

Influences of Commercialism on the British People in the Eighteenth Century: An Example from Defoe's *Moll Flanders*

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how Moll Flanders exemplifies an individual who tries to survive in a commercialized society, where the value of everything, including such intangible things as matrimony happiness becomes measured in purely commercial, materialistic terms. As a product of Puritanism, Moll Flanders initially is willing to work hard so that she can achieve social mobility. However, her legal path does not lead her to financial success; she has to resort to thievery and prostitution in order to survive in a capitalistic society.

The intensity of commercialism is shown in Moll's marriage life as well. To her, the most important criterion that determines whether she should marry a man is how effectively he manages his money. After the failure of her marriages, she is not allowed to appear poor in a capitalistic society, or she will not win respect from people around her. She has to resort to deceit so as to meet the demands of a mercenary society.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้แสดงว่า Moll Flanders เป็นตัวอย่างของผู้ที่พยายามจะมีชีวิตรอดในสังคมวัตถุนิยมอันเป็นสังคมที่คุณค่าของทุกสิ่งทุกอย่างรวมทั้งสิ่งที่จับต้องไม่ได้เช่นความสุขในชีวิตแต่งงานถูกวัดด้วยมาตรฐานทางวัตถุ ด้วยเหตุที่เธอได้รับการอบรมมาแบบชาวพิวริตัน ในช่วงแรกๆ เธอยินดีที่จะทำงานหนักเพื่อที่จะพัฒนาสถานภาพทางสังคม อย่างไรก็ตาม หนทางที่ถูกกฎหมายไม่สามารถช่วยให้เธอประสบความสำเร็จทางการเงินได้ เธอต้องอาศัยการขโมยและการเป็นโสเภณีเพื่อให้มีชีวิตรอดในสังคมทุนนิยม

ความรุนแรงของสังคมวัตถุนิยมแสดงให้เห็นที่ชีวิตแต่งงานของ Moll ด้วย สำหรับเธอแล้วสาเหตุสำคัญที่สุดที่ทำให้เธอตัดสินใจว่าควรแต่งงานกับผู้ชายคนนั้นหรือไม่ คือ ความมีประสิทธิภาพของเข้าในการจัดการเรื่องเงิน หลังจากการแต่งงานของเธอล้มเหลว เธอไม่สามารถปล่อยให้ผู้อื่นทราบได้ว่าเธอมีฐานะยากจน มิฉะนั้นเธอจะไม่ได้ได้รับความนับถือจากบุคคลที่อยู่รอบๆ ตัวเธอ เธอต้องหลอกลวงผู้อื่นเพื่อสนองตอบความต้องการของสังคมวัตถุนิยมเธอต้องอาศัยการขโมยและการเป็นโสเภณีเพื่อให้มีชีวิตรอดในสังคมทุนนิยม

Introduction

Literature of the eighteenth century often concentrates on a conflict between one's values and the socio-economic conditions. One of the foremost characters of the eighteenth century, Moll Flanders, is a product of Puritanism. She is taught to be serious with her work. Under the Colchester's Nurse, she is taught to read and to work. She and the Colchester children receive a genteel education from the nurse: "she bred them up very religiously, being herself a very sober, pious woman, very house-wifely and clean, and very mannerly, and with good behavior." (MF 9) When Moll is asked how she is going to be a gentle woman, she says she will "work very hard." Unfortunately, however, her law abiding path does not lead her to her goals eventually. She resorts to both thievery and prostitution, a very different lifestyle she hopes to possess when she is young.

Puritanism and work ethics

According to Puritanism, salvation requires self-examination and self-introspection. This theology values good works and serious dedication to one's vocation. To the Puritans, industrious people were attractive. Thus, Puritanism seems to have met the needs of a budding capitalistic society. Moll Flanders clearly illustrates how a woman is torn between her belief in the doctrine she has been brought up with and the drive to meet the demands of a capitalistic society.

Social and economic conditions in the eighteenth century

In the beginning of the eighteenth century London had a population of under 600,000. By 1800 the number had reached over a million. This growth was almost entirely brought about by migration. Many immigrants were young people trying to escape a life of

poverty on the farm. According to Arthur Young, “Young men and women in the country fix their eye on London as the last stage of their hope. . . The number of young women that fly there is incredible.” (Williams, 1973: 146)

Many of these young people became disillusioned because they could not find jobs in London. Further, they were not welcomed in the capital. As Raymond Williams (1973: 24) has pointed out, “There was a prolonged struggle, by ruling-class interests, to restrain the growth of London, and in particular to prevent the poor from settling there.”

For these young people, their lives in London were no better than in the country. Many of them turned criminal activities. As Bramble explains,

The plough-boys, cow-herds, and lower hinds are debauched and seduced by the appearance and discourse of those coxcombs in livery (other urban servants visiting the country in summers). They desert their dirt and drudgery, and swarm up to London, in hopes of getting into service. . . Great numbers of these, being disappointed in their expectation, become thieves and sharpers; and London being an immense wilderness, in which there is neither watch nor ward of any signification, nor any order or police, affords them lurking-places as well as prey. (Smollett, 1985: 118)

Bramble goes on to comment that the growth of commercialism was associated with the increase in crime. John Sekora also contends that with commercialism came an obsession with spending. Fundamentally, a capitalistic society depended on people spending money. Mandeville suggests that most people did not consider this type of economy to be detrimental to society; on the contrary, they wholly accept it. To many Londoners at that time, this economic system possessed the aspect a capitalistic society depended on, the “very natural human traits of greed and vice.” (Gonzalez, 2002: 71)

The impacts on Moll: Economy

Thus, in an age of commercialism, one’s value largely depended on the how effectively one managed one’s wealth. How one acquired one’s property was not important. Defoe’s Moll is one of the representatives of people with the eighteenth century values, in an age of commerce and of competition. She is also one with the middle class values, in a pursuit of wealth.

Moll shows her ambition from her earliest days. The orphaned Moll desires only to be “a gentlewoman,” and when her nurse questions how the orphan plans on reaching this difficult goal, the child answers she will “work . . . and work very hard” and finally “work harder then. . . and you shall have it all.” (MF 11) Moll’s early belief here is a clear example of the Protestant work ethic. Moreover, this belief shows her trust in a middle-class ideology of her day: that is, the ideology that believed in the reward of hard work, as opposed to aristocratic line, or connections at court.

Unfortunately, this type of industry, which initially seems admirable in the young Moll, is turned to criminal purpose later in her life when her path of legitimate advancement is obstructed. To the end of her tale, Moll justifies her motives for becoming a criminal. For example, this is her comments on becoming a thief: “my own distresses silenced all these reflections, and the prospect of my own starving, which grew every day more frightful to me, hardened my heart by degrees.” (MF 165)

Moll realizes that money is important in her society. This realization is contentious among her childhood peers. During one of the conversations between the Colchester sisters, one of them is not pleased at her brother’s praise of Moll, and points out that if a young woman had all the graces, and yet lack money, “she’s nobody. She has as good want them all, for nothing but Money now recommends a Woman.” (MF 18) Moll never forgets this practical statement, for she often remarks on the nature of the marriage market and the mercenary attitude men have towards women.

According to her, a man’s financial status is the most important factor that determines whether a woman should marry him. “Marriages were here the consequences of politic schemes for forming interests, and carrying on business, and... Love had no share, or but very little, in the matter.” (MF 57) Thus, Moll’s advice has nothing to do with love, and everything to do with economics. Rather than deploring the monetary attitude of marriages, she investigates techniques that will improve women’s positions within the corrupt system.

Her favorite proverb is “Give me not poverty lest I steal.” (MF 163) Moll dismisses her audience’s moral criticism of her behavior by arguing that her critics should judge her circumstances before judging her:

Let `em remember that time of distress is a time of
dreadful temptation, and all the strength to resist
is taken away; Poverty presses, the soul is made
desperate by distress, and what can be done? (MF 164)

The impact of Moll's poverty plays an important role from the outset. She can convincingly claim poverty as the ultimate cause of many people's criminal careers. When she sees her happiness with the Bath gentleman as fleeting, her fears of poverty and starvation reappears.

I had the terrible prospect of Poverty and Starving which lay on me as a frightful Spectre, so that there was no looking behind me: But as Poverty brought me into it, so fear of Poverty kept me in it, and I frequently resolved to leave it quite off, if I could but come to lay up Money enough to maintain me. (MF 95)

When her husband's business fails, he never recovers from the disappointment, and finally dies. In the two following years, she slowly spends what little money she has, living in fear and misery. Terrified by the prospect of the approaching extreme poverty, Moll steals a little bundle left unattended on a stool in a shop. She walks streets at London aimlessly for quite a while, then returns home and finds that the bundle contains some good linen, some silver, and money. She is distressed and feels guilty, but finally goes out, a few days later, to steal again. Soon, she encounters a pretty little child wearing her mother's necklace, going home from dancing school by herself, and tricks her into an alley, where she removes the necklace unseen by others.

Moll finally becomes adept and somewhat addicted to thievery. After one particularly profitable robbery in which she robs the residents of a burning house, Moll confesses, "By this job I was become considerably richer than I was before." (MF 178) She does not need to steal any more.

[Y]et the resolution I had formerly taken of leaving off this horrid trade, when I had gotten a little more, did not return; but I must still get farther, and more; and the Avarice joined so with the Success, that I had no more thoughts of coming to a timely alteration of life; though without it I could expect no safety, no tranquillity in the possession of what I had so wickedly gained; but a little more, and a little more, was the case still." (MF 178)

Moll herself admits that it is the temptation of more money that keeps her in her criminal profession long after she could afford to quit, claiming that “I grew audacious to the last degree,” (MF 174) and that her current partner in crime and she “not only grew bold, but we grew rich, and we had at one time one and twenty gold watches in our hands” (MF 174). Her obsession with the accumulation of wealth that keeps her in her life of crime, she confesses,

The busy Devil that so industriously drew me in, had too fast hold of me to let me go back. . . as poverty brought me into the mire, so Avarice kept me in, till there was no going back; as to the arguments which my reason dictated for perswading me to lay down, avarice stept in and said, go on, go on; you have had very good luck, go on till you have gotten four or five hundred pound and then you shall leave off, and then you may live easy without working at all. (MF 174)

In fact, Moll’s drive to acquire “a little more” represents the larger drive in Defoe’s society, the drive to consume, a device necessary to the capitalistic society. However, he also recognizes the consumerism brought about a different sense of morality and values from the standard he himself had grown up with. Moll becomes a criminal due to poverty, but she remains a criminal because the drive to get more money is too strong.

The impact on Moll: Marital Deception

One of the roles accepted by middle-class Protestants is getting married. Despite her losses and regrets, Moll continually remarries throughout her story because she argues that only within marriage can a woman find economic stability. Moll Flanders shows the impact of the demands placed on people in a capitalistic society. Both Moll and many other characters in the novel resort to deceptions so as to enhance chances of marriage. After her marriages fail, she has to depend on deception again so as to survive in the society.

Before the marriage

Since Moll’s and many other characters’ primary purpose in marrying involves financial status, deception is inevitable on both parts, men and women. First of all, appearances are very powerful and many people are deceived by it. Moll herself is so obsessed with the appearance of gentility that she is careless in judging character. She is attracted to a “Land-water-thing call’d, a Gentleman-Tradesman” (MF 48) who appears to be a good

catch. Unfortunately, her husband proves to be a “Rake, Gentleman, Shopkeeper, and Beggar all together” (MF 48). He insists that they travel to Oxford dressed to the hilt and carried by a coach. He would like to appear rich. All the while, he does not even have enough money for such a trip.

Similarly, men are attracted to Moll because she appears to have a considerable amount of money. Before her marriage to her second husband, a newly married captain’s lady tells her husband that Moll has at least 1500 guineas, and will inherit more money. Her relationship with her third husband is also based on lies. What attracts Moll to Jemy is his apparent difference to her: he appears to be a gentleman with fortune enough to provide for her. Her desire to marry him remains consistent with her childhood dreams of becoming a gentlewoman. He appears to be a gentleman capable of supporting her: “he Courted me, made me Presents, and run in Debt. Like a mad Man for the Expenses of his Equipage, and of his Courtship; [...] he was Tall, well Shap’d, and had an extraordinary Address” (MF 143). By all appearances, Jemy is a wealthy gentleman, and it is his appearance alone that initially attracts Moll to him. His appearance includes his conversation and behavior, which leads Moll to conclude that he is “truly a gallant Spirit,” and to admit “’Tis something of a Relief even to be undone by a Man of Honour” (MF 150). Moll is so naive as to believe every word he utters about not wanting to ruin her. She is further attracted to him because he claims to be a gentleman, even though he claims to have lost all his wealth. All her life, she has sought someone who could assist her in her desire to become a working gentlewoman; Jemy appears to be perfect for this role, and he is physically attractive to her, as well. Jemy’s appearance of being a gentleman and his willingness to support Moll during the seven months they are together endears him to her, as she makes clear in her summary all the reasons she loves him:

[T]he passionate Expressions of his Letter, the kind Gentlemanly Treatment I had from him in all the Affair, with the Concern he show’d for me in it, his manner of Parting with that large Share which he gave me of his little Stock left; all these had joyn’d to make such Impressions on me, that I really lov’d him most tenderly, and could not bear the Thoughts of parting with him. (MF 155)

However, Moll’s love for Jemy is based upon his deceit, which leads Moll to believe “he was a Man that was as well qualified to make [her] happy,” based upon his “Temper

and Behaviour.” Unfortunately, he does not have a fortune and she eventually finds their future “dismal and dreadful” (MF 148). Even with little hope for a future together, she admires Jemy more than any other man.

Ironically, what Moll first perceives as difference is in fact similarity: like Moll, Jemy has schemed to acquire wealth via marriage. Due to the encouragement of Jemy’s accomplice, Moll concludes, “in all appearance this Brother was a Match worth my lissening to” (MF 142). She believes all the lies Jemy’s female accomplice tells her and is further persuaded by his natural ease with his luxurious surroundings, so that “the glittering show of a great Estate” helps convince her to marry him (MF 144). Both of them do not realize this truth until several weeks after they are married.

The “double Fraud” which unites Moll and Jemy is maintained through a deception involving Moll, Jemy, and his accomplice. However, Moll initiates the deception by letting others believe she is a woman of fortune. Although she initially blames Jemy’s accomplice for the deception, her narrative voice reveals her own stake in this sham: “If this Woman had known my real Circumstances, she would never have laid so many Snares [...] to catch a poor desolate Creature” (MF 130). If Moll had made the truth obvious, Jemy’s accomplice would not have pursued her. Although Moll acts the part of the victim entrapped by this woman’s lies, she has also been deceptive, if only by omission. Moll never corrects the accomplice about the rumors concerning her wealth, not even when the latter exaggerates Moll’s estate price from five hundred pounds to five thousand and eventually to the amount of fifteen thousand (MF 143). Moll remains silent.

Deception after the marriage

Moll’s marriages fail. She needs to conceal the truth about herself to protect her identity and her real problems. The way she solves her problems show that she is influenced by the social values at that time: financial status and good reputation are to be protected. For example, she and her second husband spend all the money that belongs to her. When she goes home to rob the creditors, she chooses her words carefully to appear obedient, not sinful. She says that “he would have me go home, and in the Night take away everything I had in the House of any Value and secure it” (MF 50). Stating the act in this language makes Moll seem dutiful and innocent, the obedient wife. Once again, she is successful in protecting her reputation. She employs understatement to transfer all blame onto her husband: “He

used me very handsomely, and with good Manners upon all Occasions, even to the last, only spent all I had, and left me to Rob the Creditors for something to Subsist on" (MF 50). "He used me very handsomely," really means taken advantage of to a large degree. Instead of raising her stock by the match, her assets decrease to 500 pounds, making her isolated and poorer.

Her husband's debt and her circumstances make concealing her true situation necessary. She becomes skillful at changing shapes, moving, and falsifying her identity. If she is discovered to lack a fortune, she fluidly "change[s] [her] Station and make [s] a new Appearance in some other Place where [she] [is] not known, and even . . . [passes] by another Name if [she] [finds] Occasion." (MF 61). Her behavior is not due to the fact that she enjoys deceit, but that it is an only means of survival and security for her.

Deceptions also appears when she is pregnant without marriage to the child's father. It is necessary that her lying in must be handled well so as to protect her reputation. She is helped by her landlady who succeeds in obtaining midwives and nurses. She is viewed by the local magistrates as a married woman, not the adulteress that she is. But Moll's fear returns, "Knowing my own Circumstances, and knowing the World as I had done, and that such kind of things do not often last long, I took care to lay up as much Money as I could for a wet Day, as I call'd it; making him believe it was all spent upon the extraordinary appearance of things in my Lying Inn." (MF 100)

In conclusion, deception is an important means employed by Moll to achieve her goals. Her situations are against her; at the same time, she would like to meet the demands of a mercenary society.

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