



Moll Flanders

Daniel Defoe
(1722)

PLOT AND SETTING

Moll Flanders was born in Newgate prison, London, the daughter of a thief. When her mother is transported to Virginia, Moll is brought up in the house of the Mayor of Colchester. She is very pretty and clever and, at the age of fourteen, she is sent into the service of a rich family. After being seduced by the eldest son of this family, she goes through five marriages, has children, becomes a prostitute and a thief in order to survive. She is imprisoned and deported to Virginia, where she works very hard and becomes a rich plantation owner. She finally goes back to England where she leads a respectable life and, after her repentance, she recollects her experiences as examples of mistakes to be avoided.

A REFLECTION OF ITS TIME

The story develops around several characters and **describes urban society**. By setting the novel in London and the English counties, Defoe gives information about the customs of his time as well as **insights into some social problems like crime and the lack of provision for poor orphans**. Moll begins her life at a great disadvantage: being the daughter of a transported convict, she lacks the support system of family and friends which all children need. She is thrown into the world with no training in any trade and no prospects other than starvation or a life of crime. Moll's decisions are driven by the premise that women were not able to support themselves legally in 18th-century society and that the **only honourable role for a middle-class woman was that of wife**. So Moll needs to get married and when she is widowed at the age of 48, she is too old to hope to marry again. She might earn a living through honest

work, but she grows rich quickly as a pickpocket. However, theft was not the only illegal occupation open to women: prostitution was also widespread in London. **Theft and prostitution** implied the risks of transportation to Virginia, hanging or spending several weeks in Newgate Prison. Unwanted children could be given to country families to be taken care of, but they were often neglected, and rates of child mortality were very high. Lots of Moll's children disappear, probably because they fall ill. Moll rejects emotional experience, seen in Puritan terms as an impediment to the rational accumulation of capital and the social definition that this implies.

STYLE

Like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* is narrated in **retrospective first-person narration** by Moll herself in her old age. The characterisation rarely focuses on personal relationships and feelings but it stresses the adventurous experiences of the heroine in a simple and direct style aimed at creating a strong sense of identification and sympathy in the reader. The novel includes 'documents' – Moll's memorandums, quoted letters, hospital bills – in order to increase the illusion of verifiable fact. It aims at objective, realistic representation. Moll's world contains many tangible things such as watches, wigs, necklaces, dresses and trunks, which are not described in texture but only in terms of their market value. **What is important in Moll's world is the counting, measuring, pricing, weighing, and evaluating of the things according to the wealth they represent and the social status they imply for the possessor.**

Key idea

Crusoe's female counterpart

Moll is Crusoe's female counterpart: like Crusoe's, her reflections have an economic basis and are carried on in strict logical sequence. She has many of the traits that are usually regarded as middle class; she

is obsessed with gentility and keeping up appearances, she is characterised by restless individualism; she regards poverty as a sin – she prefers theft to being poor; her main aims are self-assertion and material benefit.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 Why did Defoe choose an urban setting for this novel?
- 2 What kind of choice did women have in the world Moll lived in?
- 3 What sort of person was she?
- 4 What narrative technique did Defoe employ? Why?



Moll becomes a thief

The following extract is from Defoe's third novel, which deals with the adventurous life of a reformed criminal.

Daniel Defoe
Moll Flanders
(1722)

I lived two years in this dismal¹ condition, wasting that little I had, weeping continually over my dismal circumstances, and, as it were, only bleeding to death, without the least hope or prospect of help from God or man; and now I had cried so long, and so often, that tears were, as I might say, exhausted, and I began to be desperate, for I grew poor apace².

For a little relief³ I had put off⁴ my house and took lodgings; and as I was reducing my living, so I sold off most of my goods, which put a little money in my pocket, and I lived near a year upon that, spending very sparingly⁵, and eking things out to the utmost⁶; but still when I looked before me, my very heart would sink within me at the inevitable approach of misery and want⁷. Oh let none read this part without seriously reflecting on the circumstances of a desolate state, and how they would grapple⁸ with mere want of friends and want of bread; it will certainly make them think not of sparing what they have only, but of looking up to heaven for support, and of the wise man's prayer, 'Give me not poverty, lest⁹ I steal'.

Let them remember that a 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? It was one evening, when being brought, as I may say, to the last gasp¹⁰, I think I may truly say I was distracted and raving¹¹, when prompted¹² by I know not what spirit, and, as it were, doing I did not know what or why, I dressed me (for I had still pretty good clothes) and went out. I am very sure I had no manner of design in my head when I went out; I neither knew nor considered where to go, or on what business; but as the devil carried me out and laid his bait¹³ for me, so he brought me, to be sure, to the place, for I knew not whither¹⁴ I was going or what I did.

Wandering thus about, I knew not whither, I passed by an apothecary¹⁵'s shop in Leadenhall Street, where I saw lie on a stool¹⁶ just before the counter a little bundle¹⁷ wrapped in a white cloth; beyond it stood a maidservant with her back to it, looking up towards the top of the shop, where the apothecary's apprentice, as I suppose, was standing upon the counter, with his back also to the door, and a candle in his hand, looking and reaching up to the upper shelf for something he wanted, so that both were engaged mightily earnestly, and nobody else in the shop.

This was the bait; and the devil, who I said laid the snare¹⁸, as readily prompted me as if he had spoke, for I remember, and shall never forget it, 'twas like a voice spoken to me over my shoulder, 'Take the bundle; be quick; do it this moment'. It was no sooner said but I stepped into the shop, and with my back to the wench¹⁹, as if I had stood up for a cart that was going by, I put my hand behind me and took the bundle, and went off with it, the maid or the fellow not perceiving me, or anyone else.

It is impossible to express the horror of my soul all the while I did it. When I went away I had no heart to run, or scarce to mend my pace²⁰. I crossed the street indeed, and went down the first turning I came to, and I think it was a street that went through into Fenchurch Street. From hence I crossed and turned through so many ways and turnings, that I could never tell which way it was, nor where I went; for I felt not the ground I stepped on, and the farther I was out of danger, the faster I went, till, tired and out of breath²¹, I was forced to sit down on a little bench at a door, and then I began to recover, and found I was got into Thames Street, near Billingsgate. I rested me a little and went on; my blood was all in a fire, my heart beat as if I was in a sudden fright. In short, I was under such a surprise that I still knew not whither I was going, or what to do.

After I had tired myself thus with walking a long way about, and so eagerly, I began to consider and make home to my lodging, where I came about nine o'clock at night.

- 1 dismal. Triste.
- 2 apace. Velocemente.
- 3 relief. Sollievo, sussidio.
- 4 I had put off. Mi ero liberata della.
- 5 very sparingly. Con molta parsimonia.
- 6 eking things out to the utmost. Facendo durare tutto al massimo.
- 7 want. Indigenza.
- 8 they would grapple. Si intreccerebbero.
- 9 lest. Affinché non.
- 10 to the last gasp. All'ultimo respiro.
- 11 raving. Fuori di me.
- 12 prompted. Spinta.
- 13 bait. Esca.
- 14 whither. Dove.
- 15 apothecary. Speciale.
- 16 stool. Sgabello.
- 17 bundle. Fagotto.
- 18 snare. Trappola.
- 19 wench. Giovane donna.
- 20 mend my pace. Affrettare il passo.
- 21 out of breath. Senza fiato.



What the bundle was made up for, or on what occasion laid where I found it, I
 50 knew not, but when I came to open it I found there was a suit of childbed-linen²² in it,
 very good and almost new, the lace²³ very fine; there was a silver porringer²⁴ of a pint, a
 small silver mug and six spoons, with some other linen, a good smock²⁵, and three silk
 handkerchiefs, and in the **mug**, wrapped up in a paper, 18s. 6d.²⁶ in money.

All the while I was opening these things I was under such dreadful impressions of
 55 fear, and in such terror of mind, though I was perfectly safe, that I cannot express the
 manner of it. I sat me down, and cried most vehemently. 'Lord,' said I, 'what am I now?
 a thief! Why, I shall be taken next time, and be carried to Newgate²⁷ and be tried for
 my life²⁸!' And with that I cried again a long time, and I am sure, as poor as I was, if I
 had durst²⁹ for fear, I would certainly have carried the things back again; but that went
 60 off after a while. Well, I went to bed for that night, but slept little; the horror of the fact
 was upon my mind, and I knew not what I said or did all night, and all the next day.
 Then I was impatient to hear some news of the loss; and would fain³⁰ know how it was,
 whether they were a poor body's goods, or a rich. 'Perhaps,' said I, 'it may be some poor
 widow like me, that had packed up these goods to go and sell them for a little bread for
 65 herself and a poor child, and are now starving and breaking their hearts for want of
 that little they would have fetched³¹'. And this thought tormented me worse than all the
 rest, for three or four days' time.

But 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.
 70 It was then particularly heavy upon my mind, that I had been reformed, and had, as I
 hoped, repented of all my past wickedness; that I had lived a sober, grave, retired life for
 several years, but now I should be driven by the dreadful necessity of my circumstances
 to the gates of destruction, soul and body; and two or three times I fell upon my knees,
 praying to God, as well as I could, for deliverance³²; but I cannot but say, my prayers
 75 had no hope in them. I knew not what to do; it was all fear without, and dark within;
 and I reflected on my past life as not sincerely repented of, that Heaven was now
 beginning to punish me on this side the grave, and would make me as miserable as I
 had been wicked.

Had I gone on here I had perhaps been a true penitent; but I had an evil counsellor
 80 within, and he was continually **prompting** me to relieve myself³³ by the worst means; so
 one evening he tempted me again, by the same wicked impulse that had said 'Take that
 bundle', to go out again and seek for what might happen.

- 22 **childbed-linen**. Biancheria da puerpera.
- 23 **lace**. Pizzo.
- 24 **porringer**. Scodella per il porridge.
- 25 **smock**. Grembiule, camiciola.
- 26 **18s. 6d.** 18 scellini e 6 pence.
- 27 **Newgate**. Famosa prigione di Londra.
- 28 **be tried for my life**. Essere condannata a morte.
- 29 **durst**. Osato.
- 30 **fain**. Volentieri.
- 31 **fetchd**. Ricavato.
- 32 **for deliverance**. Per la mia salvezza.
- 33 **relieve myself**. Alleviare le mie pene.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words in the text with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1 suggerendo | 5 indurì |
| 2 tazza | 6 sventetti |
| 3 spavento | 7 avvolto |
| 4 panca | 8 sofferenza |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ up to line 24 again and note down the circumstances that drove her to steal.

3 READ up to line 46 again and write down the details of the theft.

Victim:	Moll's technique:
Place:	Moll's way home:
Things stolen:	Moll's reactions:

**4 READ** the text to the end again and say

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| 1 | what time Moll came home; | 4 | what she wondered about; |
| 2 | what she found in the bundle; | 5 | what had led her to steal; |
| 3 | what she suddenly realised; | 6 | whether she repented. |

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**5 STATE** the narrative technique used in this text and the point of view adopted.

The narrator directly addresses the reader in lines 10-16. Say what effect is achieved. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ The author stresses Moll's desperate situation implying that she cannot be condemned according to common morals or laws.
- ☐ The author avoids direct judgement of the heroine.
- ☐ The author aims at producing an emotional response in the reader so as to diminish Moll's responsibility.

6 FOCUS on the character of Moll in the passage and complete the table with the expressions used to describe her psychological state before, during, and after the theft.

Before	During	After

7 TRY to describe the progression of Moll's feelings re-ordering the nouns below.

misery	desperation	regret	fear	unawareness
repentance	guilt	weariness	terror	surprise

..... → → → → → →

..... → → →

8 DISCUSS. Do Moll's regret and repentance sound convincing? Why/why not? Who does she blame as responsible for this and her future thefts?**9 CONSIDER** the paragraph where Moll, once at home, opens the bundle. What qualities of the objects are denoted by Defoe's language? Tick as appropriate. Then answer the question below.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Solidity. | <input type="checkbox"/> Value. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Extension. | <input type="checkbox"/> Colour. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Figure. | <input type="checkbox"/> Number. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Motion. | |

What aspect of the character's attitude is underlined by Defoe's prose?

> COMPETENCE: FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**10 STATE** what insight into the condition of women in 18th-century urban society the passage provides.**11 COMPARE** the characters of Moll Flanders and Robinson Crusoe: write down similarities and differences.