***Character of Moll Flanders***

Moll Flanders has unusual features for a female protagonist of the time period. Her intelligence, practical competence, self-sufficiency, and defiance of conventional feminine roles and mores set her apart from women of her time. Indeed, such masculine characteristics place her above judgment for her immoral acts. Persevering and adaptable, she dominates every situation. She will depend on men for security, but no more than necessary. She actively chooses her dependency, using men as tools, to further her opportunities for self-reliance. Moll is most free in the lowest layer of society. Moved by need rather than artificial mores, her ability to adapt and survive rises to the level of art. Conflict is inherent in morally dubious ways Moll uses her many talents to provide for herself; she can be a thief, as crassly sexual as a prostitute, or a demurring husband-seeker. Her flexible moral code is designed to accommodate this conflict as much as possible.

Moll's particular dilemmas, combined with her questionable morality raises conflict between mercantilist ethics and religious ethics, and between public and private values. Defoe portrays the novel as the memoir of a person, although fictional, who is a composite of real people and experiences that are part of society in London at the beginning of the 18th century. The story concerns itself with practical needs and obstacles faced by women with no social stability or financial security. The factual details stand as evidence of the times, if not a literal memoir, to a reader of period when the book was published. Throughout the text, Moll's voice, uttered in the vernacular of the place and time, is a combination of journalistic accuracy and affected authenticity.

Moll's development unfolds in two main movements. First, she becomes sophisticated in the ways of the world. Gradually, each obstacle her life provides, teaches her to handle herself, and to minimize her dependence on others. This phase leads Moll into ever-greater degrees of vice, forming the bulk of the novel. The second phase shows a repentant Moll, reformed of her wickedness. This phase development seems unconvincing, having little effect on the story as a whole. Moll's life has material but not ethical consequences, and even from the perspective of her later repentance, she tells her own story in those terms.

The novel's preface emphasizes that it's meant to convey a serious moral. However, actual tale of Moll's outrageous sexual and criminal enterprises, keeps the social and Christian moralizing to a minimum. Her immoral actions have no real consequences, and the narrative seeks to justify her immoral behavior with material necessity. Despite her unconcealed ethical shortcomings, Defoe presented Moll Flanders as a character whose self-reliance and perseverance dignifies hard work, and excuses crime when it takes the form of necessity.

The novel illustrates the motives for moral ambiguity that arise under hardship and duress. The frank way with which Moll discusses her own motivations, appeals to their universality. Moll lives a wildly varied life of adventure, punctuated by an astonishing number of marriages and affairs and brazen criminal escapades before her eventual repentance and retirement. The alias she adopts for her memoir, "Moll Flanders" is bestowed upon her by the criminal underworld during time thieving for survival. Moll is a woman of skill, cunning, and rationality. A reader may feel her moral rationalizing flawed, in that she puts herself in these needful situations by refusing to be a working class woman, by the story's end it's clear that Moll is far too intelligent and quick witted for a servant's life. It's a fault of artificial moralizing to say it'd be noble to live simply as a servant. It's the lowest classes of society that are most disadvantaged, and most often forced to break society's rules. It is doubtful Moll's outcome would've been much different if she'd chosen a laborer's life.

Moll's exceptional beauty attracts many roguish men. Historically, the novel takes place in an era when men were used to getting what they wanted, especially from women of lower social classes. As a servant class woman, it's is likely she'd be often ill used by lusty gentlemen. Moll unashamedly offers herself to wealthy men of station, to obtain money and security, and to ward of the advances of lesser men. Regardless of class or social status, women of her time were servile to men's will.

Throughout the story, Moll avoids poor marriage, even more skillfully than hard labor. While several of her marriages are tragic or unfortunate due to chance circumstances, through her sexually liberated nature she avoids a great deal of unpleasantness other women of her time could not. None of her husbands or paramours are ugly, low class, or physically abusive. She only settles down with men she's agreeable with. Tragedy may strike in the form of unwitting incest or a lying husband, but never by a lack of Moll's greatest efforts to secure the best man available.

Separated from her mother, a convicted felon, Moll's first female role model is her nurse. The Nurse, a Colchester widow, cares for Moll from age three until her maiden years. Though the nurse is a hard working, moral woman, Moll sees her guardian's life as one of hardship, without security or privilege. The nurse's sudden death precipitates Moll's placement with a wealthy family, where she is seduced at a young age.

Later, Moll is reunited with her own mother, who speaks frankly about her own criminal past. She's a reasonable woman, and regretful of her decisions. However, she is unashamed to admit to what she perceives as deeds done out of necessity. Moll is similarly proud in her narrative, to speak of doing what must be done, even if it contradicts the artificial values of her society. Moll's mother dies, leaving Moll a sizable inheritance, which she reclaims in America at the end of the novel. Moll's story ends similar to her own mother's; she's at peace with her past and reclaims her honesty just as her mother did.

Moll's landlady and midwife, becomes her friend and confederate in crime. She helps Moll deal with an inconvenient pregnancy, and introduces her to the methods of thievery. Moll is clever and skilled at adapting the behaviors she sees around her to secure herself a stable position in life. Moll refers to her friend as "my governess" and sees her as an authority figure. It's a testament to her skill and intelligence, that Moll is able to later separate herself from the life of crime she adopted, just as her mother did.

Despite her perceived moral turpitude, Moll Flanders presents a strong and intelligent female protagonist, portraying the female heroine as a rational being facing the obstacles of an unbalanced and prejudiced society. Her perceived moral character is a sacrifice made Both Moll and Lizzie overcome the prejudices inherent in the roles and customs women were educated to accept in the society they lived in. The novel's moral seediness reflects the absurdity of forcing women into unfit roles in their society.