

THE ETHICS OF *MOLL FLANDERS*: A STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY

Daniel Kamenov
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

dankamenov@uni-plovdiv.bg

After writing his masterpiece *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe presented his readers with a novel about a controversial type of protagonist that does not fit social norms at a time when morality was rigidly defined and enforced. Moll Flanders is a con-woman and a criminal that pleads penitence at the end of her life as she narrates the events that led her to an existence on the streets and in jail. From a secular perspective, however, her plea to the reader turns into a call for acknowledgement as she self-consciously revisits all her previous deeds and both explains her motivation and takes responsibility for her actions. Using Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, I shall analyze her call to be acknowledged by potential readers from the perspective of existential authenticity.

Key words: *Moll Flanders*, Defoe, existentialism, authenticity, morality, bad faith

Daniel Defoe was an influential figure in 18th-century English literature, renowned for his contributions to the development of the novel. His works pushed the boundaries of literary realism and explored the complexities of human experience with unprecedented honesty. Defoe's chef d'oeuvre, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), offered an I-narrative provided by an everyman character, emphasizing verisimilitude and focusing on daily struggles. However, his novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) stands out as the one that explores much more of the intricate social and economic realities of 18th-century England. Moll is a criminal – which already separates her from the run-of-the-mill protagonists of the time (and the reason the novel was first decried on publication) – but most of all, she is a resourceful and resilient woman navigating a world of limited opportunities. Her story is told in Defoe's established I-narration and offers a then-unique perspective on issues such as poverty, social mobility, gender roles, and the complexities of

moral agency in a rapidly changing society. At the end of Moll's tale, she tells the reader that she is penitent, emphasizing the importance of repentance and conformity to religious and societal norms – this is her defense that she acknowledges all the bad she has done and stressing the importance of virtue in the world. However, this paper will argue that under closer examination, Moll is a much more multifaceted character with more complex motivation than the act of simply pursuing repentance would suggest. By using Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), I shall argue that Moll does not seek understanding and acknowledgement of her repentance from the reader but rather portrays her individual agency, self-determination, and the active creation of meaning, thus exemplifying a form of 18th-century existential authenticity. Her actions reveal attempts to assert her agency and claim ownership of her life choices, even within the confines of a restrictive social order. Examining Moll's story through this existentialist lens will allow the perception of the novel to move beyond a simplistic focus on sin and redemption to appreciate her as a complex individual in a time when individuality was yet to be invented.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir challenges the notion of predestined meaning and emphasizes the inherent freedom and responsibility of the individual. She illustrates ambiguity as the “normal” state of individuals. This ambiguity is defined by the contrasting states and modes that people face in their daily lives. Each day, hour, or even minute individuals have to make choices in a world full of oppositions such as the individual and society, order and chaos, meaning and absurdity, ethics and reality, free will and determinism. This is what de Beauvoir calls “the paradox of [the human] condition” (Beauvoir 1962: 9). People cannot escape the duality of their lives and this begs the question, “How then can one live an existentially authentic life in such a setting?” For de Beauvoir, authenticity does not lie in conforming to societal norms or following externally imposed moral codes. It rather embraces freedom and motivates actively “creating” oneself. This stresses the active role individuals play in shaping their own existence through their choices and actions. Authenticity, therefore, requires a constant process of self-creation and self-transcendence, a continuous engagement with the world and a constant questioning of one's assumptions and beliefs. Authentic individuals are not passive recipients of societal norms or pre-determined roles; they actively engage in the process of becoming, constantly striving to define and redefine themselves in relation to the world around them. They must assume their

“fundamental ambiguity” as it is “in the knowledge of the genuine¹ conditions of our life that we must draw strength to live and our reason for acting” (Ibid.: 9). This means that self-awareness and self-consciousness are essential when making choices and exercising one’s freedom through choices to affirm one’s authenticity.

And authenticity is a call that the character Moll Flanders seemingly understands while writing down the story of her life. The goal of this story seems to be a plea to the reader to understand her actions, to see her as a penitent in a society surrounded by hardship, a penitent that did what she had to do to survive. Cesare Pavese calls the tale an “attentive investigation of one’s own motives” (Pavese 1970: 61), thus marking it as a tale of revelation both to the reader and to herself. However, Moll’s penitence remains a point of contention even deep into 21st-century criticism. This is why I argue that her penitence takes a back seat to another call: that of the reader acknowledging her authenticity. By framing Moll Flanders’s experiences through the lens of existential authenticity, we can begin to understand her motivations beyond the simplistic framework of sin and redemption. We can move beyond the judgmental gaze of 18th-century society and explore the complexities of her choices, her struggles for survival, and her relentless pursuit of a life that, in her own terms, could be considered meaningful and, ultimately, existentially, authentic.

Moll’s story starts at its end – when the reader is introduced to her, she is already in her seventies, living the comfortable life of a gentlewoman in the Americas. She tells the reader about her past in the manner of an autobiography throughout whose course we learn that the full title of the novel has already told us her entire story in a nutshell: *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders; Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu’d Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv’d Honest, and dies a Penitent. Written from her own Memorandums*. To a Protestant-conformist 18th-century society, the title itself is damning enough and calls into doubt her claim to penitence. Due to the scientific revolution and the change in philosophical thinking, society at the time believed that “morals needed attention” as “the old sheet anchors of morality – the Christian commandments and the authority of

¹ “Genuine” here is translated from the French word “authentiques” (Beauvoir 1947: 15). Thus, I shall treat the word “genuine” as interchangeable with “authentic” wherever the theme of existential authenticity is concerned.

tradition – had had their cables cut” (Porter 1982: 323). A story such as Moll’s seems to send the wrong message to such a world, hence the initial negative reaction to the novel and why readers needed to know that the character is indeed penitent. This would be the only thing to make her authentic, to demonstrate that she did not abide by external morality or fall to the snares of “bad faith.” However, the only way to know whether Moll is penitent is to explore her story, not the values around her because “goodness became a more introspective matter” and “the shrine of morality moved within the self” (Ibid.). Thus, only Moll can decide whether she is or is not penitent.

I, however, argue that it does not matter whether Moll is penitent or not. The ambiguity of existential authenticity lies in that “being a subject is a universal fact and the Cartesian *cogito* expresses both the most individual experience and the most objective truth” (Beauvoir 1962: 17). Moll’s authenticity is a matter of her self-consciously acknowledging and accepting her choices as acts of self-creation and constant movement forward in a world where all other individuals are free to do the same. Accepting the choices and the responsibility that comes with them is what defines her as authentic, not her status of penitent. After all, as some critics argue, “what she does is not so much immoral as amoral” (Gooding 1965: 80). If 18th-century morality is dictated from without, then she does not take into account what she is “supposed to do” according to society, thus escaping one of the pitfalls of bad faith. As explained by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, “bad faith” (*mauvaise foi*) is “self-negation,” an individual denying themselves (i.e., their own being and consciousness), and entertaining a “pleasing truth” – even if that “truth” is not what the individual would personally define as such, but accepting it nonetheless as morality coming from without (Sartre 2018: 88 – 89). The argument here, then, is that Moll prefers to remain a subject to herself than an object to external morality.

A shortcut to exploring Moll’s state of authenticity through *The Ethics of Ambiguity* would be to study her character by eliminating the modes of bad faith that de Beauvoir illustrates: the nihilist, the serious man, the adventurer, and the passionate man.

That Moll is not a “nihilist” is all too clear. The nihilistic character model is one that recognizes the absurdity of existence and sees life as fundamentally meaningless. The nihilist lacks motivation and tends to have a passive approach to the world. The nihilist “wills himself to be nothing” and therefore “all mankind must also be annihilated” (Beauvoir 1962: 55). None of these characteristics applies to Moll. Maximilian E. Novak long ago defined Moll as a character that professes Christianity and is “one of the

most active of [Defoe's] protagonists" (Novak 1964: 200 – 201). There is no doubt that she believes in a meaningful world and actively pursues a certain goal – sometimes to her own detriment.

Her connection to the "serious man" character model is also something we can dismiss with ease. The serious man escapes the burden of freedom and pursues external goals and values that are a product of society and societal pressures. "The thing that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of being able to lose himself in it [...] to believe for belief's sake, to will for will's sake" (Beauvoir 1962: 47). This is the epitome of existentialist bad faith. The outside world is Moll's framework and its values are suggestions, not rules. Lou Caton argues that Moll uses a "reasoning that foregrounds situational ethics" depending on her circumstances and follows no external "truth" (Caton 1997: 512). A good example is the famous scene where Moll steals a necklace from a small child and then reasons how she is doing nothing wrong, but rather teaches the child, her guardian, and her parents a lesson. In that particular case, "Booty," "Poverty," and "Necessities" (Defoe 2011: 163) come to the forefront of Moll's mind as the core of the "situational ethics" that Caton mentions. *Moll Flanders* as a whole is a novel that observes and reflects on social flaws that people come across, such as legal customs concerning criminals (7), marriage customs (39), or women losing their "privilege of saying no" (57). The heroine confounds all the customs she encounters and manifests her own internal reality – thus rejecting external "truths."

The "passionate man" is the character model that most approximates Moll and the one she comes dangerously close to losing herself to. The passionate man "sets up the object as an absolute, not, like the serious man, as a thing detached from himself, but as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity" because "only the object of his passion appears real and full to him. All the rest are insignificant" (Beauvoir 1962: 64 – 66). This character model is driven by desires and emotions toward a particular object, completely consumed by it. It is defined by passion, absolute conviction, and destructive behavior. The needs of others are of no matter. The passionate man prefers a life of simplicity – the only thing that matters is what they are striving for. To them, the end justifies the means. Moll can be associated with this model as she does indeed have a goal: to become a "gentlewoman." However, this is by no means an obsession and working toward this goal does definitely not result in destructive behavior. Her reasoning may be described as stone cold, never obsessive or destructive –either of herself or of her obstacles. At the very start of her actual journey, Moll realizes that one cannot rely on

abstractions, which is what the passionate man is obsessed with. An idealistic lover, for example, will sacrifice everything (or everybody) in the name of love. However, Moll, “trick’d once by that Cheat call’d LOVE” (Defoe 2011: 51), understands that such notions are detrimental to her. According to Lee Edwards, “[h]er solitude and freedom from obligations turn out to be associated with [...] Moll’s quite literal physical freedom” as she understands that her plight can be “solved only in practical terms” (Edwards 1970: 102). To Moll, being a “gentlewoman” means independence. In a way, the very fact that she pursues the status is a sign of her authenticity. Even as a child, Moll understands that “being a Gentlewoman, was to be able to work for myself” (Defoe 2011: 12). The self stands at the top of Moll’s goals and self-creation is what she strives for throughout the novel. Describing somebody who seeks authenticity as a passionate man would limit them to a single-directional route due to the one-dimensional nature of this character model – a nature that Moll apparently avoids.

The “adventurer” is a model that definitely may describe both Moll Flanders the character and *Moll Flanders* the novel. One of the ways to read this book is as a picaresque novel. There is no doubt that there is much in the way of adventure in her story. However, the key to the definition here would be to identify her as a picaresque character specifically. The adventurer model as described by de Beauvoir as one that is constantly on the run, that thrives on thrill, and lacks commitment. According to de Beauvoir, he is one who is indifferent to the “human meaning of his action, who thinks he can assert his own existence without taking into account that of others” (Beauvoir 1962: 61). The adventurer rejects all interdependence – much like the passionate man, others are means to his end. Robert Alter even describes the setting Moll lived in as one encouraging such practices: “this very spirit of economic adventurism played a rather important part in the growth of modern British capitalism” (Alter 1964: 46). However, both he and other critics like Ernest A. Baker in *The History of the British Novel* (1950) disagree that Moll in particular is a picaresque: “The heroine is a rogue, but not one rejoicing in her rogueries” (Baker 1950: 190). A closer examination of her “fortunes and misfortunes” will prove that to be true. Moll’s goal itself is clear: to become a gentlewoman. The role by definition is not one associated with adventures. Despite her being constantly on the move, Moll wishes to settle and, excluding her third husband, who turns out to be her half-brother, she never willingly leaves a marriage or a lover – as mentioned above, movement is always dictated by circumstances. Her first husband dies, her second husband leaves her after bankruptcy, her lover at Bath returns to his wife, her fourth husband leaves her to earn money, and her

fifth husband dies as well. Each change necessitates a change of scenery as she cannot con others while surrounded by the same environment. And while we can blame Moll for lacking responsibility in some cases (obviously, as with the many children she leaves behind), she always commits to her circumstances while experiencing them.

Ultimately, Moll does not fit any of the character models of bad faith as described by de Beauvoir. But then, how do we judge Moll from an existentialist perspective? What makes her existence authentic? Beauvoir marks the word “progress” as important in that matter – a constant pursuit of the “expansion of existence” (Beauvoir 1962: 79). This would be a good start as it makes a person truthful to themselves, especially when knowing that progress is all they get, never achievement. Authenticity means understanding one’s own life, that “every living moment is a sliding toward death” and despite that fighting for the future as it is “the meaning and substance of all action” (Ibid., 127). This is the ambiguity of life which one needs to embrace, the beginning of self-consciousness and the knowledge in whose background one lives their life. Moll’s “fear of death moves her” (Caton 1997: 515), thus making her embrace life. Moll’s reasons and morality are her own, therefore she constantly recreates herself. In a world where women exist only in the background, she sets out to make independent choices, affirming her freedom. Virginia Woolf describes her as one who embraces agency in all things: “From the outset the burden of proving her right to exist is laid upon her. She has to depend entirely upon her own wits and judgment, and to deal with each emergency as it arises by a rule-of-thumb morality which she has forged in her own head” (Woolf 1970: 13). Moll avoids external morality and values, she escapes abstract goals, she does not let meaninglessness rule her life despite bouts of depression and despair, nor does she lose herself in the life of a constant adventurer. She is completely conscious of her actions as she is “socially adapted” in time and place and “in tune with culture, furnished with the mental and moral means to meet contingencies” (Ghent 1970: 35). By all accounts, she meets the requirements that de Beauvoir sets to consider a person existentially authentic.

It all boils down to the question of responsibility: does Moll accept responsibility for the moral choices that she self-consciously makes? Linda Bree seems to not think so – she claims it too convenient that Moll always finds somebody (or something – sometimes she just blames “the Devil”) to blame for her own decisions. But such actions also raise “uncomfortable questions about personal responsibility in the ‘real’ world” (Bree 2011: xvii). Moll’s retrospection then becomes a cautionary tale – her own awareness of her choices and their consequences turn her into a warning to

other people about people like her. The common question here is usually “Is Moll sorry about anything she did?” I think the answer is, again: it does not matter. Ian Watt says that “Defoe gives us only the bare facts, long after they have lost their potential power for psychological illumination” (Watt 1967: 110). The reader never receives a direct answer. But the reader does get facts: Moll lived in a harsh environment with “poverty” as her “taskmaster” (Woolf 1970: 16); Moll set herself a goal; Moll kept following that goal; Moll never left a child behind that the reader wasn’t assured was being taken care of. She professes complete awareness of her acts and lets nothing get in the way of achieving her goals. She, however, never hurts anyone, and after every outcome it is only she who seems worse off as a direct result of her own actions. Does Moll accept responsibility? Seeing that she is the only one she actually hurts and reading the reflections of the old woman who spent all her time in Newgate repenting and feeling sorry for herself, it would definitely seem so.

Moll Flanders is a tale about the life of a reformed criminal who wishes to be understood by the reader. She claims herself penitent and that seems to be the most contested claim, but I do not believe it matters at all. What does matter is that Moll exposes herself, revealing complete awareness of everything she did and taking responsibility before the reader with the plea of a fair judgement. However, an existentialist analysis reveals much more to her character than even she lets on. It reveals a rare authenticity that people living before the later rise of individualism cannot appreciate due to societal values at the time. Judging her as morally good or morally bad seems to matter much less unless she is first judged as a free, existentially authentic individual.

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