

Compare the ways in which crime is presented in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*?

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



The eponymous titles *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders*, are two of a collection of novels written by Daniel Defoe. Coleridge described these novels as one of 'the few great novels, which we can call indisputably great'<sup>1</sup>. This 'greatness' that Coleridge speaks of is displayed through the way Defoe presents crime in these novels. He explores the lives of women in the early 18th century and how crime was often a woman's key to survival. The novels are set and centred in different locations in the world of the 1720's.

The geographical settings and mobility of the characters expresses their personal ambition to be known, respected and to have the finer things in life. First and foremost, before looking into the criminal lives *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* both led, their reasons for engaging into crime have to be considered. *Moll* was born into poverty, and ironically she was 'born into a jail cell' in Newgate prison. From this it seems as though *Moll* was born a criminal and a criminal career was destined for her. She is a street educated woman that thrived upon crime to escape the jagged teeth of poverty and also to live a lavish life.

On the contrary *Roxana* is a well-educated and well-bred woman, however her life of crime begins when she is abandoned by her husband, who has also left her with a handful of children to care for. With the encouragement from her accomplice *Amy*, can it be argued that *Roxana* turns from a virtuous woman to an immoral whore? Well, firstly *Roxana* does sleep with numerous men, without marrying them, which was immoral in an 18th century society and *Roxana's* sexual behaviour may have been labelled as

whoring, because she slept with men and receives payments in the form of fine clothes and ornaments and expensive jewellery.

However Roxana does fall in love with every man she sleeps with, so she shouldn't be really referred as a whore. For example in the novel, Roxana admits she fell in love with her landlord 'I grew to love him'; Roxana loves her landlord besides the comfortable lifestyle she lives. Roxana does commit adultery to an extent, her act as been described as a state of 'innocent adultery'<sup>2</sup>: their liaison is as respectable as any marriage, supported as it is by affection and respect, and even by legal settlement.

In an contemporary society Roxana's act wouldn't be describe as whoring or prostitution, and adultery wouldn't be a crime in the 'eyes' of the English law. Also whoring or prostitution is based upon a direct exchange of money for sexual pleasure, no emotions, liking, or loving or relationships are supposed to be formed, whereas Roxana falls in love. Defoe sympathizes with woman in these times, as they were powerless in terms of marriage. Women were condemned if they had children, without being married and more to the point women were neglected and not protected by the government.

Therefore it can be argued that women were more likely to engage in criminal activities as a way of escaping poverty, and to an extent improve their quality of living. However women were less likely to commit crime as there movements were isolated especially if they were married they were the property of their husbands they were to do domestic duties and had little

time to explore the outdoors. However Moll and Roxana do not have these constraints.

It could be inferred Defoe aims to make his two protagonists heroic figures as they manage to succeed against the odds, they're renegades that reject the norms and values of society and do not conform with stereotypical female roles, such as domestic duties, instead they distance themselves from the morals of society and beautify their lives by either using men or stealing valuable objects to fulfil their needs. The novels are written in an autobiographical format, where the protagonist gives a chronological sequence of events in their life.

This presentation is highly effective; firstly it is continuous throughout both novels, more importantly a contemporary reader can easily engage with the novels as the lives of Roxana and Moll are often presented like a soap opera. In Roxana the protagonist notices her first husband in a dinner party she tries her best to conceal herself. If she were caught she would have faced public humiliation or possibly death- 'He had just brushed against me, but didn't notice me'. The close encounter causes tension and the word 'brush' expresses the danger of the situation.

Roxana is an adulteress as; she is sexually involved with the Prince of France while still being legally married. In Moll Flanders, Moll steals a lady's gold watch, Moll is almost caught but she is not suspected of taking the watch. These soap opera like episodes create intimacy between the protagonist and the reader and they have a continuing appeal to a contemporary reader, as

they cause excitement, tension and suspense, this again may support Coleridge's statement that these novels are 'indisputably great'. In both novels, 'Roxana and Moll Flanders look back on their life of sinfulness and opportunism.

It is a life that they must both embrace; it is made them who they are'. However Defoe does make his presences felt in the novels where he expresses his own views towards issues such as marriage; Defoe used the term 'Matrimonial Whoredom'<sup>3</sup> to describe women who married men only for financial gain. From this we are given an insight of the character of Defoe through his protagonists. It can be argued that temptation is without a doubt the reason for Moll and Roxana indulging in crime. There temptations are centred on economic needs and a craving for social status. For example Roxana, with Amy's influence prostitutes herself to her landlord.

In the novel Amy says to Roxana in one occasion 'Dear madam says Amy if I will starve for your sake, I will be a whore'. Here the language is persuasive as Amy's use of reversepsychologypersuades and makes Roxana feel guilty. Roxana is clearly tempted because if she gives up her chastity she could restore the comfortable life she once lived. Although Roxana eventually gives in, she still appears to have a little self-respect; this is evident where she says 'A woman ought rather to die, than to prostitute herself' the tone of language is very bold and convincing that it may contradict my initial argument that Roxana is an immoral whore.

However Roxana opposes her own statement as she lets temptation get the better of her. On the other hand Moll excuses herself for her crimes: 'The silver tankard calls out to her'. A silver tankard would be a large drinking vessel made out of what would have been expensive metal, silver.

Metaphorically it expresses pleasure and wealth, the 'silver tankard' is a vivid use of pathetic fallacy, and it is as though the silver tankard is a person that tempted Moll to committing crimes in order to live well.

Moll admits she became 'more confounded with money', which could give an early indication that her love for money would ultimately lead her to her desperation and further temptations to commit crimes. This in fact is what happens to Moll, in one part of the novel she is in the position where she is so desperate, she contemplates killing a child, This is a turning point as Defoe reveals a dark side of Moll , the reader sees Moll in previous encounters as a thief and whore but contemplating murder shocks the modern day reader.

Episodes such as this are intriguing and have continuing appeal because not only does Moll reveal a dark side the reader can easily sympathies with the villain rather than the victim, the phrase 'the dreadful necessity of circumstances is the cause', express this, the word 'dreadful' is emotive as the reader pity's Moll's well being, The 'circumstances' Moll speaks of, are due to many factors such as the absences of any parental figures for example, since her mother is a criminal, the reader may not be surprised that Moll takes a criminal path for her career.

In sociological terms a poor level of cultural reproduction, could explain why Moll follows her mothers footsteps. Crime is presented with the association of the devil's works. Firstly it has to be considered that crime in the 18th century was often seen either as the work or the influence of the devil, considering at this period people tended to be very superstitious. In Moll Flanders, Moll believes the crimes she commits are caused by the devil- 'She had enough to work on but the devil sends her out unto the streets'.

This use of imagery is effective because Moll personifies the devil as a person who forcefully dragged her onto the street to steal. Moll also refers to herself as a 'busy devil'. The language used here is unusual as the word busy often refers to hard work or a dedication to work, whereas the word devil contradicts the word busy, as the devil is associated with evil or negative works, which causes an overall effect of irony. In Roxana, Roxana prostitutes Amy to her landlord; after Roxana realizes that what she did was immoral and indeed a sin she says she is the 'instrument of the devil's works'.

This has a continuing appeal because the reader shocked that Roxana, supposedly a woman of virtue forces Amy, her closest friend, and 'pimps' her to her landlord. It questionable whether Roxana has an ounce of integrity in left her. Although she admits she was the instrument of the 'devils works' one still has to be amazed at what people will do just to fulfil their own selfish needs. This is similar in Volpone by Ben Jonson, where the character of Corvino forgets all virtue and decided to pimp his own wife.

However can it be argued that Moll and Roxana use notion of the 'devil' as a way to elevate the blame that they feel is already upon them. Also the actual meaning of the devil has to put into consideration. In the period in which Defoe lived, the devil was often described as a hideous creature with horns and jagged teeth. However in the novels Roxana and Moll Flanders, could the devil represent the poverty that eats away in their society, which ultimately leads them to committing crime? Social pressures and personal circumstances is another way crime is presented.

Defoe presents his whores as ordinary people who are normal products of their environment, victims of circumstances which anyone might have experienced. For Roxana the absences of her husband, who left her with the responsibility of caring for five children, leaves Roxana in a difficult situation, so whoring herself at first to her landlord seemed to be the only option for survival as she was on the verge of absolute poverty. In the early stages of the novel Amy presents a strong argument to Roxana.

Roxana begins by saying to Amy 'What consent to lye with him for bread? ' Amy replies 'It would not be lawful for anything else but for bread, Madam, why nobody can starve'. The word 'lawful' is interesting it may suggest that Roxana somehow has the right to sell her own body in order to survive, or maybe Amy is being ironic as prostitution was against the law. Again Amy's persuasive use of language leaves Roxana, completely convinced - 'If he should give me an estate to live on, he should lye with me. Roxana thinks about the situation logically and rationally and decides to give up her chastity. It is upsetting that for woman in these times their, bodies were



almost the only thing they could offer to a man in return for a stable standard of living, so one has to sympathies with Roxana due to the difficult situation she is in. The reader shouldn't look at her negatively especially when individuals such as Amy point out to her 'why nobody can starve'. However the reader may view Roxana negatively in certain parts of the novel.

For example after the brutal death of her lover, her landlord, Roxana attempts to sell the jewels that he had left with her, one has to question her integrity, but it shows the lengths that people would go to maintain the material goods they possess. Although Roxana is an intelligent woman, and arguably she was more than capable to improve her lifestyle by using legal means, Defoe expresses that women were at a disadvantage in terms of earning a decent living; Moll Flanders quotes 'The market is against our sex'.

Here Defoe expresses his feelings through Moll Flanders, as he was interested in women's oppression, as he believed that women were oppressed, especially in marriage. Roxana refuses to marry the Dutch Merchant on various occasions, as she believed women were at a disadvantage as marriage was more of a patriarchal institution. Like Roxana, Moll Flanders is a victim of society and circumstantial issue. Moll was born into poverty.

From an early age, Moll is socially aware of her low status but she refers to herself as a 'Gentlewoman', which expresses her ambitions to have the fine things in life and to be accepted by society. Here it could be argued that Moll

wants the desired social status that Roxana also achieves. Moll Flanders, like Rastignac and Julien Sorel, is a characteristic product of modern individualism in assuming that she owes it to herself to achieve the highest economic and social rewards and in using every available method to carry out her resolve.

Even Moll admits that 'the dreadful necessity of circumstances is cause', referring to the poverty she lives in is the cause of her thieving; Moll says in her defense 'give me poverty lest I steal'. In one occasion Moll begins sewing lace for a particular wealthy woman, however Moll is still relatively poor. The rich woman has two brothers that Moll acquaints herself with; she prostitutes herself to two of them. They both spoil her excessively with fine clothes and ornaments, she says in one occasion; 'He had furnished me very sufficiently with money for extraordinary express of my lying in I had everything'.

One may look down upon Moll as a whore, however one has to consider she is not educated like Roxana and her ambition to be a 'gentlewoman' is still at large, so it is either she took this opportunity or not, but Moll admits 'she had enough to live on' however she still has the urge to commit crimes. To Moll's horror she commits another crime, she later finds out that the two brothers she sleeps with are too her own brothers. This has a continuing appeal to a modern day reader because it is hilarious that Moll prostitutes herself to two brothers who actually are her brothers it is a bizarre experience for Moll.

It is engaging for a modern day reader, as incest tends to occur when both relations are aware they are related, whereas Moll isn't aware. Moll indulges in crime not just for survival but to have the fine clothes and ornaments. Moll says ' I needed to dress well in order to mingle'. Defoe makes it evident in both novels that society was beginning to be more capitalist, so as times changed Roxana and Moll, too had to modernize in order to be respected and accepted by society.

Moll's fine clothes and ornaments and Roxana's expensive Turkish dress are symbolise of the pressure in society to live lavishly. However both Roxana and Moll reasons for indulging in crime are not strong sociological arguments, such as we might make today: they don't ask themselves why a certain percentage of the population is destitute, they just want to make sure they are not one of them. However their determination not to be destitute shows their survival instincts.

Also Defoe shows the emergence of an individualistic society where people began to develop their own norms and values and tended not to look at traditional institutions such as the church for guidance and rather they'd take matters into their own hands. The relationship between crime and identity has to be explored. For example Moll is a common slang term in these times for a woman of low repute, often the girlfriend of a professional thief, 'Flanders' was a term to describe women in prostitution.

Roxana Turkish dress reveals her criminal identity as a courtesan. It interesting as their names are clear indications of their true identities and

purposes but none of the characters realize this. In *Roxana* where Roxana leaves her lavish life momentarily, she takes up Quaker dressing. This way of dressing is a drastic change from her lavish gorgeous dresses, which emphasis the change from her high life and erotic encounters to a simple way of living.

*Roxana* and *Moll Flanders* hide away behind their names and costumes to protect their identity, their hidden identities explain that they are afraid and do not want to face up to who they and they're afraid of how people will react to them like the character *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe creates characters similar to how he felt about himself as he even changed his name from Foe to Defoe, which suggests that Defoe feels the struggle and can sympathise with what his protagonists go through.