

On Morality of Moll Flanders

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Abstract. Moll Flanders is a representative work of the famous 18th century British novelist Daniel Defoe, which depicts the sinful life of the protagonist Moll Flanders with a self-reported tone: a female at the bottom of society marries and steals frequently for survival. This novel not only reflects Moll's complex and multidimensional morality, but also shows her fights between morality and survival, morality and desire as well as morality and sin: putting the interests of survival first; putting the real existence of the individual in the first place and understanding releasing personal desires but indulging in them; achieving the awakening of conscience by repentance. By revealing Moll's morality, this paper aims to show that the pleasure brought by carnal and material desires is temporary and sinful, and only the pursuit of goodness and virtue can make people spiritually rich.

Keywords: Moll Flanders; Morality; Survival; Desire; Sin.

1. Introduction

Moll Flanders is a novel written by famous British writer Daniel Defoe. The novel tells the sinful life of the protagonist Moll Flanders (the daughter of a prison thief), who struggles to survive in a difficult social environment by herself. She goes through five failed marriages and many years of criminal theft. Finally, she is arrested in Newgate Prison but gains the rebirth through repentance.

Moll Flanders has attracted much attention since it was first published, in which Defoe first puts a lower-level woman as the main character. Many scholars have interpreted this novel from different perspectives. In the last century, Western critics had a heated discussion on whether Moll Flanders is an ironic novel. Mark Schorer argues that "what appears like irony is merely the result of Defoe's moral confusion-the 'classic revelation of the mercantile mind'" (Novak 198). Maximillian E. Novak suggests that Moll Flanders is a consciously ironic novel. "On the surface level of her narrative Moll sees her life as a Christian penitent. She is only dimly aware that she operates on a level of natural law" (Novak 203). While in *To the Palace of Wisdom*, Martin Price argues that "although Defoe seems to have been aware of the moral complexity of his subject matter, he was not being ironic in Moll Flanders" (Novak 198).

Since the translation of Moll Flanders was introduced to China and Chinese feminist consciousness improved continuously, plenty of Chinese studies on feminism and female images in Moll Flanders have emerged. Simply from the female perspective, Li argues that Moll Flanders is the women's history of resistance in 18th century England: Moll fights against the inequity of love and marriage, against stereotype for women in the patriarchal society and against the ill-fated life. "She tries to unfetter and realize self-independence, which offers a new way for the later literature, and has important research significance for the life guidance of contemporary women" (Li 69). Xu reveals Defoe's female view through Moll Flanders: criticizing the inequality of capitalist social system to women, encouraging women to resist bravely and strive to improve their self-cultivation and ability, so as to truly realize women's social status (Xu 53). Yang, on the other hand, focuses on the historical value and practical significance of literary works. In her article "Research on Female Crime in Moll Flanders and Its Roots", Yang proposes that the fundamental causes of female crime wave of England at the turn of the 17th century and the 18th century are social prejudice, poor life and monetary marriage (Yang 120). As for the ethics and morality in Moll Flanders, some scholars study the complex relations between economy and morality and the changeable ethical relations. Other scholars suggest that Moll's ethical dilemma in the novel is due to Defoe's insistence on "casuistry" which not only accepts the rationality of natural law, but also insists on the necessity of social and divine law.

Morality is one of the social ideologies as well as the criterion and norm for people to live and conduct themselves. Kant's moral philosophy holds that "in people's daily life, there exists an absolute moral standard, which is an important standard for judging the behavior of social individuals" (Li 64). "The task of morality is first to define what is good and evil, and on this basis to establish a series of evaluation methods, principles and norms to regulate the relationship between individuals and the society" (Hu 43). To some extent, morality refers to the individual's views and opinions on the mainstream moral norms of the society, and morality is reflected by specific moral behaviors. In the Middle Ages, western morality is nearly equal to religious doctrines, which regards God as the core of morality and advocates asceticism. "Thus, the focus of the morality in this period is the constant emphasis on the will of God so as to push people to resist secular temptations with the spiritual joy obtained in pious faith" (Hu 43). However, with the rise of humanism in the Renaissance, "humans" gradually break away from the constraint of "God", and human morality has also improved. At the beginning of the 18th century, the British society experienced political turmoil and the rapid rise of capitalist economy. Old morality could not adapt to new social changes, while new morality had not yet been formed. Based on the intersection of old and new morality, this paper reveals Moll's morality from three aspects: the fights between morality and survival, morality and desire as well as morality and sin.

2. The Game Between Morality and Survival-Leaving Morality and Choosing Survival

The game between morality and survival means the individual's choice between moral norms and survival interests in the face of survival crisis. The survival interest refers to the individual's claim and pursuit of the right to life and property. Survival crisis refers to an emergency in which human life and property are seriously threatened. If no active measures are taken, the individual cannot sustain his life. In this case, moral norms and survival interests are incompatible and the individual can only choose one or the other. If the individual chooses to adhere to moral norms, he will lose his life; on the other hand, he can survive but will violate the moral norms.

In the game between morality and survival, Moll Flanders chooses to break away from morality and pursue survival interests. After the death of her fifth husband, Moll's life situation became worse and worse: no money, no youth and no friends. "I lived two years in this dismal condition, wasting that little I had, weeping continually over my dismal circumstances" (105). At this time, Moll's life was facing an unprecedented survival crisis: extreme poverty and hunger. "Give me not poverty, lest I steal" (106). From then on, the seed of theft began to take root in Moll's heart. "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" (106). Poverty and hunger would weaken people's moral will and self-control. Faced with the dilemma of the moral norm of banning theft and survival interests realized by stealing, Moll finally gave up resisting and chose to sublate her morality for the sake of survival. From then on, she began her stealing career for twelve years.

Moral behaviors reflect morality. Therefore, we can conclude Moll's morality from her moral behaviors: Survival and self-preservation are in the first place; the right to life is the basis of all human activities, for which people can abandon everything including morality. This kind of morality has become more common since the 18th century. The code of morality has transferred from "God" to "individual". "A man's desire to be happy, to behave justly and to live reasonably always goes together with his desire to survive, to act and to live-in other words, to really exist", "Striving for self-preservation is the first and only foundation of virtue" (Spinoza 203-204). In addition, "casuistry" emphasizes that in dealing with specific matters, people must judge individual behaviors by comprehensively considering divine law, natural law and social law. In casuistry, the natural law elaborates on the survival necessity: "Natural law holds that when a person is in trouble and is likely to starve to death, he can take any actions to save his life, that is, to break through the constraints of

social law and morality” (Chen 81). Samuel Pufendorf observes that “Everyone speaks of the necessary situation, and the necessity’s power is known to everyone: therefore, it is common to say that there is no law before necessity and it can constitute an exception to all human ordinances and laws; it thus gives a person the right to do many things which are otherwise prohibited” (Pufendorf 156).

Therefore, Moll’s choice of survival interests is understandable. However, her way of pursuing survival interests is not personal hard work, but the theft that morality and law prohibit. Her choice has a lot to do with the social environment and women’s living conditions of England in the early 18th century. “At the turn of the 17th and 18th century, the social and economic situation of England was quite terrible. After declaring war with France in 1692, the foreign trade that supported English economy suddenly stagnated, so English economy suffered extreme collapse. The death of King William in 1702 caused great political tension” (Yang 115). Social instability naturally affects the daily life of ordinary people, and also affects the living environment of lower-level women. At the same time, England was in an important economic transition period. With the development of capitalist economy, the gap between the rich and the poor became wider and wider. As far as women are concerned, the ladies of the upper-class lived at luxury, stayed at high status and held great wealth; while lower-class women were paid a few pence a day in textiles or domestic work. After Moll’s fifth husband’s death, she had been at the age of 48, so she could no longer utilize her beauty and figure to gain financial support from men, and the pay that she gained from weaving was so low. Only stealing from the rich was a shortcut to accumulate huge wealth in a short time.

Moll’s moral choice shows a kind of advance in morality that humans are free from the bondage of God. However, harsh living conditions of women push Moll to choose a more immoral behavior-stealing. This indicates that the social environment and personal circumstances have a great influence on the individual’s morality. But that doesn’t mean Moll’s immoral behaviors should be supported. Her choice of stealing results in her gradual degradation and the final punishment. Therefore, Defoe conveys to readers the view that people can choose to give up morality in order to protect themselves, but they cannot get rid of the constraints of law and religion.

3. The Fight Between Morality and Desire-Abandoning Morality and Falling into Desire

The fight between morality and desire refers to the control and restraint of internal desires with moral will. Desire is a kind of normal inner pursuit of the beloved things or persons. Aristotle divides “orexis” into three different parts: *epithumia*: direct desires tied to animal instincts for eating, drinking, and sex; *thumos*: subjective and political desires for victory and glory in war; *Boulēsis*: desires for existent or inexistent things that people regard as good and valuable, such as health, happiness or eternal life (Chen 69–72).

In the Middle Ages, some ascetic theologians like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas are against people having a secular life. “They regard personal desires as the source of corruption, and the lust for material and carnal desires blocks the light of God and leads to the destruction of the individual” (Hu 43). Since the 18th century, people’s thoughts have gradually been liberated from the captivity of God. People started believing that their pursuit of desire was no longer sinful and began to release their nature and satisfy their desires. However, the pursuit of human desires must have a certain measure, and this measure is morality, especially the sense of self-discipline in morality. People with strong self-discipline can control their desires and let them fluctuate within a reasonable range; while people with weak self-discipline are dominated by desire, eventually harming themselves and others.

There are many desires in Moll’s life: the vanity of being a “gentlewoman” and the eager for sex, etc. While the desire that affects Moll’s life most is the greed for money during her theft. After Moll started stealing, she gradually got better off and made a living barely: “At last I got some quilting work for ladies’ beds, petticoats, and the like; and this I liked very well, and worked very hard, and

with this I began to live” (110). By this time, Moll’s necessities were secure enough that she could give up stealing totally and become self-reliant. However, “Thus the devil, who began, by the help of an irresistible poverty, to push me into this wickedness, brought me on to a height beyond the common rate, even when my necessities were not so great, or the prospect of my misery so terrifying” (112). When poverty is eliminated, greed returns. With weak self-control, Moll could not restrain her inner greedy desire and also did not want to give up this lucrative means of making money. So that every time Moll was ready to quit, greed would appear and control her body and mind, and the danger approached correspondingly. In an unremarkable burglary, Moll was bumped into by a neighbor of the house’s owner. Finally, she had nothing to say and was taken to Newgate Prison for burglary.

Moll’s greedy desire for money is largely due to the “economic individualism” under the influence of British capitalism in the 18th century. “From the perspective of social ideology and economic life, ... it is the middle-class value focused on the pursuit of personal wealth and protection of personal interests that gradually replaces the value system of the agricultural society and becomes the universal value of the whole society” (Wang 42). This new middle-class value spread rapidly in the society and permeated into all classes and industries, so that a reechy practice that “money dominates everything” was formed. Driven by mammonism, people began to accumulate primitive capitals in a crazy way, and an increasing number of “economic individualists” emerged. This kind of people is characterized by “strong economic consciousness, shrewd calculation habit and indifferent interpersonal relationship” (Zhang 22), and regards wealth as the goal of life. “People’s strong desire for wealth is the inevitable product of the capitalist economy’s recognition of the existence of individual interests” (Wang 42). Moll is no exception. Money is not only the foundation of doing, but the only way to break the class barrier and become a “gentlewoman”. The capitalist value of mammonism makes Moll produce a strong desire for money. From this we can see that in the 18th century, humanity-imprisoned asceticism is obviously unable to adapt to new social changes in England and is gradually abandoned by people. However, rapid capitalist economy growth also exerts a strong impact on new imperfect morality. People were dissociating in the old morality and the new social system, and thus formed a world full of greed and desire. As Shakespeare feared: “The advancing world will be a money-dominated world..., which indulges individualism vigorously and is full of greed” (Wang 42).

Therefore, Moll’s morality can be seen in her conflict of morality and desire: Although Moll gets rid of the bondage of the medieval asceticism and puts the real self-existence and feeling in the first place, she indulges in her desires infinitely. Moll goes from one extreme of asceticism to the other extreme of rampant desires. Her immoral behavior of indulging in desires will be neither sympathized with, nor understood. On the contrary, she will be condemned by morality and sanctioned by law.

4. The Struggle Between Morality and Sin-Dissolving Sin and Reshaping Morality

The struggle between morality and sin refers to people’s re-cognition of their own crimes. When people commit crimes, they focus only on their own motives and the criminal pleasure, so they do not have a clear understanding on whether their behavior is right, moral, legal or not. However, in the rest of life after the crime, some people come to a further understanding of their sins through reflection, repentance, education and reform, and will make up for their mistakes with practical actions.

Moll’s struggle between morality and sin refers to her tortuous course of repentance. After arrested into Newgate Prison, Moll would face the execution and punishment of never being happy. She was so horrified at the punishment, but she began to repent insincerely: “I was a penitent, as I thought, not that I had sinned, but that I was to suffer” (154). This was the instinctive reaction of any prisoner who had been deprived of the capacity of crime. However, when she was sentenced to death, she became numb: “I had no trouble, no apprehensions, no sorrow about me... my senses, my reason, nay, my conscience were all asleep” (156). Thus, Moll’s friend invited a priest to help her, who advised Moll to speak freely out the past sins and repent seriously so as to achieve personal salvation. Moll then began to repent sincerely: “How vile, how gross, how absurd did every pleasant thing look! --I mean,

that we had counted pleasant before”, “With these reflections came, of mere course, severe reproaches of my own mind for my wretched behavior in my past life” (161). She took the first step toward the salvation of her soul and tried to find the chance of rebirth. “He revived my heart”, “obtaining the comfort of a penitent--I mean, the hope of being forgiven” (162). Later, Moll received a special pardon and was exiled to Virginia. During the exile, Moll worked hard to create wealth, and accepted her husband in Lancashire and her son in Virginia. She began to value love and kinship and pursue goodness and virtue.

In the struggle between morality and sin, Moll abandoned the past sinful life and finally realized a new morality: Sensual pleasure brought by carnal and material desires is temporary and sinful, and only virtue and goodness can bring eternal spiritual satisfaction. “The pursuit of both virtue and goodness gave Moll a more lasting happiness and helped her establish a sense of dignity, so that she could escape from the past hellish life of abandoning morality for survival” (Bai 90). Moll’s ending also confirms Defoe’s teaching at the beginning of the story: “letting them know that diligence and application have their due encouragement, even in the remotest parts of the world, and that no case can be so low, so despicable, or so empty of prospect, but that an unwearied industry will go a great way to deliver us from it, will in time raise the meanest creature to appear again the world, and give him a new case for his life” (3).

John Stuart Mill believes that “the pleasure of reason, feeling and imagination, as well as the pleasure of moral feeling are of much higher value than the pleasure of mere senses” (John 12). This view revises the traditional “utilitarianism” that emphasizes the pleasures of the senses, and powerfully explains Moll’s moral awakening: Moll breaks away from the traditional “utilitarianism” and begins to pursue moral and spiritual satisfaction. In addition, the revised “utilitarianism” has certain functions of education and guidance for British society full of excessive desires in the 18th century. This theory promotes the public to think about if the pleasure of sex and materials that they pursue can bring them true joy and satisfaction. Once these superficial substances are pulling away, whether people will be happy. Mill, on the other hand, emphasizes the pursuit of morality and believes that people can obtain happiness beyond the material level through the pursuit of goodness (Bai 90). Mill’s theory, therefore, encourages people to reconcile with desire and sin, and to pay attention to virtue and goodness. To some extent, this theory reduces the bad influence of bourgeois supremacy and utilitarian values on British social morality: It normalizes people’s immoral outlooks and behavior, and plays an important role in moral enlightenment on those guilty persons like Moll Flanders. Finally, it would lead British social morality back to the right direction.

From the development and change of Moll’s morality, we can see Defoe’s strong intention of “moralization”: First, Defoe uses Moll’s nearly sixty years of immoral behaviors to warn readers and the public: “All the exploits of this lady of fame, in her depredations upon mankind, stand as so many warnings to honest people to beware of them, intimating to them by what methods innocent people are drawn in, plundered and robbed, and by consequence how to avoid them” (3). Defoe then shows Moll’s story of reshaping the morality and gaining the rebirth through confession, aiming to explain to readers that people should pursue virtue and goodness, and stick to justice and faith. Because walking with evil is doomed, and that only with good is the real way of survival.

5. Conclusion

Moll Flanders, influenced by capitalist value and difficult living environment, shows complex and changeable morality. In this context, although Moll’s morality is free from the constraint of medieval theology and makes great progress at that time: putting survival interests first; putting her own real existence in the first place and having the awareness of releasing personal desires. However, due to the “mammonism” value and the harsh living conditions of women, her morality also shows many disadvantages: deep-rooted “economic individualism” and rampant desires. Ultimately, Moll’s strong living will and sincere repentance reshapes her morality: The pleasure brought by sexual and material desires is temporary and sinful, and only pursuing goodness and virtue can make people spiritually

rich. This new morality is not only conducive to the perfection of individual personality, but also promotes the harmonious coexistence between people and the harmony and stability of the society.

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