

Section 1 (Moll's childhood)

Summary

Moll Flanders (which is not her true name, she tells us) is born in Newgate prison to a mother who is a convicted felon. Her mother had "pleaded her Belly," and so was granted a reprieve until her child was born. When Moll is six months old, her mother is transported to America as punishment for her crime, leaving her infant daughter "a poor desolate Girl without Friends, without Cloaths, without Help or Helper in the World." Moll's earliest childhood memory is of wandering with a band of gypsies at the age of three. She separates herself from the gypsies in Colchester, where she is taken up by the town magistrates as a charity case. They place her with a nurse, a local woman who "got a little Livelihood by taking such as I was suppos'd to be, and keeping them with all Necessaries, till they were at a certain Age, in which it might be suppos'd they might go to Service, or get their own Bread." This honest and kind woman provides Moll with a fairly good upbringing and gives her a rudimentary education.

When Moll reaches the age (eight years) at which she is supposed to seek employment as a servant, she protests tearfully that she would rather stay with her current mistress. She could earn her keep doing needlework, she entreats, explaining (without really knowing what the word means) that she wants to be "a gentlewoman." The childish innocence of this unreasonable ambition amuses her mistress and neighbors to no end, and she actually becomes something of a local celebrity. She is allowed to continue in her current situation, and several rich ladies begin to act as her benefactors, occasionally giving her money and clothes. When the nurse dies, Moll (now fourteen years old) goes to live with one of these prominent families. She continues her education alongside the daughters of this family, learning to sing, dance, and speak French.

Commentary

The narrative begins with the disclosure that "Moll Flanders" is not the heroine's true name, but rather an alias given her by "some of my worst Comrades" in crime. Defoe thus reveals from the novel's first lines that Moll, having been born in prison as the daughter of a convicted felon, will eventually continue in that tradition. We also glimpse in this opening paragraph the severity of the justice system of the time. Defoe's century saw an increase in crime, and also in the number of crimes that were punishable by death. Moll's mother receives her sentence--transportation to the American colonies--as a "Favour"; the expected punishment would have been execution.

Defoe takes great pains to establish the authenticity of his book, which, though fictional, is almost journalistic in its unflinching realism and in its wealth of mundane detail. By presenting the story as the autobiographical account of a first-person narrator, Defoe reinforces that sense of immediacy. Almost everything that happens in the book is told out of Moll's direct experience. When this is not the case,

Defoe is careful to give the source of Moll's indirect knowledge, as when she sketches the first few years of life based on "hear say."

Moll begins as an orphan, and her life will in fact be defined, from start to finish, as one of profound isolation. Moll's early abandonment is but the first in a long line of such desertions, and the novel will continue divesting Moll of all her friends and relations at a rapid rate. The basic aloneness of human beings was a favorite theme for Defoe. Although Moll exists in the midst of a bustling and crowded urban world (rather than being stranded on an island like Robinson Crusoe), she forges almost no enduring loyalties or friendships. On the rare occasions when she does find fellowship, Defoe does not allow Moll's interpersonal relations to become the focus of the novel.

Moll's solitary and unpropitious start in life also initiates her remarkable self-sufficiency. That she divides herself from the band of gypsies at the age of three is an index of the power this heroine will have to steer and direct her own life. While Moll is often at the mercy of circumstances, her lack of affiliation also gives her a kind of freedom, and it forces her to rely on her own judgment and cunning to make her way in the world. Her story will be a quest for survival.

Section 2 (Moll's first lover and first marriage)

Summary

Moll is growing into a very beautiful young woman, and she becomes vain of her appearance. The two sons of her adopted family begin to take notice of Moll (who at this time is known as "Mrs. Betty"). The eldest son is of a worldly and dissolute character. He flatters and flirts with Moll and eventually seduces her--which, as Moll confesses, was actually not all that difficult a task. They become regular lovers, and he gives her quite a bit of money in exchange for her sexual favors. She believes, however, that he means to marry her, and so she is bewildered when the younger brother, Robert (also called "Robin"), makes her a marriage proposal as well. Robert, captivated by Moll's beauty, wants to wed her immediately and without regard for the certain disapproval of his family and friends. Because he makes no secret of his desires, his mother and sisters start to treat Moll gruffly and even begin to talk of turning her out of the house.

Moll consults with the elder brother about how to handle the situation. Much to her surprise, her current lover encourages her to accept Robert's offer. He obviously sees this marriage as an easy way of extricating himself from a potentially embarrassing liaison. Moll, however, is aghast at this suggestion; she feels herself bonded to the elder brother indissolubly, and she admonishes him "to remember the long Discourse you have had with me, and the many Hours pains you have taken to persuade me to believe myself an honest Woman, that I was your Wife intentionally, though not in the eye of the World, and that it was as effectual a Marriage that had pass'd between us as if we had been publicly Wedded by the Parson of the Parish." She realizes that if she marries the younger brother, she will have been nothing but a prostitute to the elder: "If I have been persuaded to believe that I am really, and in

the Essence of the Thing your Wife, shall I now give the Lye to all those Arguments, and call myself your Whore, or Mistress, which is the same thing?"

The shock of this whole series of developments throws Moll into a fever, from which she takes five weeks to recover. The family's concern over their younger son's attachment to Moll becomes increasingly obvious during this period, and they interrogate her repeatedly about his advances and her own intentions. She first claims that Robert is not serious, and then declares that she would never marry him against the family's wishes. Robert presses his family for their consent, believing that then Moll will marry him. His older brother aids him in this campaign, urging both Moll and his mother to agree to the marriage. He tries to work on Moll without having to violate his promises explicitly, but finally he makes her understand that he will have nothing more to do with her, whether she marries Robert or not. She begins to see the true contours of the situation, and when the mother eventually consents, she agrees to marry Robert. The older brother arranges things so that Robert is in too much of "a Fuddle" on his wedding night to know that his bride is not a virgin. Moll has no love for Robert and continues to cherish a flame for her first lover. Her husband dies after five years, and their two children are sent to live with Robert's parents.

Commentary

The situation in which Moll eventually finds herself--in love with one brother but compelled to marry the other--is the stuff of tragedy. Defoe gives the plot a fairly comic treatment, however, utilizing the episode mainly to demonstrate Moll's early naiveté and to show her perseverance and her quickness to learn from her experiences. Moll singles out the growth of her youthful vanity as marking a turning point in her life. Up to this point, Moll has had nothing to reproach herself with except a childish ignorance. "Thus far I have had a smooth Story to tell of myself, and in all this Part of my Life, I not only had the Reputation of living in a very good Family,...but I had the Character too of a very sober, modest, and virtuous young Woman, and such I had always been; neither had I yet any occasion to think of any thing else, or to know what a Temptation to Wickedness meant." Yet the narrator backs off of the sermon on the evils of vanity, or at least she recasts those evils in material, not spiritual terms. The lesson she draws is one of expediency rather than of piety. When she warns her younger readers "to Guard themselves against the Mischiefs which attend an early Knowledge of their own Beauty," the mischief to which she refers is not immoral sexual behavior but rather the credulousness that will allow a woman to be the dupe of a more sophisticated man. She admonishes herself for her lack of attention to practical matters--not for the fact that she yielded to temptation, but for the fact that she failed to secure her own interests as she might have.

The scene of Moll's seduction is one of the book's raciest episodes. As the heroine becomes more sexually experienced, the narrator ceases to present the sexual facts of her story with the same romance and titillation. Desire and emotion are in fact conspicuously minimized in this novel, which distills human existence to its economic and materialistic bottom line. The emotional responses of the character Moll contrast markedly here with the wizened perspective of the septuagenarian who narrates the story. As Moll grows into her adult self, this divided perspective

closes somewhat: she matures into a pattern in which her first reactions to events, which may be emotional or impetuous initially, quickly resolve into stoic and pragmatic courses of action.

Yet the gap between the narrator and the protagonist remains important throughout, serving to reinforce the conditional morality that the book so often propounds. Life decisions in Defoe's novel cannot be divorced from the circumstances under which they are made. The narrator's most frequent strategy in commenting on her own life is to imagine herself into her former situation, rather than to impose the wisdom of her years on her earlier experience. Moll's ability to perform this imaginative displacement is part of what enables her to tell her story with such tenderness of sympathy and understanding. The narrator is never coy with her reader, which is part of her appeal. She presents her own responses and motivations frankly and unabashedly, as when she confesses that she was too pleased with her first lover's attentions to resist him. The fact that we get no real external perspective on Moll's life, however, limits the capacity of the novel to pronounce any stern judgment or to come to an objective moral resolution, and many readers find it difficult to discern even the author's own real opinion of Moll's character.

Section 3 (Moll marries the draper, and then her half-brother)

Summary

Moll suddenly finds herself a wealthy widow (she has saved 1200 pounds of the money her first lover gave her), alone in London, and "still Young and Handsome." She is courted by several men before she marries a draper, a tradesman who strikes her as being "something of a Gentleman too." His extravagant expenditures soon cast them into poverty, however. He is arrested and then escapes from prison and flees to France. This leaves Moll in a strange predicament: "I found I could hardly muster up 500 l. and my condition was very odd, for tho' I had no Child,...yet I was a Widow bewitched, I had a Husband, and no Husband, and I could not pretend to Marry again, tho' I knew well enough my Husband would never see England any more." She decides, accordingly, to dress as a widow and begin a new life under the assumed name "Mrs. Flanders." She soon finds herself among a miserable, "wicked" company of men and does not feel inclined to return any of their attentions.

Moll reflects on the extreme disadvantage women are at in the marriage market. Her own situation is such that it "made the offer of a good Husband the most necessary Thing in the World to me," but the people with whom she is acquainted all know that she has no fortune, a handicap over which "Being well Bred, Handsome, Witty, Modest and agreeable" cannot prevail. Moll gets help from an acquaintance, who carries her into the country where, together, they cultivate the public misinformation that Moll has a fortune of 1500 pounds. Moll then finds herself courted by a plantation owner and, during a flirtatious game, tricks him into saying that he would marry her even if she were penniless. Once they are married, he bears the news that she is actually poor with relative equanimity, stating "that indeed he thought it had been more, but that if it had been less he did not repent his

bargain; only that he should not be able to maintain me so well as he intended." In light of their reduced prospects, he expresses the wish to move to Virginia, where his plantations are, and where his mother and sister live. Moll agrees.

The whole family is getting along well in America, and Moll "thought myself the happiest creature alive; when an odd and surprizing Event put an end to all that Felicity in a moment, and rendered my Condition the most uncomfortable, if not the most miserable, in the World." While her new mother-in-law is telling some stories, Moll suddenly realizes that the woman is actually her own mother by birth, and that she has inadvertently married her half-brother. Appalled in this moment of recognition, she hesitates to reveal her discovery to her husband; she knows only that she cannot continue in the marriage. She insists on being allowed to return to England--without giving a real reason--and her husband refuses. They quarrel regularly and begin to be on very bad terms. Finally Moll confides in her mother-in-law/mother, who recommends that she "bury the whole thing entirely" and continue to live as before. She also promises to provide for Moll in her will. Moll is too disgusted at the thought of "lying with my own brother" even to consider this option. She finally tells her husband/brother the whole story, and the news throws him "into a long lingering Consumption." Moll once again demands to go to England, and he is in no condition to resist. After eight years in America she sails for home, and she and her husband consider their marriage effectively dissolved.

Commentary

The disappearance of Moll's second husband to France is the first of several occasions when Moll will find herself with "a Husband, and no Husband." Her solution to this problem is to close the door on her past and assume a new identity. She embraces the same strategy for dealing with her incestuous marriage, and she will continue the practice throughout her life, becoming increasingly adept at molding her disguises and personas to her own advantage.

Defoe depicts, through his heroine, the harsh realities of the marriage market. He himself was outspoken in his criticism of the practice of marrying without love, calling such alliances "legalized prostitution." This candid and unsentimental presentation of the economic motives governing marriage casts Moll's frankness about her own motivations in a new light. If we were inclined to see her avowed acquisitiveness as overly mercenary, we are now forced to acknowledge, at the very least, that she is a creature of her world.

Moll's moral disgust at the revelation that she has been living with her brother as a husband is somewhat surprising, given the equanimity and lack of emotion with which she has met the other tragedies that have befallen her. This is one of the rare cases when a moral principle will outweigh every other consideration for Moll. Even in this case, however, her initial repulsion is quickly channeled into a more pragmatic vein as she calmly considers what action she ought to take. The news causes Moll's brother/husband to suffer a breakdown, a fact which reinforces, by contrast, Moll's personal resourcefulness and resiliency. This episode serves as a link between the beginning of the novel and the end: it shows Moll rediscovering her

mother and her own origins and also paves the way for her return to America and her final attainment of prosperity.

Section 4 (Moll has an affair with a married man)

Summary

Moll arrives safely in London but finds that some of her possessions have been destroyed in transit. With those goods, she says, "I might have married again tolerably well; but as it was I was reduc'd to between two or three hundred pounds in the whole...[and] entirely without Friends." She sets up residence at Bath, which turns out to be a place "where Men find a Mistress sometimes, but very rarely look for a Wife." She does, however, become the platonic companion of a Gentleman whose company she particularly enjoys. He turns out to be a fairly wealthy man, and Moll finds out that he is in fact married, but that his wife has gone mad.

This gentleman-friend inquires into Moll's financial situation, offering to assist her if she is in need. Moll hesitates at first to accept any money from him despite the urging of her landlady, who tells Moll that she "ought to expect some Gratification from him for [her] company." Finally she does take his money. He invites her to move to London with him, but then he falls ill. She nurses him for five weeks, during which time their familiarity increases. Finally, after a journey to Bristol in which they are forced to sleep in the same room, their reserve falls away and they become lovers. "Thus the Government of our Virtue was broken and I exchang'd the Place of Friend for that unmusical harsh-sounding Title of Whore."

Moll has several children by this man, and he dutifully supports both her and them. "Now I was indeed at the height of what I might call my prosperity," Moll relates, "and I wanted nothing but to be a Wife, which however could not be in this Case." She saves her money, knowing that her prosperous situation may not continue indefinitely. Because of the imperative to secrecy, Moll lives a fairly solitary life except for the company of her lover: "I kept no Company but in the Family where I Lodg'd,...so that when he was absent I visited no Body, nor did he ever find me out of my Chamber or Parlor whenever he came down; if I went any where to take the Air it was always with him." After six years "in this happy but unhappy Condition," Moll's lover falls into a "Distemper." For months she has little news of him. Finally he explains that he has had a religious experience in which, finding himself "at the very brink of Eternity," he repented of his sinful and adulterous conduct. Giving her a final sum of money, he resolves to see her no more. Moll plays on his guilt and pity to extract some further payments from him, on the agreement that he will then be released from all further obligation.

Commentary

Moll's relationship with this "Gentleman" is governed by a conflict: she seems reluctant to become his mistress, but also at some level desires that outcome. She confesses "that from the first hour I began to converse with him, I resolv'd to let him lye with me if he offer'd it; but it was because I wanted his help and assistance, and I

knew no other way of securing him than that." The underlying question for Moll is one of security, not of love or even desire. Moll has learned that being a wife is more secure than being a mistress, and she knows that there is no chance of marrying this man as long as his mad wife is still living. Yet his generosity and loyalty make him a likely candidate for an affair, and this assessment is confirmed when he promises to take care of her and her children. For the six years that they are together, Moll enjoys financial stability, if not social comfort. She is wise enough, however, to save money while she is enjoying such prosperity, "knowing well enough that such things as these do not always continue, that Men that keep mistresses often change them, grow weary of them or Jealous of them, or something or other happens to make them withdraw their Bounty." Moll's concerns--and her financial prudence--are not unfounded: after finding himself on the brink of death, her lover repents of his adultery and deserts Moll. Still, the relationship is a relative success, especially since marriage for Moll has been equally uncertain.

Interestingly, the moral valence of the situation is not in the fact of committing adultery, but rather in having the common sense to secure oneself against some change of circumstances; the woman who does not protect herself against that possibility is "justly" ruined. Moll admits to having some "secret Reproaches of my own Conscience for the Life I led," but then elaborates them in financial terms: "even in the greatest height of the Satisfaction I ever took, yet I had the terrible prospect of Poverty and Starving which lay behind me." Moll has learned to look for openings that might bring her financial gain, and she is not shy to capitalize on them when she finds them.

Section 5 (The banker, and Moll's Lancashire husband)

Summary

"I was now a single Person again," Moll remembers, "loose'd from all the Obligations either of Wedlock or Mistresship in the World." She has 450 pounds to her name, but at forty-two years old she is aware that her assets of personal beauty are in decline. She knows what she wants ("to be placed in a settled State of living") but says she does not know how to attain that end. What she really means is that no easy opportunity presents itself, and so she sets out to create an opportunity. Moll again allows people to think she is richer than she is. She meets and befriends a woman who carries herself like a gentlewoman and who encourages Moll to move to the North Country, where the cost of living is lower and where, she hints, there are plenty of rich husbands to be found. Moll decides to take her up on this offer, except that she needs someone to look after her finances in London. She is referred to a banker, who offers to handle her money for her and then offers to marry her in the bargain. He is married already, as it turns out, but his wife has been cheating on him. He is wealthy and congenial, and Moll agrees to consider his proposal if and when he can obtain a legal divorce. In the meantime, she still means to travel north, stating, "I made no scruple in my Thoughts of quitting my honest Citizen, who I was not so much in love with, as not to leave him for a Richer."

In Lancashire, Moll is introduced to Jemy, who poses as her friend's brother and who supposedly has a great estate in Ireland. He understands from his "sister" (who is actually his accomplice) that Moll has a fortune. He courts her in grand style, and at great personal expense. Not until they have been married for a month does Moll's actual poverty come to light. Jemy then is forced to reveal his own fraudulence. He has no Irish estate; he has in fact wasted his last pennies trying to impress Moll and was counting on her supposed fortune to restore himself to solvency. "We are married here upon the foot of a double Fraud," Moll tells him; "you are undone by the Disappointment it seems, and if I had had a Fortune I had been cheated too, for you say you have nothing." They discuss various get-rich-quick schemes to alleviate their distress, but Moll wakes up the next morning to find her husband gone. She is quite forlorn: "Nothing that ever befel me in my Life sunk so deep into my Heart as this Farewel." He soon returns, but Moll cannot persuade him to stay. He heads off to try his luck in Ireland, in spite of all her protestations. If he meets with any success there, he tells her, he'll look her up.

Commentary

We see in Moll's calculating treatment of the banker how much she has learned since her handling of the two brothers at the time of her first seduction. With respect to that affair, she sees retrospectively that "if I had known his Thoughts, and how hard he thought I would be to be gain'd, I might have made my own Terms with him." By this time, however, Moll knows how to string a man along; "I play'd with this Lover as an Angler does with a Trout," she brags. When the banker suggests that she marry him immediately, promising to seek the divorce afterwards, she is tempted only momentarily, and knows not to reveal her eagerness to her suitor. She plans her moves so as to keep her options open and refuses to rest her confidence in anybody but herself.

In Jemy, however, Moll meets her manipulative match. They cross each other in the same game, and although they banter about which of them is more "undone," each is good-tempered enough not to harbor any real resentment. For all their anxiety about what to do next, both take a certain delight in their predicament, and Jemy's attitude toward adversity is much like Moll's: "I must try the world again; a Man ought to think like a Man: To be Discourag'd, is to yield to the Misfortune." Jemy is in fact the only man Moll has any real and lasting affection for, probably because they have so much in common. "I really believe...that he was a Man that was as well qualified to make me happy, as to his Temper and Behaviour, as any Man ever was," she reminisces. He is one of the few characters in the book who has a name (in fact he goes by several). While this is partly an expedient to his reappearance later in the story, it is also a signal of the fact that he makes a lasting impression on Moll's affections--something few of the people she meets manage to do.

This segment of the story is full of little morals and bits of wisdom that seem at times to come from Defoe's mouth rather than Moll's. For example, he writes, "When a Woman is thus left desolate and void of Council, she is just like a Bag of Money, or a Jewel dropt on the Highway, which is a Prey to the next Comer." This statement reinforces the connection between economics and feminine virtue that the novel has been exploring all along, but by literary-sounding analogy rather than in direct, pragmatic, and causal terms. Nor does the fatalism of this passage sound like Moll.

She is aware of the role that chance plays in her own outcomes and choices, reinforcing for the reader the fact that, whatever her moral shortcomings, "the Vice came in always at the Door of Necessity, not at the Door of Inclination." Even though Moll subscribes to an ethics of convenience and speculates about the circumstances under which she might have behaved differently, she never renounces her own free choice or ascribes her decisions entirely to fate or to the power of other people.

Section 6 (Moll marries the banker)

Summary

Moll returns to London intending to find the banker, who has been writing her letters weekly and who knows nothing of her marriage to Jemy. When she realizes she is pregnant, however, she has to stall her husband-to-be so as not to give herself away. During this inconvenient pregnancy Moll falls under the care of a street-wise woman whom she will later call "my Governess." This woman orchestrates all the details of Moll's confinement and arranges for the hasty dispatch of the infant once it is born. Moll is then free to marry her banker, who in the meantime has succeeded in divorcing his wife.

She arranges to meet the banker outside of London in order to preserve the appearance that she is just returning from Lancashire. He persuades her to marry him that very night, and a minister is called to the inn to do the offices. The next morning Moll happens to look out the window and is surprised to see her Lancashire husband, Jemy, in the company of two other men. She is later questioned by the police, who are looking for three highwaymen. She throws them off the trail, assuring them that she knows one of those three to be a very respectable gentleman.

Moll returns to London with her new husband, where she says she "took Possession at once of a House well Furnish'd, and a Husband in very good Circumstances, so that I had a prospect of a very happy Life, if I knew how to manage it." They lead a pleasant and comfortable existence, if a solitary one (Moll still insists that she had no friends and "kept no Company" at that time). After five years, however, Moll's husband loses a great deal of money in a financial speculation, falls into despair, and eventually dies. Moll is left alone and impoverished once again.

Commentary

Although we have seen Moll growing in worldliness and sophistication over the course of the novel, Defoe emphasizes his heroine's innocence in comparison to the women she meets when she returns to London. Assuming her first landlady to be a very scrupulous gentlewoman, she is embarrassed to appear as an unwed mother (although she is also reluctant to admit that she is married, because of her intention of remarrying). Only later does she realize that "the Mistress of the House was not so great a Stranger to such Cases as mine was." The midwife whom the landlady summons turns out to be exactly "the right sort" for Moll's situation. Little by little, Moll begins to get glimpses into a shadowy--but highly organized--world of

corruption and degeneracy. She is surprised to discover what intricate networks of people and practices are in place to support immoral and criminal behavior. Moll's Governess is midwife to "Ladies of Pleasure" on a regular basis, and she knows just whom to contact to have Moll's baby taken off her hands. She evidently knows how to abort the baby as well, though she broaches the topic so indirectly that Moll only barely catches her meaning. She also appears to be acting as a procuress. Moll in fact declines to narrate in full detail "the Nature of the wicked Practice of this Woman, in whose Hands I was now fallen," fearing that she may tempt others to similar vice. Defoe offers his readers a glimpse into this underworld as kind of realistic documentary--as "Testimony of the growing Vice of the Age."

In the security of her new married life with the banker, Moll has leisure to reflect on her past misdeeds, and to acknowledge "how much happier a Life of Virtue and Sobriety is, than that which we call a Life of Pleasure." One of the tenets of the novel, and the final moral of Moll's life, is that virtue and piety are luxuries that can be enjoyed only when certain basic material needs are met. "While I liv'd thus," Moll says, "I was really a Penitent for all my Life pass'd, I look'd back on it with Abhorrence, and might truly be said to hate my self for it." Yet there is little acknowledgment on Moll's part that she really ought to have acted differently, under the circumstances, and she recognizes even in her repentance that her new outlook might last only as long as her fortunes do.

Section 7 (Moll begins a life of crime)

Summary

Moll lives for two years in a hopeless and lonely state of ever-increasing poverty. One night she wanders out with no particular aim and happens upon an unguarded package. "This was the Bait," she recounts, "and the Devil who...laid the Snare, 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." She steals the package and then wanders around in "Horror of...Soul" and "Terror of Mind." Her severe poverty soon reconciles her to the act, however, and she becomes a regular thief. Moll has a particular eye for an opportunity--and quite good luck as well--and soon has a substantial store of stolen goods. Not knowing where to market them, she returns to her "old Governess," who has since fallen on hard times and become a pawn-broker.

Moll entertains the hope that her Governess might be able to help her find some honest employment, "but here she was deficient; honest Business did not come within her reach." She does finally find a little sewing work, but still feels the periodic urge to walk out on stealing expeditions; it becomes plain that she has begun to enjoy them. After becoming the mistress of a baronet for a brief period, Moll returns to crime. She soon begins to collaborate openly with her Governess in her thieving and becomes acquainted with other local criminals as well. She learns a few tricks of the trade from veteran thieves and pickpockets, and her skill quickly surpasses their own. Although she sometimes enters into partnerships, Moll

prefers to work alone, and she soon gains some renown as a master thief. In the period of her greatest notoriety she is given the name "Moll Flanders."

Moll sees a number of her "Comerades" sent to Newgate prison and even executed, and she has several close calls herself. The sense of danger she derives from these experiences makes her more careful--she begins to don disguises and occasionally leaves London when things get too hot--but she is never seriously deterred from her life of crime. If anything, the risk seems to feed her addiction. Moll once gets arrested by mistake, and she even manages to turn that to her own advantage. Finally, however, Moll is caught in the act of stealing some fabric, and they cart her off to Newgate.

Commentary

Moll carefully traces the process by which she is tempted into and then inextricably involved in a life of crime. She says of her critics, "Let 'em 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?" The more successful and celebrated she becomes as a criminal, the more reluctant Moll is to leave off the "trade," despite her occasional pangs of conscience. She explains the strength of the inducements to crime but does not disguise her motives: "If...a prospect of Work had presented itself at first, when I began to feel the approach of my miserable Circumstances,...I had never fallen into this wicked Trade, or into such a wicked Gang as I was now embark'd with; but practise had hardened me, and I grew audacious to the last degree; and the more so, because I had carried it on so long, and had never been taken." Stealing becomes a kind of compulsion for Moll, and she freely admits that she continued to steal even once she had plenty of money--as if for the challenge and excitement of it.

This segment of the book is peppered with pragmatic morals: Defoe tells us not only how Moll could have done her work better, but also how her victims might have avoided being robbed. And the crime detail as a whole is purported to serve the moral purpose of warning readers against becoming victims themselves, rather than against criminal behavior. Even this explanation does not seem to capture the true character of Defoe's relish for these scenes, however. He presents Moll's thievery as almost an art form; her narrative delights in the ingenuity with which each crime is conceived and the technical mastery with which it is accomplished. "I grew the greatest Artist of my time," she writes, "and work'd myself out of every danger with...Dexterity." The fact that Moll, from her retrospective vantage point, takes such joy in these relations calls into question the sincerity of her repentance.

Moll's criminal phase is in many ways the period of her greatest independence and autonomy. Once she becomes a master thief, Moll's solitude is turned from a liability to an advantage. It becomes the mark of freedom and self-sufficiency, just as her preference for working alone stems from the knowledge of her superior skill. Having found a "career," at which she excels, Moll no longer has to seek desperately for a man to support her. The fact that crime is the occupation that presents itself (we can hardly imagine that needlework, Moll's only real alternative, would have been as fulfilling or empowering) might be taken as an indication of Defoe's insight

into predicament of women in his day, and particularly of the dearth of acceptable outlets for their talent and ambition.

Section 8 (Moll in Newgate)

Summary

Moll describes Newgate as the very pit of hell: "'tis impossible to describe the terror of my mind, when I was first brought in, and when I look'd round upon all the horrors of that dismal Place: I look'd on myself as lost, and that I had nothing to think of, but of going out of the World, and that with the utmost Infamy; the hellish Noise, the Roaring, Swearing and Clamour, the Stench and Nastiness, and all the dreadful croud of Afflicting things that I saw there; joyn'd together to make the Place seem an Emblem of Hell itself, and a kind of Entrance into it." Moll's fear of the prison launches her into a posture of repentance, and she spends several sleepless nights tormented by her conscience as well as by the mockery of her fellow inmates. However, she soon grows accustomed to her new surroundings. Moll's Governess, having heard of her capture, comes to advocate on her behalf with the prison officials and with the prosecution. Moll realizes during this tense period that her first repentance had not been sincere, but rather "only the Effect of my Fear of Death." While she still anticipates a death sentence, she finds that she can muster very little remorse--even though she acknowledges that her life has been "a horrid Complication of Wickedness, Whoredom, Adultery, Incest, Lying, Theft, and in a Word, every thing but Murther and Treason."

Jemy, Moll's Lancashire husband, soon appears in the prison as well, finally having been caught at his highwayman's trade. She is surprised to feel a resurgence of guilt at her deception of him, in spite of the fact that he had deceived her equally. She still feels no real remorse for her crimes, though, even when her death sentence is handed down. Her Governess, who had become a "true penitent" herself, sends for a minister for Moll. With his help, Moll finally repents of her misdeeds. He eventually manages to have her sentence reduced to transportation to America. At this point, Moll finds Jemy and urges him to try for transportation as well, convincing him that going to America will offer the best chance for both of them to get a fresh start. He succeeds in this, and they manage to get passage on the same ship, where with their combined assets they are able to purchase good treatment on the voyage and to stock themselves with the implements and supplies they will need to set up a plantation in the colonies.

Commentary

Defoe links Newgate with hell: he clearly wants to summon up a connection in the reader's mind between earthly punishment and eternal judgment, and Moll tells in ominous, religious-sounding terms of "the Place, where my Mother suffered so deeply, where I was brought into the World, and from whence I expected no Redemption, but by an infamous Death: To conclude, the Place that had so long expected me, and which with so much Art and Success I had so long avoided." The scene of Moll's terror upon entering the prison is one of the most emotionally

evocative in the book. But the fact that Moll so quickly grows accustomed to her surroundings is typical of the novel's tendency to subordinate emotion to pragmatism (and literary contrivance to realism). Moll has ever been one to make the best of a bad situation, and the fact that she can engineer her own reprieve stands as an unavoidable reminder that Newgate is not Hell. The place may suggest eternal damnation, but it never loses its literal reality. Moll's religious repentance, however vividly depicted, has little bearing on her release from punishment. She finds rescue rather by means of a decidedly non-religious expedient: she essentially buys herself out of captivity and into a new life.

The Governess who has all along been complicit in Moll's misdeeds now feels herself responsible for her friend's desperate situation. The astonishing degree of loyalty and solicitude she demonstrates proves her to be one of the only real friends of Moll's life. In this, she stands out from the long succession of minor, nameless female characters who serve to help or hinder Moll's fortunes and then disappear from the story. They seem to be mere instruments by which Defoe advances his plot; all of his strength of characterization is invested in Moll herself. Only with her Governess and with Jemy does Moll create anything approaching a realized relationship; Defoe, interested primarily in Moll's isolation, seems to want even these personages to be limited as far as possible to instrumental roles, obscuring their characters and refusing to tap into whatever depth of relationship the reader may feel to exist beneath the surface.

Moll seems to anticipate the fact that her repentance might seem less-than-convincing, or at least that it will not make for such riveting reading as the tales of her misdeeds: "This may be thought inconsistent in it self, and wide from the Business of this Book; Particularly, I reflect that many of those who may be pleas'd and diverted with the Relation of the wild and wicked part of my Story, may not relish this, which is really the best part of my Life, the most Advantageous to myself, and the most instructive to others; such however will I hope allow me the liberty to make my Story compleat." This series of reflections forces the reader to ask what "the Business of this Book" has been exactly, and the answer is not altogether clear. Moll's repentance has seemed to many critics an unsatisfactory or unconvincing resolution to the novel. Certainly such an ending, even if contrived, would have been necessary to make the book publicly acceptable.

Section 9 (Moll and Jemy in America, and conclusion)

Summary

Moll and Jemy land safely in Virginia, but Moll knows she cannot stay there because of the chance of running into her Virginia relatives. She is led by curiosity to inquire after her mother and brother, and she learns that the old woman is dead and that her former husband, who lives on a nearby plantation with their son Humphrey, has gone almost blind and a little bit crazy. Seeing her son from a distance, Moll goes into a rapture of filial emotion: she can barely restrain herself from embracing him, and feels moved to kiss the ground where he has walked.

Remembering her mother's promise to provide for her in her will, Moll tries to devise a way to collect her inheritance without exposing herself. She has concealed her earlier ill-fated marriage from Jemy; he knows only that she has relatives in the area who ought not to know of their current shame. She cannot therefore let Jemy into all the particulars of her current dilemma over the inheritance, but tells him as much as he needs to know to agree with her that they ought to move elsewhere. They settle themselves on a farm in Maryland, and then Moll returns to Virginia to pursue the inheritance. She writes a letter to her brother, which her son receives first. He is moved deeply by the rediscovery of his lost mother and receives her passionately and with great generosity. Without informing his father of anything that passes between them, he makes arrangements for Moll to receive the yearly income of the estate her mother has left her. She returns to Maryland laden with her son's gifts and in a fair way to make a great success in the New World. After her brother dies, Moll invites Humphrey to visit in Maryland, pretending to have married Jemy only recently. She also tells Jemy the whole story of her Virginia relations, and thus frees herself from all her lies and entanglements. Moll returns to England at the age of seventy, where she and Jemy "resolve to spend the Remainder of our Years in sincere Penitence, for the wicked Lives we have lived."

Commentary

Moll presents it as a basic truth of human nature that "a Secret of the Moment should always have a Confident, a bosom Friend, to whom we may Communicate the Joy of it, or the Grief of it, be it which it will, or it will be a double weight upon the Spirits, and perhaps become even insupportable." This reflection is particularly poignant in light of the fact that Moll has so often been lacking in such a friend or confidante, and thus has been forced to bear most of her life's burdens alone. She does not draw out the connection very explicitly in her own case, but goes on to affirm that the lack of friends has been the source of much weakness in many of her acquaintances.

Moll's outpouring of emotion upon seeing her son seems incongruous with the strikingly unsentimental way she has borne the loss of so many children, and especially with her particular disdain for the children of her incestuous relationship with her brother. Such sentiment, it would seem, is a luxury for Moll: only in moments of relative security and prosperity does she find leisure to indulge in such displays of emotion. Her new filial piety is also presumably meant to accord with her religious conversion, as testimony--however thin it may seem--to the fact that her outlook has really changed. The fact that she does not hesitate to tell a whole web of lies to protect herself and promote her own convenience casts some doubt on the image of Moll as a reformed woman, however, and her eagerness to retrieve her share of her mother's legacy has a similar effect. Much critical debate has centered on the (questionable) sincerity of Moll's reformation by the end of the novel. By her own account, her repentance is sincere enough. The fond manner in which she relates her past life, however, suggests otherwise, and the fact that the novel seems to offer piety as an option only after economic security and social stability have been obtained represents a more bleakly materialistic view of human spiritual possibilities. On the religious register as well as on others, the question of whether Moll actually develops as a character or merely responds to changing conditions remains a troubling one.

