Individuality and Isolation in Defoe's Moll Flanders

Moll, in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, is a female character who, curiously, seems to lack maternal instinct, who abandons her children time and time again and shies away from ever creating or being a part of a traditional family unit. The traditional female roles of belonging to the private sphere, of maintaining the home and staying out of public affairs is still a standard in the early 18th century. But Moll entirely defies this convention; her wishes are externalized, her personal will made known from the first few pages of the novel. Her methods of obtaining money force her out into the world. She is constantly interacting with others, practicing a sort of "employment" that, though illegal, resembles a trade. Her thievery gives her a reliable income and puts her into the public sphere. Her externalization is, for the time, characteristically masculine; her livelihood does not consist of raising children, but of making business in the world. This recurring masculinity in the portrayal of Moll's character suggests a woman of a new era; the 1800s become an era in which the first cinders of feminism are kindled. But along with defiance of convention and female masculinity come the consequences: Moll remains, throughout the novel, an incredibly isolated figure. Each interaction she has with other human beings falls almost immediately, in most cases, to economic exchange. By her very external actions defining her character, the idea of family and companionship solely for human interaction and interpersonal connection is barely emphasized. The psychological, her inner life,

is suppressed. The lack of any psychological probing by Defoe even isolates Moll, in certain cases, from us as readers. Defoe's Moll represents a changing age, one in which people are not entirely products of their circumstances and family, in which the individual becomes increasingly more valued over the ties of duty and kinship; her isolation is the product of not belonging to any particular group, but to herself.

At the outset of the novel, in Moll's youth, we see straight away what emphasis she places on independence and self-possession, very unfeminine characteristics for the time. She wants, as a gentlewoman, to "be able to Work for myself, and get enough to keep me without that terrible Bug-bear going to Service, whereas they meant to live Great, Rich, and High…" (14). Her notion of being a gentlewoman centers entirely around what she can accomplish through her own actions. She values being able "to Work for [her]self" above all else; this is the foundation of her aspirations. The definition of gentry that she misses has to do with living "Great" and "High", like how others in the society conceive of gentry. These, in contrast with the very physical nature of earning money and subsisting, are ideals and subjectivities. It is in the perception of *others* that one is "great" and "high"; the second part of belonging to the higher class has to do with social connections and establishment of a name in the higher society. Rather than wanting to belong to a class or to an insular group, Moll wants simply to be the master of herself. In the case of the first family of a gentlewoman who takes her in after the death of her Nurse, she is allowed to live a similar life to the daughters of the house: "and as I was always with them, I learn'd as fast as they...yet I learn'd by Imitation and enquiry, all that they learn'd by Instruction and Direction…I learn'd to Dance and speak French as well as any of them…" (18). She outlines here the distinction she draws between formal learning, "Instruction and Direction", which belongs to the realm of the gentry, and her own sort of learning, by "Imitation

and enquiry." Thus, she is not completely dependent on anyone for her learning; the mention of "enquiry" suggests an active curiosity that enables her to learn. Her learning alongside of the daughters of the family is acceptable, but we see later that it becomes problematic.

Moll seems, at every turn, to threaten both the gentry and the notion of family. In the case of the family, it is when Moll is a threat to intrude on their family, to threaten the cohesion. The mother addresses Moll after she refutes wanting to marry the son without prior parental consent: "for we have all look'd upon you as a kind of Snare to my Son...for we have all a Respect for you still, tho' not so much, as to have it be the Ruin of my Son; but if it be as you say, we have all wrong'd you very much (43). Moll is addressed as a potential "Snare" and "Ruin". But addressing Moll's intentions of not wanting to marry the son, the mother changes her tone, saying that is the family who has "wrong'd" her. The snare here is in reference to Moll's potential unadvised marriage to their son. The implication is that her lower birth would tarnish his name. Moll is upsetting the family dynamic because, suddenly, she is in a position to make herself a permanent addition to their family. Moll's semblance of belonging to the gentry is so great that they hold a certain respect for her, that eventually she does marry this son, without great consequence.

In much the same way, children are presented as inconveniences and disruptions to life and independence. After the death of her first husband, she says: "My two children were indeed taken happily off my Hands, by my Husband's Father and Mother, and that by the way was all they got by Mrs. Betty" (49). Here, the children as talked about as if they are objects: "children" could easily be replaced by any other tangible noun—shoes, or pillowcases. They are being acted upon, "taken"; they have no agency and no human characteristics, serving in this sentence as simply things Moll chooses to leave behind. The familial tie that Moll has to them is

completely severed at this leaving, because she conceives of them as objects. Later, she says in reference to her Lancashire husband, "…tho' I was in no condition to have had him yet, not being so foolish to marry him when I knew my self to be with Child by another Man" (127). She also has no sense of maternal tie to this child; the child, instead, is a tangible and visible manifestation of the affair she had with another man. It is because she bears this child that she meets the Midwife and her future governess, who says "...and if you have no Friends to come to you, you may save the Expence of a supper" (131). This is where the reader is reminded explicitly of Moll's lack of connection to those around her. It is in her isolation that this child is a burden; this time, there is no family to hand it off to, and no acquaintances to give support during this time.

Moll's occupation as a thief necessitates her isolation from society, yet at the same time, her bond with her Mistress seems to be one of the most genuine in the book; her Mistress is the only confidante she has, and the only one to whom she tells the story of her affair. In some of the phrasing used, like "I came home to my Governess", we see the contrast between Moll's state here and in the rest of the book; she has, for once, a home to which she returns, not an impermanent lodging or an apartment at which she awaits her lover, but a place of refuge (158). She says, when she leaves to hide out for fear of being apprehended, "I had no Recourse, no Friend, no Confident but my old Governess, and I knew no Remedy but to put my Life in her Hands" (173). Surprisingly, she speaks of her life, for one of the only times, as under the control of someone else, but the situation is such that she must remain anonymous so as not to be arrested. Her faith in her Governess here is out of desperation, and soon enough, she is back to her occupation and independence. She is even isolated from her fellow thieves: "Here again my old Caution stood me in good stead; Namely, that tho' I often robb'd with these People, yet I

never let them know who I was, or where I Lodg'd; nor could they ever find out my Lodging…They all knew me by the Name of Moll Flanders" (175). Anonymity is the vehicle through which Moll is a success at robbery, and her preservation of her identity keeps her in the business much longer than the rest; she is not a member of the gentry that she robs from, because they must not recognize her, but she also is not a member of the society of thieves. Though the interdependence between Moll and her governess most closely resembles anything close to a family unit, the dissolution of the unit sheds light on the very nature of the relationship: when Moll is charged with the sentence of death, the governess is "struck with Horror at the Sense of her own wicked Life" (225). Though they do depend on each other, they also share solidarity without safety; they endanger their lives and oppose the law; their sort of familial structure has no allowable place in society.

Moll is a stranger to both us and to those around her; the connections she forms with people all eventually dissolve. She always moves on independently, and ultimately, her entire life is gained by her own hand and her own initiative. Even at the end, it is her will and her plan for buying a plantation that brings them back to Virginia, where the traditional family unit is re-established, with the reintroduction of her son. Even so, the end of the novel does not define the rest, and Defoe comments on the necessary isolation and anonymity of a woman in pursuit of her own agency. It is through denying the maternal instinct and not defining herself as belonging to any single society or community that Moll achieves the financial independence that allows her to be the sort of gentlewoman she defines for herself at a young age. In Moll's masculinity and externalization, Defoe creates a story that is at once about an individual struggle and a struggle that sheds light on the growing individualism and subsequent isolation of humanity in a changing society.

Works Cited

Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. Ed. Albert J. Rivero. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.