Defoe Moll Flanders Essay, Research Paper

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English Novel to 1832

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?Moll Flanders: Freedom or Fate?

In New Hampshire I had a Philosophy teacher that used to say, and I believe he was quoting another, ?People who believe in freewill are ignorant of the reasons of their actions?. This quote, in the context of Defoe?s Moll Flanders, brings about a multitude of questions and discussion. Was Flanders free or was she predetermined to live a wicked and improper life mired in years of penitence? Was the fact that her mother a whore before her enough to dismiss the question? It is, in fact, these questions that persuaded me to abandon my philosophy major and follow my love of literature, but that is a different story.

Certainly there is no question that Flanders was a criminal, that is to say she was a whore, a thief, and furthermore broke laws that are seen as truly heinous and immoral, namely incest. In regards to Flanders having sex with her own brother it would be difficult to argue that this was a predetermined event considering she truly did not know her husband was of her own flesh and blood. If, indeed, she was aware of the relation and then chose to proceed then one could discus it further in the context of freewill. As for being a whore there is no question that Flanders, especially later in her life, involved herself with such happenings, but for me it was the thievery that seemed to capture the essence of Flanders continual undoing and constant need for penitence. There is no better part of Defoe?s work to capture the feelings of utter despondency then when Moll is going to steal for the first time from the apothecary?s shop. Defoe prefaces the scene with a few paragraphs where Moll explains her absolute ?desolate state?. The crime is then set in what James Sutherland explains, ??Moll?s first theft he sets the scene with such careful attention to detail that he fixes it in our minds, and gives to it that air of authenticity which, for Defoe, is almost justification of fiction?. This is where Defoe?s journalistic stylings shine. The reader is indeed in the apothecary and sees Moll?s gaffe unfolding before him. We are free to judge whether or not we would take the bundle that so often becomes Moll?s pursuit in the future. It is at that instant that we can decide whether Moll was free to do so or controlled by something unavoidable, such as fate.

If Moll was acting on freewill it is arguable that she would not repeat the same crime in the future, in fact she would most likely avoid any such acts that resulted in the terrible feelings she experienced during and after the first offense. For she says herself, ?It is impossible to express the horror of my soul all the while I did it?. The truth is though; the crimes become much easier and done with much less regard to moral conviction after the first. Moll becomes ?hardened?. In fact she finds ways of justifying her crimes as they progress to an even more appalling standing. After Moll steals the necklace off the boy returning home from dance school she blames the parents for letting the ?poor lamb to come home by itself.? So is Moll fated to do such acts? Continually through the book Moll refers to the Devil, ?who laid the snare? as the main root of her misdeeds. She explains that she was a mere victim of circumstance and that there was little choice in her acts. Is this not more comforting for Moll and the reader? Yes Moll lives in constant penitence, that is when she is not committing crimes, but she also has a way of constructing the situation so it seems almost unavoidable. This is the way the human mind works. We are not completely at fault all the time for our wrongs, surely we would all go mad if this were the case. Humans are much like Moll Flanders. Sutherland says it best, ?Moll, it may be argued, is inconsistent because that is what she was, and what most people are.? I would be hard pressed to call it fate, but there certainly is a tinge of something in all of us that, if nurtured, will blossom and sometimes blossom into a not so pretty flower.

Bibliography

none available