Images of the Moral Order: (Im)Morality and Redemption in Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*

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Abstract
The article starts from investigating the human preoccupation with the role and importance of divine providence through the centuries, with special emphasis on eighteenth-century English images of providence and divine authority, while observing the way in which the old tradition of magic and providential action was, during the same century, gradually overcome by the influence of Christian precepts and beliefs. Eighteenth-century England does not appear, at first sight, as a particularly religious age. Yet, religious themes pervade almost all the novels of the period, focusing on issues of morality or immorality. The recurrent invocation of, and belief in, God's guidance of humans was also related to human sinful practices under such forms as theft, adultery, or prostitution. The article analyses the way in which images of providence and human practices related to morality or immorality played an important role on the cultural scene of the eighteenth--century England, particularly in Daniel Defoe's novel The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders *and Henry Fielding's* The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling. *Special attention is paid to some key social and cultural agents such as the priest or, at the opposite pole, the prostitute seeking redemption. Investigating these characters' relation to the divine order and its injunctions, the article intends to reveal their moral and spiritual accomplishment or failure.*

Keywords Earthly order, Divine order, Providence, redemption, fate, fortune, (im)morality, penitence, Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders,* Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones.*

The providence tradition and the discourse of morality

Eighteenth-century ideas about the role of divine providence in human lives draw on the previous centuries' beliefs in the existence of a regulating rational force behind the apparent irrationality of nature. The 'enlightenment' of man in different domains such as science, geography, philosophy, economy, etc. had sometimes placed religion at the background of human interests. Yet, the individual still strove to find and understand the existence of a divine reason behind the chaotic world in which he lived or behind the uncontrollable forces of nature. Throughout the centuries, western literature emphasised the role of a providential order which was significant for human life from various viewpoints: it was mysterious, often incomprehensible to man and never fully revealed to him, it offered oscillating solutions to human problems, sometimes favouring the individual, while at other times it seemed to castigate him, it was the foremost and ultimate source of salvation for man who always clung to it in hope or despair, it was that abstract entity which nevertheless offered a genuine model of moral order, the backbone of human existence since it controlled and guided everything on Earth.

The concept of divine providence has its roots in the religious belief related to the existence of a benevolent, wise, and powerful deity guiding humans[1]. Thus, God (in monotheistic religions and the Anglican religion) is perceived as a compassionate force

1 http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861736283/providence.html, accessed November 20, 2010.

directing humankind and the whole universe. The first definition of the term suggests that this divine force is necessarily good and protective for humans[2], as it mirrors the supreme loving divine being interfering in human affairs so as to control, limit or restrain possible sins in human lives. Nevertheless, the most important connotation refers to human trust in God's care and benevolence despite human imperfection.

The eighteenth century witnessed a major shift from the teachings of theological morality to the preoccupations of another type of ethics, that is lay morality[3]. From this perspective, the idea of divine providence proved to be an important element of the secularization controversies. The theological system of morality envisaged that all human thinking and behaviour depends on divine grace. The emerging lay morality revaluated human conduct through its practical and social functionality, and through personal initiative and responsibility. The denunciation of the almighty Christian morality involved the affirmation of man's free morality and the belief in an inner moral arbiter stemming from the laws of nature. Munteanu[4] refers to J.J. Rousseau's natural man who was innately good, and whose free morality had no divine origin but was dictated by personal sentiment and reason. If the measure of civilisation was also a measure of refinement in manners and morals, then this idea of civilisation was utterly rejected by the French philosopher, who thought that man, through civilisation, was deformed rather than improved or refined. But if Rousseau advocated the necessity of man's (re)education in an uncivilized, natural environment, other philosophers stressed the importance of the social criteria, of education, and culture in the formation of individuals.

The traditional religious codes could no longer respond to the new requirements of the age. New moral precepts necessitated new people and new conventions to dictate the morals of the age. Writers reflected the clash between religion and the new norms of the social order, too. Oliver Goldsmith's vicar (in *The Vicar of Wakefield, a Tale*) is sometimes trapped between the calls of the society and those of religion, a religion urging that we were born sinful and must look for afterlife grace, and another implication which supports our impulses to seek for personal happiness within the social environment. Morality, it was said, was but another name for nature[5]. Moralists like Voltaire, Diderot, or d'Alembert were actively engaged in laying down the principles of moral conduct. They spoke of rational/ natural morals, not of religious ones, and morality had to be natural, or it did not exist.

The discourse of the moralists included two central guidelines. The first one referred to the lawfulness of self-love, seen as respect for personal well-being while being virtuous, so it did not entail being selfish. It rejected vice as excess, abuse and misapplication of appetites, desires and passions, and it embraced virtue. In other words, a moral being does whatever he can – within the borders of reasonable action – to be happy and to make the others happy.

The second concern was with sociability as the root of morals, and the real basis of sociability lies in the individual's fellowship and communion with his kindred[6].

2 If we take into consideration the etymology of the term dating from 1382, and which it initially meant "foresight" or "prudent anticipation", from Old French *providence* (12th century), from Latin *providentia* "foresight, precaution", from *providentem*, from *providere*, "supply, look ahead, prepare". With a capital letter, the term was first recorded in 1602. (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=providence, accessed July 5, 2010)

3 Romul Munteanu, *Cultura europeană în epoca luminilor* (Bucureşti: Editura "Univers", 1974), 158-159.

4 Munteanu, *Cultura europeană*, 160.

5 Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 179-180.

6 Hazard, *European Thought*, 182.

Personal virtues and social virtues were together meant to bring real happiness, that of the individual and that of the wider community.

A new catechism took shape, the catechism of humanity, stating that morals depend first of all on our being humans, then citizens and, only afterwards, Christians. People should be instructed regarding their duties and rights as members of the human race, then as members of the society, as well as in the laws and government of the country where they live. Hazard identifies three main virtues of the new morality code, as follows: tolerance, beneficence and humanity (understood as humaneness). Tolerance was not only a Christian teaching, it was also seen as a social safeguard. Beneficence referred to the quality of being helpful and generous, while avoiding the persecution of one's fellow beings. Humanity represented a virtue which was specific for the eighteenth-century moralists as it stressed that particular human condition from which they had to start, to which they must return, and which was, therefore, the cardinal human virtue[7].

The recurrent presence and invocation of divine help in eighteenth-century English tradition has its roots in the Augustinian tradition of the providential design of history[8] and also in the Calvinist emphasis on the depravity and weakness of man in relation to the complete sovereignty of God. Accordingly, God's plan for the world is not consistent with man's freedom of choice, but humans are rather limited and predestined by God's will or intervention.

Eighteenth-century Christian beliefs permeate the literature of the period, too. Thus, the domination of divine providence in the plots of the eighteenth-century English novels is evocative of the people's mindset, and some of its main roles are: to enhance the sense of verisimilitude and truthfulness that many novelists wanted to render; to show that the cosmic order of things cannot be separated from the worldly one; to suggest that people were still concerned with religion and that religious teachings still had some important presence in their lives; to support the role of the socio-cultural type of the priest in relation to the intellectual, ethical and spiritual education of the congregation; to warn that the human being's power or will was inevitably limited by the divine forces and that individuals were always responsible to, and restricted by, God in their actions; or to counteract the belief that novels were mere romantic matter. In fact, writers such as Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe or Oliver Goldsmith chose the novel form deliberately so as to render their Christian messages more suggestively and elaborately.

Nevertheless, the concept of divine providence was sometimes paralleled by that of *fate*, hence disclosing that people's religious thinking was still challenged by mythological and pre-Christian ideas. The Christian notion of predestination – inherent in the meaning of *providence* – existed together with that which viewed the inevitable course of life outside a person's control, but which was not attributed to God's intervention. *Fate* was felt more like an abstract principle, as "will, determining cause or power" that causes and controls all events, sometimes synonymous with destiny[9]. When people believed that fate was that force which caused a certain course of events, they recalled the mythological belief in the Greek goddesses ("Fates") of destiny[10], Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, who would spin the thread of humans' lives.

7 Hazard, *European Thought*, 185-188.

8 God achieves his purposes by guiding history, the history of the universe, of communities, or of individuals. (http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~nurelweb/books/concise/WORDS-P.html, accessed August 7, 2010)

9 http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/fate?view=uk, http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryResults.aspx?refid=1861610628, accessed July 5, 2010.

10 http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861610631/Fates.html, accessed July 5, 2010.

Additionally, the eighteenth-century English novels also reveal people's belief in other forces that could shape and influence their lives. In some fictional texts, fortune was present with all its polysemantic nuances.

First of all, since money was a key-concept characterizing the system of values of the century, fortune as wealth or property defined the discourse of most cultural types. For instance, the conceptual metaphor "a man/woman is money" seems to describe best Moll Flanders's discourse and, accordingly, her outlook on life. Women, especially worldly women, were also treated in society according to their wealth, considering whether they were a good fortune or not. If they were poor, then "Men play the Game all into their own Hands"[11] as long as "if a young Woman have Beauty, Birth, Breeding, Wit, Sense, Manners, Modesty (…) yet if she have no Money, she's no Body"[12].

Secondly, fortune affected human activities as a matter of chance or luck. Most often, good luck ("fortune(s)") or bad luck ("misfortune(s)") managed human lives, or it was just an abstract notion of destiny associated with no sense of religious influence. However, in Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* events are caused, changed, or solved by goddess Fortuna, once again showing that literature still drew on, or interacted with, mythological beliefs. The Christian forces coexisted with the pagan ones, and both interfered freely in human actions determining human lots. The mythological intrusion was necessary as long as Fielding unfolded a sort of "prosai-comi-epic" poem[13] apparently recalling and replicating, in his mock-epic, the deeds of "Homer's heroes" and even those of "Don Quixote"[14].

Nevertheless, some critics[15] reveal the fact that the old tradition of magic and providential action was, during the eighteenth century, gradually overcome by the authority of religion. The interference of magic and mythology in Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* is then probably meant to counteract popular superstitions and beliefs and to finally prove that human life is shaped not only by supernatural forces, but precisely by individual actions, too. Furthermore, Fielding's pre-eminent appreciation of religion is meant to underline that its superiority lies in preparing people for the afterlife.

The traditional substance of providential meaningfulness in human life also seems to have been rooted in the belief that reality made more sense when placed in providential patterns[16]. Hence, God ordered (t)his world, always trying to set things right, and people's fear of God's interfering hand was also a means of regulating human action. The Christian church also inculcated the image of providential intrusion so as to keep the congregation in a state of order and to encourage a rightful, well-ordered, fearful way of life.

God and man: Moll Flanders's representations of the divine order

Since one of the major tasks of the eighteenth-century literature was to reveal the vices and failings of human beings so as to instruct, Defoe, in his *Preface* to the novel, makes it

11 Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2001), 17.

12 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 18.

13 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 167.

14 Fielding, *History of Tom Jones*, 144.

15 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1971), 57.

16 Carol Houlihan Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 13.

clear that his novel has a religious use. The two parts of the novel – "the criminal Part" and "the penitent Part" – are built on images of sin and repentance which constitute a woman's trajectory from evil and bad morals to the "Brightness and Beauty" of penitence and virtuous life[17]. Concepts such as sin, vice, misery, misfortune, deceit are recurrent in the former half of the novel, whereas the closing part is supposed to emphasize Moll's seriousness, industry, and struggle to start a new life. This is possible after a stage of transition, in which imprisonment functions for Moll as the occasion to reform herself. Moll often emphasizes the fact that her story serves as a piece of instruction for other people. She does not moralize, she only reveals her fortunes and misfortunes, leaving the reader to examine, ponder, and judge by him/herself. But she warns that the instruction is all the more serious as long as it comes from a "completely Wicked, and completely Miserable"[18] woman. Her story offers a counter-model of devoutness so that, by showing the darkest side of a human being, she exposes even more strongly the qualities and virtues of man.

But, as I will show, Moll's repentance is not indisputable and complete, and her discourse divulges a type of pragmatic, independent, unscrupulous thinking if we consider her efforts to earn her living in the eighteenth-century English society. The religious issues brought forth by the narrative must be discussed in relation to Moll's notions of (im)morality and (dis)honourable living. Roughly speaking, Moll rejects honest work while becoming skilled in thieving and whoredom (of two types: a prostitute, and then married to her own brother). She is also a counter-model of motherhood for she abandons her babies and leaves them behind so that they could not hinder her way to adventure and rich existence. Except for murder, she performs severe sins showing her availability for wrongdoing rather than for generous and humane deeds. On the whole, in spite of short moments of sinless activity, Moll epitomizes the image of an independent woman striving to make her own living by corrupt means, in a male-dominated society. Moll's sense of religion is that of a simple, uncultured woman when it came to matters of theology. Yet, like Robinson Crusoe, she creates her own image and model of divinity, one whom she recalls and begs mostly in times of despair and crisis. Most of the time, this image of divinity seems to be one that must overlook human sins and should assist, forget, and embrace the sinner.

God helps the one that helps himself

From the very beginning, Moll presents herself as a counter-model of virtuous femininity[19]: as a young maid, she is proud and knows no virtue, and when one of the young gentlemen in that family woos her, she readily accepts his sexual offers. She does not try to find excuses for her behaviour and her sincere discourse on, and confession of, her sexual life distinguishes her from other eighteenth-century heroines who treated both the practice and the very mentioning of the subject as taboo. Moll is aware that "perhaps he found me a little too easy, for God knows I made no Resistance to him while he only held me in his Arms and Kiss'd me, indeed I was too well pleas'd with it, to resist him much"[20].

17 Defoe, *Fortunes and Misfortunes*, 4.

18 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 208.

19 Despite numerous critical debates, I consider Pamela in *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson to be Moll's antagonistic image related to virtuous conduct.

20 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 19.

This is the first time she gets paid for her sexual bountifulness, admitting that her naiveté also cleared the way for the gentleman's success. She actually has no sound religious education[21], but only a rich stock of cunningness and vanity[22].

In her feeble recognition of the divine order, Moll is not aware of an absolute divine agency shaping human destinies. In her view, both man and God act together so as to construct people's lives. Contrary to Fielding's literary vision that fate or gods and goddesses determine human actions, Defoe puts forward a double-folded power, half human and half supernatural, "God's Blessing" and "Man's Assistance", to manage the world[23].

Moll is sometimes inconsistent in her behaviour or her theories regarding morals and morality. One example is her determination not to be kept for a mistress – not out of moral scruples – as long as she has the money to lead her life with no need of a man's fortune. Thus, she understands the idea of honesty as being financially independent, waiting for the right husband to be worthy of her wealth. Once more, Moll's discourse reveals her errors which have nothing to do with devoutness: "Thus my Pride, not my Principle, my Money, not my Virtue, kept me Honest"[24].

Moll could not imagine a virtuous life while being poor, just as she feels like praying to God for forgiveness without putting an end to sins. Stealing is motivated by the necessity of subsistence, of survival, but it is also strange that she attributes the urge of stealing to a dark force inside her soul that manages to control her entire being. For Moll, God's grace can only bring happiness to humans' lives, whereas the Devil ruins any prospect of felicity. She manages to comply with the urges of the dark forces, while she cannot lead her life according to the precepts of religion. Nevertheless, this devilish force may only represent an imaginary representation of her excessive fear of poverty: "I had an evil Counsellor within, and he was continually prompting me to relieve my self by the worst means; so one Evening he tempted me again by the same wicked Impulse that had said, *take that Bundle*, to go out again and seek for what might happen"[25]. Here, the most malevolent outward power determining human life is neither a punishing God nor a playful goddess, it is the evil spirit. In fact, she cannot give up the diversion of stealing, which turns into her profession, alleging that a sinful practice can rule one's entire life, and that no divine belief can stop one from sinning: "when once we are harden'd in Crime, no Fear can affect us, no Example give us any warning"[26].

God's will is sometimes understood as *predestination* and, as her trial approached, she "began to say Prayers", which she had seldom done before. Her desperate calls for divine assistance enable her to construct the image of a forgiving and merciful divinity though she does not confess her sins, and she does not perform the proper ritual of religious repentance. Her idiosyncratic attitude is that of crying out for mercy and assistance, while "I never brought my self to any Sense of my being a miserable Sinner, as indeed I was, and of Confessing my Sins to God, and begging Pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ; I was overwhelm'd with the sense of my Condition, being tried for my Life, and being

21 She was a low-born orphan herself with no proper religious education: she was born in prison and her mother, a prostitute and a thief, abandoned her soon after birth.

22 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 20-21.

23 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 23.

24 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 48.

25 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 150.

26 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 171.

sure to be Condemn'd (…)"[27]. Therefore, despite her oscillating and problematic relation to repentance, she does admit the existence of a providential order.

Repentance or impenitence?

It seems that the sinners found it hard to repent truly and live a better life. This is because, on the one hand, there was too much poverty in English society and, on the other hand, as Moll comments, the public was too immoral. Moll tries to think of some arguments for so much moral crime, and she observes that, statistically, the number of corrupt women was significantly greater than that of men. But she judges the situation from a woman's viewpoint, attributing the source of vice to men. Therefore, she finds that the "Age is so Wicked, and the Sex so Debauch'd, that in short the Number of such Men, as an honest Woman ought to meddle with, is small indeed, and it is but here and there that a Man is to be found fit for a Woman to venture upon"[28].

Great obstacles or suffering in life may direct a Christian to the path of repentance and moral or spiritual correction. It is now that the former sinner becomes aware that "those things that must be repented of, must also be reformed"[29]. Moll realizes that in cases of adultery or incest the abhorrence of the sin is accompanied by the abhorrence of the sinner, as well. She then ponders whether it is more sinful to live with your own relative when not being aware of the relation, or when you voluntarily act as someone's lover or concubine, although not being involved in any blood relation. Thus, she pragmatically balances these two sins so as to prefer the less significant one, little thinking that virtue is not a matter for negotiation: "the Reproaches of my own Conscience were such as I cannot express, for I was not blind to my own Crime: and I reflected that I might with less offence have continued with my Brother, and liv'd with him as a Wife, since there was no Crime in our Marriage on that score, neither of us knowing it"[30].

Yet, it will only be his repentance, not hers, for she abandons her baby, not wanting to know the "care of providing for him"[31]. The same happens when she takes lodging in a matron's house so as to miscarry, for she wants no children as a burden to, or obstacle in, her adventurous life. It is clear here that Moll knows no scruples when it comes to her own comfort and this idea of comfort includes, first of all, being free of any responsibilities, away from any religious principles. We might consider that her greatest crime is that of abandoning her babies. She wilfully disposes of the greatest blessing given to man by God, that of procreating the species. Eventually, she realises that "all those Women who consent to the disposing their Children out of the way, *as it is call'd* for Decency sake, would consider that 'tis only a contriv'd Method for Murther; that is to say, a killing their Children with safety"[32].

The role of a wife does not show Moll in a very different light: when she finally thinks she has met an honourable man, she makes a summary of her sinful life till then, and it is for the very first time that she speaks of repentance, thinking that she is not a worthy wife for him: "If ever I had a Grain of true Repentance for a vicious and

27 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 219.

28 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 58.

29 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 96.

30 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 96.

31 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 97.

32 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 134-135.

abominable Life for 12 years past, it was then"[33]. Again, her repentance is more of a transitory feeling of regret, because it does not stop her from marrying the man, though she knows she has already cheated on him. Her image of a penitent woman implies only an inner, secret acknowledgement of sins, without any confession in front of the mistreated one, and without any rightful conduct subsequent to that moment of regret. Now she secretly reckons "what an abominable Creature I am! And know this innocent Gentleman going to be abus'd by me! How little does he think, that having Divorc'd a Whore, he is throwing himself into the Arms of another! That he is going to Marry one that has lain with two Brothers, and has had three Children by her own Brother! One that was born in Newgate, whose Mother was a Whore, and is now a transported Thief; one that has lain with thirteen Men, and has had a Child since he saw me!"[34].

Temptation – both sexual and financial – hinders any real hope of redemption, while the offence is supported by the habit of stealing and gaining ready money. Moll sees her whoredom as a "Crime"[35], but she cannot resist the temptation of being offered money. She perpetuates the same sin even when she becomes a middle-aged woman, claiming that "having committed a Crime once, is a sad Handle to the committing of it again; whereas all the Regret, and Reflections wear off when the Temptation renews itself"[36].

Moll seems to repent more actively when she is imprisoned. Therefore, she realizes that her fear of the place and of death pushes her into a state of atonement. Still, she admits that this is not a genuine penance, as she is "repenting after the Power of farther Sinning was taken away"[37]. What is more, her sincere nature emboldens her to judge her own selfishness and ingratitude for the divine order. Her regret is not a sad reflection on her past life, but a desperate sorrow for the unhappiness to come, so the future is more important here than the past which engendered it: "I seem'd not to Mourn that I had committed such Crimes, and, for the Fact, as it was an Offence against God and my Neighbour; but I mourn'd that I was to be punish'd for it; I was a Penitent as I thought, not that I had sinn'd, but that I was to suffer, and this took away all the Comfort, and even the hope of my Repentance in my own Thoughts"[38]. Her oscillation between feeling a grain of remorse and its total absence makes her clearly admit that, though praying, "there was not a Word of sincere Repentance in it all: However, I was indeed dreadfully dejected, and disconsolate to the last degree"[39].

Getting accustomed to the place of imprisonment coincides with the transition from fear to senselessness, true repentance never taking place. She knows her crimes; she knows she has to try to wash her sins away by confessing, praying, and living a virtuous life. But death is imminent and repentance is even more remote, being replaced by dumb, passive acceptance of death, still recognizing the image of the divine agency that is about to judge her: "all my Repentance appear'd to me to be only the Effect of my fear of Death, not a sincere regret for the wicked Life that I had liv'd, and which had brought this Misery upon me, or for the offending my Creator, who was now suddenly to be my Judge"[40].

33 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 140.

34 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 141-142.

35 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 183.

36 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 183.

37 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 212.

38 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 212.

39 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 218.

40 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 215.

Contrasting representations of priesthood

At this point, the novel also reveals ideas related to the ways in which the eighteenth--century English priests ministered to the spiritual needs of their congregation. As a convict, Moll hopes to find assistance for her condition, and this help is to be offered by the prison's chaplain. Unfortunately, the priest is not the person in position to reprimand her for her sins, as long as he himself is a drunkard and a brutal minister hurrying her into confessing her deeds so as to finish his job more rapidly. Moll finds no real consolation in one "preaching Confession and Repentance to me in the Morning, and find him drunk with Brandy and Spirits by Noon"[41]. Defoe's image of the cleric is yet another representation of corrupt masculinity in the eighteenth-century England, one that failed to comply with the conditions that ensured the manly ideal which could eventually act as a moral reformer of the society[42].

Moll's case points out again the inefficiency of the eighteenth-century prisons in reforming people. Daniel Defoe, like Tobias Smollett, highlights that such places could only lead the sinner on a shorter path to death or other sins. The prison is the very "Emblem of Hell itself"[43] and, consequently, one where tranquil redemption could not be possible. The clamour, idleness and despair of the convicts, together with Moll's own inability to be truly penitent in front of death has as an effect the paralysis of her conscience, while "a certain strange Lethargy of Soul"[44] possesses her being. At this stage, Moll "had neither Remorse nor Repentance"[45], and her main preoccupation was to helplessly panic while thinking of the death sentence to be charged upon her.

The recognition of guilt slowly creeps in upon her with the apprehension of ruining a former lover and, at last, she feels that she has risen from a state of utter dejection which has made her less human and less humane. The former passive, object-like stance is now replaced by a more active position though she is still a captive; the capacity to reason and judge, which is the first attribute of human beings, is then restored to its utility: "I began to think, and to think is one real Advance from Hell to Heaven; all that Hellish harden'd state and temper of Soul, which I have said so much of before, is but a deprivation of Thought; he that is restor'd to his Power of thinking, is restor'd to himself"[46]. The image of divinity is therefore associated with the ability to judge, that ability to think logically as the basis for human knowledge.

Though only temporarily, Moll starts to feel the sincere calling of repentance in her soul. Before death, she has the aid of a virtuous priest for the first time. She feels encouraged when seeing that the discourse of the minister is consistent with his actions and morals and, though she claims she is no exquisite "Mistress of Words"[47], Moll's discourse resembles a lecture upon the moral reformation of former sinners. She starts thinking of the ephemeral nature of life on earth, and of the "views of felicity" offered by the eternal image of the afterlife. The image of the promised eternity is now the only hope left for the penitent: "The word *Eternity* represented itself with all its incomprehensible Additions, and I had

41 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 215.

42 For further discussion on the model of masculinity and its requirements see Stephen H. Gregg, *Defoe's Writings and Manliness: Contrary Men* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

43 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 212.

44 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 216.

45 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 216.

46 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 218.

47 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 223.

such extended Notions of it, that I know not how to express them: among the rest, how vile, how gross, how absurd did every pleasant thing look? I mean, that we had counted pleasant before; especially when I reflected that these sordid Trifles were the things for which we forfeited eternal Felicity"[48].

The transience of life is then associated to dark images, whereas the afterlife is envisaged in bright images. The instruction for the reader is to carefully balance the two images under the guidance of equilibrium, moderation and piety, and to get a "clearer Sight into things to come, than they had here, and a dark view of their own Concern in them"[49]. The virtuous priest manages to unlock Moll's heart because he really treats her as a human being who can be reformed and who, most of all, has a painful soul. He does not act as other priests did, trying to bully, belittle and look down on the prisoners, sometimes aiming to extort confessions in order to trap other offenders or frighten the sinners to such an extent that they could never reach a state of inner peace before death. Conversely, his "business was to disburden my own Mind, and furnish him to administer Comfort to me as far as was in his Power; and assur'd me, that whatever I said to him, should remain with him, and be as much a Secret as if it was known only to God and myself"[50].

The two priests depicted in the novel illustrate two contrastive representatives of the clergy, while the focus lies on the image of the depraved, immoral and impatient priest who did not regard his mission as a sacred vocation, but as a mere job. The counter-model, the righteous priest, is presented, just as in many other eighteenth-century novels, as an unusual case; he is virtuous, pious, patient, persevering, urging and helping the sinners to overcome temptation, and treating them as human beings with unique personalities. He is the one to lead Moll on the road of true penance and he could achieve this due to his own qualities and to the fact that he explained to Moll the Christian doctrine which, otherwise, could have remained only some empty theory. He always "back'd his Discourses with proper Quotations of Scripture"[51], comforting her with his "moving Eloquence"[52], showing not scolding, disburdening her mind, not making it more dejected.

Moll starts thinking of two other notions related to divine protection, namely eternal felicity and mercy. As before, Moll's pragmatic nature calls for a pragmatic image of divinity, one that pours the gift of forgiveness upon the most incorrigible sinner: "(…) he exhorted me to a sincere Repentance, explain'd to me what he meant by Repentance, and then drew out such a Scheme of infinite Mercy, proclaim'd from Heaven to Sinners of the greatest Magnitude, that he left me nothing to say, that look'd like despair or doubting of being accepted"[53].

What this priest manages to firmly instil in Moll's heart and mind is that she should not fear death as it only coincides with finding a better existence due to the divine mercy. As a true penitent, she is then ready to be sincerely desirous of being accepted into "the Arms of infinite Mercy"[54], together with truly confessing and despising her sins. Unfortunately, as I have anticipated, Moll's repentance is only a short-term one,

48 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 222.

49 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 223.

50 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 223.

51 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 222.

52 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 224.

53 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 223.

54 Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 224.

her fear of death controlling her being, while gradually growing weary of the minister's guardianship.

John Richetti[55] argues that the Newgate episode builds up the climax of the narrative where the "inexorable force of psychosocial determinants" enables Moll to undergo a total change, and this change is prefigured by Moll's intense recourse to figurative language. In prison, interior tribulation is at its highest, and the critic considers that her transformation in this place coincides with a replacement of the old self and the birth of a "newly distinct self, defined now by opposition rather than marginalized or subversive participation". It is true that, gradually, Moll is no longer an object-like being but a coherently self-conscious subject trying to cope with the laws imposed by the would--be correctional institution. But Richetti also admits the genuine character of Moll's repentance in prison, whereas I have presented several arguments showing that her repentance is only feeble, circumstantial and thus temporary and, in order to see that, we need to observe her behaviour till the end of the novel.

Still, as the critic maintains, the prison turns into "a locale where her personality acquires a desperate coherence and sharp self-definition in opposition to the now visible determining force of state regulation". The prison symbolizes social necessity and state law, as well as social determination. It is here that Moll is moved "to discover a new and coherent approach to self-understanding", for the confinement "brings the experience of the inescapable connection between social circumstances and personality". The social regulations that Moll transgressed find their expression in Newgate, the social inevitability it embodies making her experience a subjectivity conscious of its relationship to the prison. Still, the critic's belief in Moll's redeemed state, which is in fact a new identity, that of a moralized individuality; does not find solid arguments in the book. It is true that the prison experience offers the image of the character's "self-conscious *psychological density* and *coherence* that are produced or at least provoked by the experience of social totality". But I insist that her sense of guilt, responsibility, remorse, and repentance are only incidental, the prison offering the environment for moral reformation; still, once the prisoner is set free, the same old thinking and habits are restored. The coherence of her behaviour that should comply with the rules of society or of religious teaching is inevitably broken.

In the colonies, Moll and her husband think of themselves as leading a penitent life, which is interpreted as having put an end to stealing, but not to cheating or lying to the others and to themselves. Again, the image of a loving God emerges, one asked to protect their lives, just as they remember God's existence only when they are in trouble or when they are rewarded with money. The image when Moll's husband lifts his hands thanking God for the wealth they acquired is suggestive of the way these people turn to God or away from Him on the basis of pecuniary necessities.

Moll's story does not conclude with a true act of penitence, her case shows that she continues to be a sinner till her end, while the text also suggests that even the fiercest sinners could lead a better life if choosing a religious conduct and approach to life, and if being determined to rehabilitate their morals and behaviour towards oneself and towards the social community.

55 John Richetti, *The English Novel in History 1700 – 1780* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 61-65.

Conclusions

Even if Moll Flanders is immoral no matter what code of morality we might apply, Defoe displays an indulgent attitude towards his heroine, and the narrative tends to excuse her behaviour, because the author's vision is one that values the personal qualities of industry, self-reliance and perseverance, and that dignifies human labour, even when it takes the form of crime. Moll is guided by her unique sense of reason and keen intuition, and her body becomes the instrument of achieving financial security and it facilitates her survival in an increasingly pragmatic and secularized society.

As I have shown, Moll's repentance can also be doubted: the book generates a conflict between Christian morality and the pragmatism that governs the business world. Moll uses her body to try to achieve financial security, so her sex is a commodity which guarantees material comfort. Even though she struggles to improve her life, she often breaks the codes of virtuous action, so she cannot respond totally to the demands of the new moral code, one based on frugality, justice, beneficence, discretion, self-command, temperance, and rejection of vice. The commodification of her body seems to be an imperative in a growingly pragmatic society, so she constantly needs to negotiate and reconcile those virtues. Pragmatism takes the form of anti-morality, but it is just something that the individual must get used to, because when survival is involved, the end justifies the means. Defoe manages to balance the material and the sensual by rationalizing sexual desire and turning it into a "self-serving function in a consumer economy"[56]. The idea that sexual indulgence was considered pleasurable[57], and that it was natural to follow one's sexual urges was rooted in the new Enlightenment thoughts about sexuality, which was seen "less as a sin or vice, and more as part of the economy of nature"[58].

All in all, as a prisoner, Moll comes to admit the existence of an almighty, loving, and protective God and of eternal felicity, but she does not manage to totally fulfil the norms of Christian existence or those of the new virtue ethics.

At a more general level, Moll Flanders's weak struggle to manage the calls of sin and immorality leads us to two major conclusive remarks. On the one hand, her story points to the high rate of crime and decadent behaviour in English society of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the fictional representation of such criminals or sinners and their misdeeds reveals the century's increased concern with degraded images of femininity (Moll Flanders) or masculinity (the priests in the novel). Inevitably, the need for moral reformation claimed its urgency.

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56 Houlihan Flynn, *The Body*, 69.

57 Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 278.

58 Houlihan Flynn, *The Body*, 54.

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