

Daniel Defoe: *Moll Flanders*

**THE RISE OF THE NOVEL AND
INDIVIDUALISM**

Ian Watt: *The Rise of the Novel* *Pimlico, London 2000 [1957]*

- The novel has a serious concern with the daily lives of **ordinary people** → society must value **every individual** highly enough to consider him **proper subject of literature**; there is a variety in the life of individuals so as to arouse interest in other ordinary people (the readers) (p. 61).
- Both these factors depend on the rise of **individualism** in society.
- Social arrangements were based no longer on the church, the family, the township, the guild or other collective units but on the individual.

The Novel: a New Literary Form?

- How does it differ from the prose fiction of the past, from that of Greece or the Middle Ages?
- Defoe and Richardson are the first writers in English literature who did not take their plots from mythology, history, legends or previous literature. In this they differ from Chaucer, Shakespeare or Milton who, like the authors of ancient Greece, habitually used traditional plots, because they accepted the natural premise that Nature is complete and unchanging, so its records, whether legendary or historical, constitute a definitive repertoire of human experience (p. 14).

Individualism

- **Independence** of the individual both from other **individuals** and from **tradition** (a social force). Autonomy of the individual with regard to his particular social status or personal capacity.
- Individualism is a characteristic of modern society. Two major historical causes: the spread of **Protestantism**, especially in its Calvinist or Puritan forms and the rise of **modern industrial capitalism** (p. 60).

When did it start?

- In the 16th century the rise of national states and the **Reformation** challenged the substantial social homogeneity of mediaeval **Christendom** /'krisəndəm/. “For the first time, the Absolute State faced the Absolute Individual”. (F. W. **Maitland** = a jurist, historian father of British legal history, 1850-1906)
- The foundations of the new order were laid after the **Glorious Revolution** (1689) (p. 61).

Rise of Capitalism: 1700

- The commercial and industrial classes (**middle class**) had achieved greater political and economic power.
- They were the **prime agents** in bringing about the **individualist social order**.
- They became more and more important in the **reading public**.
- Capitalism brought an increase of economic specialisation and this, combined with a **less rigid and homogeneous** / hə'mɒdʒ ə nəʃ, hoʊ- / **social structure** and a less absolutist and **more democratic political system**, enormously increased the individual's freedom of choice.

Steele, Addison, Defoe

- Richard **Steele** editor of *The Tatler*, daily newspaper founded in 1709 ; Joseph **Addison** and Steele (co-editors of *The Spectator*, 1711-12).
- Together with **Defoe**, they set the seal of literary approval on the heroes of economic individualism (p. 61).

Robinson Crusoe

Economic man = Homo Economicus

- Defoe has much in common with the empiricists in supporting individualism as a virtue (p. 63).
- All of Defoe's heroes pursue money, which he characteristically called "the general denominating article in the world". They pursue it methodically according to the logic of profit and book-keeping (contabilità).
- Our civilisation is based on individual contractual relationships as opposed to the unwritten, traditional and collective relationships of previous societies.
- Robinson's purpose (unlike Ulysses or other classical heroes) is profit. The world is his territory (p.67).

Moll Flanders

- Some criticism of the book for its moral inadequacy and primitive fictional technique. But the text is a revelation of **the mercantile mind: the morality of measurement** (Watt, p. 93).
- *Robinson Crusoe* is Defoe's most popular and powerful work. But since E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, *Moll Flanders* has been considered as the best single work for investigating Defoe's methods and his place in the tradition of the novel.

Robinson Crusoe and *Moll Flanders*

- The story is different, but they are very similar in attitude.
- Moll's crimes like Robinson's travels are rooted in the dynamics of economic individualism.
- Moll = criminal. **High incidence of criminality** in our civilisation due to the wide diffusion of an individualist ideology and the fact that success is not easily attainable by all its members.

A picaresque novel?

- The Spanish *picaro* (which historically comes out of the break of the feudal social order) is **not so much a complete individual personality**. His adventures are **a literary convention** for the presentation of a variety of satiric observations and comic episodes. He does not really suffer the deep stings of pain and death. World of **comedy**.
- Some of Moll's actions may be similar to those of the *picaro* but there is much more **identification** and **sympathy**. Reader and author take her problems much more seriously.

Moll Flanders vs the *picaro*

- In Defoe:
 - whores, shoplifters, adventurers, pirates are presented as products of their environment, victims of the circumstances which anyone might have experienced.
 - the sanctions of the law are rigorous, punishment is a reality not a convention.
 - The context is more serious, the story shows the dangers of criminal activity

Characteristics of Modern Urban Civilisation

- Rise of individualism, of a well-defined **criminal class** and of a **complex system for handling it made of law-courts, informers and crime reporters** like Defoe.
- New attitude to society and its laws: the **individual's orientation** to life is determined not by his/her acceptance of the positive values of society but by his/her own personal aims which are **restrained only by the legal power of authority**.
- The *polis* has become the police (Watt, 95).

Poverty and Protestant Ethics

- In the Middle Ages the examples of Christ and St. Francis gave sanction to the view that poverty is not a disgrace but will enhance the individual's prospects of salvation.
- In the 17th century: new emphasis on economic achievement. The opposite viewpoint came to be accepted: indigence was shameful and considered as evidence of present wickedness and future damnation. Defoe's heroes would rather steal than beg.
- The Wise Man's Prayer: *Give me not Poverty lest I steal* (*Moll Flanders*, Penguin, p. 254).

Connection between Individualism and Colonial Development

- John Gay: *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) marks the golden age of highwaymen (banditi). A satirical ballad opera set among thieves and whores. Growth of theft and crime especially in London → severe punishments.
- 10,000 metropolitan criminals were transported from the Old Baily to the North American Plantations between 1717 and 1775.

Style and Inconsistencies in *Moll Flanders* (Penguin Classics)

- **Style:** Plain statement of the facts, description of solid objects, of financial instruments, lists.
I am what I own.
- **Inconsistencies:** many discontinuities suggest that the work was **not conceived as a coherent whole**, but worked piecemeal, very rapidly and without subsequent revision.

The Gold Watch

- Defoe's paid little attention to the internal consistency of his story. For example: the gold watch given to her son (p. 422) "that I stole from a gentlewoman's side," at a meeting house in London. But there is only one episode like that and Moll did not succeed in stealing the watch. → Defoe had a faint recollection of what he had written 100 pages before.

Defoe's Prose

- **Casual attitude to his writing** – inconsistencies in the matter of details are common in all his works.
- Repetitions and parentheses, unpremeditated stumbling rhythm, long and involved sequences of co-ordinate clauses, length of sentences.
- **However, no previous author could represent the way of speaking** of such an uneducated person so naturally.

Narrative Technique

- Two methods of reporting are used in novels:
- alternation of **fully realised scenes** and **passages of less detailed summary**.
- Defoe's story is told with a hundred realised scenes whose average length is less than 2 pages and an equally large number of passages containing rapid connective synopses → a large proportion of the book is occupied by uninspired summary.

No Division into Chapters: One Long Narrative

- No chapters but **groups of episodes**: those related to Moll's seduction by the Elder Brother, those about the discovery of the incestuous marriage with her half-brother. Each episode is divided into important scenes alternated with bare summary
→ the emotional force of the episode is weakened.

Verisimilitude

- The aim of his narrative technique is to reproduce a convincing likeness to the autobiographical memoir of a person.
- Defoe's prose is **not well-written** in the ordinary sense, but is very **effective** in keeping us very close to the **consciousness of Moll** as she struggles to make her recollections clear.

Influences on Defoe's Factual Prose

- **Royal Society** encouraged **factual prose** in scholarly and scientific writing. Mathematical plainness.
- **Language of preaching** : it should be simple, the language of merchants and artisans rather than scholars.
- Defoe's language contains a very high proportion of words of Anglo-Saxon origin like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The Great Empiricists of the 17th century

- The great Empiricists of the 17th century were vigorously individualist = political vanguard of nascent individualism: Bacon, Hobbes, Locke.
- **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626) applies his inductive method to an accumulation of factual data about a great number of particular individuals (p. 62).

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

- Hobbes: Egocentric psychological constitution of the individual. *Bellum omnium contra omnes* = "war of every one against every one". This is the description of the **state of nature**. *Homo homini lupus*. The way out of the state of nature into political society and government is by mutual contracts. He is in favour of political absolutism. You put yourself in the hands of the sovereign who guarantees your rights. You must respect the pact with your monarch (p. 62).

John Locke (1632 – 1704)

- Locke's political theory was founded on the **social contract theory**. He defended the claim that men are by nature free and equal against claims that God had made all people naturally subject to a monarch. Governments exist by the consent of the people in order to protect the rights of the people and promote the public good. **Governments that fail to do so can be resisted and replaced with new governments.** A good state is based on a contract between people and King.
- It is the spirit of the Glorious Revolution (1688)
- Indefeasibility (intoccabilità) of individual rights against those of Church, family or King (p. 62)