

# Social Realism in English Novels from Defoe to Fielding

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## **Abstract**

This essay critically explores the development of social realism in English novels through the works of Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), and Henry Fielding (1707-1754). It examines the socio-cultural and political context of the time and how these factors shaped the narrative form and content of the works of these authors. Through a close reading of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), the essay will analyze the conventions employed to create a realistic representation of 18th-century British society. It will further elucidate how authors such as Defoe and Fielding used literature to reflect and comment on the rapidly changing world around them. The purpose of the essay is also to examine the motivations behind these realist approaches as well as the impact they had on the novel form. It highlights the importance of realism in allowing novels to reflect the society around them and how this kind of writing became an important tool in delineating the struggles of the lower classes.

**Keywords:** Defoe, Realism, Fielding, Social Approaches, Novel.

## **Introduction**

The early eighteenth-century English novels present a form of social lives that continues to hold archival value. This essay will argue about the social reality of early eighteenth-century Britain through close reading of three novels: *Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders and Company* by Daniel Defoe, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson, and *History of Adventures of Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding. With these three texts, the essay will try to explore aspects of social elements such as crime, morality, ethics, sentimentalism, the

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decadence of feudalism, the uplift of bourgeois society, and the role of commerce in gender roles. The paper also intends to engage with the characterization of the female 'criminal' and explore the socio-economic conditions affecting these women.

In the Introduction to *Aristocratic Government and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, Daniel A. Baugh writes: "Whether a historian's concern is with the origins of the industrial revolution, of modern politics, or the United States of America, eighteenth-century England cannot be ignored. It is a convenient starting point for modern history and a stable platform for launching the story of the revolutionary age. But for this very reason, eighteenth-century England is often misrepresented and misunderstood." (Baugh, 1975, p. 1)

This book attempts to prove that early eighteenth-century England preserved its traditions and symbols of a pre-industrial revolution era. In other words, this fact is incontrovertible that "early eighteenth-century Britain retained a traditional social culture" (Baugh, 1975, p. 1). Compared to other European nations, this country was modern, only Dutch provinces were superior to England when it came to modernization. In this Introduction, a picture emerges that early eighteenth-century Britain was a powerful contender in the field of commerce and trade: "Its maritime and commercial supremacy and its financial institutions were the envy of Europe. Their strength was reflected in the surging growth of London and was linked to the countryside." (Baugh, 1975, p. 1).

### **Crime in London**

London was the focal point of commerce and trade in Britain. The city was controlling every action related to economic benefit. This financial competition was pervading British society. As already mentioned, other European powers were given tough competition by Britain in the field of commerce and trade, and England was emerging as a supreme power in the whole of Europe. It is ironic that there existed internal financial competition in Britain. This competition became the prominent cause of inequality which birthed several social evils.

This inequality divided British society into two classes- the rich and poor. The exploitation and injustice drove the oppressed labor class towards different kinds of crime to attain luxuries and economic profit.

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Gambling was a prominent source of entertainment among the poor. According to Douglas Hay, it was the first time in British history that society faced a number of problems created by a criminal class. Gamesters were the main perpetrators of crime. They always tried to plunder on the highway or in the sea. Beattie (1974) presents glimpses of the late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century crime in his essay *The Pattern of Crime in England, 1660-1800*. This essay apprises us of the fact that death was the common punishment for criminals in Britain. Beattie's essay is a part of his larger work *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660 – 1800* where he uses court records and writes in great detail about the different kinds of crime that were being committed, and how socio-economic changes affected them. His work also discusses the gendered nature of crime and how London was a major center of criminal activity due to its dense population and growing economic inequalities. In their literary works, Defoe and Fielding have discussed in detail the relationship between criminals and society while also focusing on 'criminal' women. The gendered nature of crime as discussed by Beattie finds its representation in these novels in the form of female criminals who commit crimes out of economic and social necessity.

In early eighteenth-century Britain, women did not have any rights in the field of politics. They were also not self-reliant in the economic sphere. They could attain financial security through matrimonial alliances. It is also discernible that, as wives, they had limited rights. Moral and ethical norms were also extremely rigid or unbending. Men could indulge in adultery and premarital relations but for women, this kind of behavior was labeled as 'criminal', even though it is undeniable that these norms were intermittently violated by female aristocrats. In the domestic domain, the division of labor was governed by patriarchal norms. The condition of lower-class women was more precarious. They were dominated both by the opposite sex and the higher class causing them to face double-discrimination. It was not uncommon for servant girls to be exploited by their masters.

Sometimes their circumstances also drove them towards evil deeds in the form of pickpocketing, thievery, murder, and prostitution. Bernard Capp (2003) in the Introduction to *When Gossips Meet* discusses one incident which occurred in May 1698. Two women named Margaret Kingston and Katherine Aldridge faced trial at the Old Bailey for the

murder of Anne Barker. During this trial, they informed the court that she was a pickpocket and she was pickpocketing Kingston's husband. They claimed that by killing her they were taking revenge for the crime committed against Kingston's husband. In this incident, a chain of criminal women pickpockets, and murderers lies exposed where the crime has been committed by a criminal woman against a criminal woman.

### **Of 'Criminal' women and class inequalities**

To some extent, Defoe highlights the 'criminal woman' in his novel *Moll Flanders*, and in *Roxana* too. *Moll Flanders* discusses multiple social issues of early eighteenth-century Britain. Defoe belonged to the lower middle class. His father was a butcher, but Defoe became a tradesman by profession. He himself got imprisoned twice, and in prison he became familiar with the social underworld. Defoe was a keen social observer and is quoted as saying, "Men rob for Bread, Women Whore for Bread: Necessity is the Parent of Crime" (Sutherland, 1992, p. 48, as cited in Defoe, 1711). This novel talks about the upheavals faced by the female protagonist, who has been a wife, then a whore, mistress, and also a criminal during the last stage of her life.

Moll Flanders' life has been underestimated by society since her birth. As Virginia Woolf writes in her essay on Defoe:, "From her very birth or with half a year's respite at most, Moll Flanders, the most notable, of them, is goaded by 'that worst of devils poverty', forced to earn her living as soon as she can sew, driven from place to place, making no demands upon her creator for the subtle domestic atmosphere which he was unable to supply, but drawing upon him for all he knew of strange people and customs" (Woolf, 1925, *The Common Reader*). With the help of a magistrate, she reaches one nurse's home where she learns basic manners and tickets and also gets the opportunity to educate herself. In her childhood, being an orphan from a poor class, she was persuaded to earn money for herself. This persuasion indicates that her condition is more precarious than a servant girl. Although she refuses to work as a servant and chooses to pursue her interest in education, she becomes the victim of social norms and faces several kinds of problems not uncommon to other women from her class. In her youth, she falls into the trap of a manipulative man, the elder brother of Robert, who sexually exploits her, and pays her occasionally. David Daiches (1968) in *Critical History of English Literature Volume*

3 writes that Moll Flanders feels financially secure by submitting to Robert's elder brother. However, many would find this statement problematic. It is undeniable that Robert's elder brother is a fraud and cheat. Moll Flanders is unable to understand because she is naive, innocent, and emotionally attached to him. She rejects his advice to marry Robert. During the conversation between Flanders and her fraud lover, her emotions come to light. It is also conspicuous that Robert's love for her is real. This complicates the relationship between the two brothers and Moll Flanders. Moll Flanders wants to marry Robert's elder brother but Robert wants to marry Moll Flanders. The need for financial security and pressure from Robert's family causes Moll to marry Robert. Defoe's views on marriage is based on a utopian ideology. According to him, life would be miserable in such a matrimonial alliance, where there is no love. Women had to be very careful while choosing their life partner. This marriage leads her into a scandalous incident. In the pursuit of economic benefit and social status, her sentiments take a backseat.

After the death of her first husband, she falls back into her previous condition. The only difference is that she is now practical and more experienced in dealing with relationships. In the novel, she confesses her innocence and wants to marry once again to regain her social status. The second time, she marries a tradesman but he goes to France and never comes back. The third time she marries her half-brother without having any knowledge about it. She eventually comes to know about him and her mother on reaching Virginia. In other words, she realizes her value and what she needs to do for survival. After facing a number of difficulties, she returns to England and becomes a mistress. Alan Dugald McKillop writes in *Early Masters of English Fiction*, "Moll Flanders is a victim of society, showing the workings of economic and social compulsion: unfortunate adventures, showing the workings of circumstance; a cool exponent of self-interest, systematically trying to figure profit and loss in business, love, and crime." (McKillop, 1948, p. 28).

Morality, ethics and personal profit are interwoven together in the eighteenth century. Moll Flanders' master attains some religious experience and this experience creates havoc in her life. She loses her financial position once again. In this plot, Flanders' master's religious

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attitude is ambiguous. He does not try to improve Moll's condition, rather only tries to get rid of her.

Even after facing a lot of upheavals, Moll still wants her social and economic existence in society. By displaying financial power, she tries to gain a husband again. Her fourth husband Jimmy, also transforms into a fraud. She spends a peaceful and happy life only with her two husbands Robert and Banker. The major part of life is full of trouble. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist in Defoe's novel about one man's struggle against extenuating circumstances, Moll Flanders carves out her own identity in society with a great determination to find a space for herself.

After the death of her fifth husband, she accepts the strategy of crime. This time she has lost her old charm and beauty. With the help of an old woman, she learns different tactics related to thievery and pickpocketing. In other words, circumstances compel her to adopt her mother's profession. The opening chapter of the novel provides a glimmer of information about her mother. In this novel Moll Flanders tells the story herself: "My mother was convicted of Felony for a certain petty naming (viz.) Having an opportunity of borrowing three Pieces of fine Holland, of certain Draper in Cheapside: The circumstances are too long to repeat, and I have heard them related so many ways, that I can scarce be certain which is the right account. However it was, this they all agree in, that my Mother pleaded her Belly, and being found quick with Child, she was respited for about seven months, in which time has brought me into the World, and about again, she was called Down, as they term it, to her former judgment, but obtained the Favor of being Transported to the Plantations, and left me about Half a Year old; and in bad Hands, you may be sure" (Defoe, 2003, p. 8). Like her mother, she, too, has been arrested. Newgate is intricately associated with the life of Defoe. In *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf writes: "He had eighteen months in Newgate and talked with thieves, pirates, highwaymen, and coiners before he wrote the history of Moll Flanders". Woolf interest in Defoe's writing stems from her own criticism of how women were treated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its reflection found in *A Room of One's Own* where she criticizes the restrictions put on women and imagines how life would be like for an imaginary sister of Shakespeare during that restrictive time. In prison, Moll meets her fourth husband Jimmy. Turns out that both the husband

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and wife are criminals without knowing each other's criminal professions. Moll Flanders 'inherits' her mother's fate, adopting her mother's legacy. Just like her, she is also transported to Virginia. This journey of transportation marks the end of her troubled life.

Upon reading the novel, one comes to know that Moll Flanders has no real friends. Except Robert, her relationships with the men in the novel are purely conditional and exploitative. Only her governess shows faithfulness as a friend. During the difficult situation in her life, her governess renders her emotional comfort. In Moll Flanders' punishment, she plays a prominent role in reducing the death sentence to transportation. Like Defoe, Richardson and Fielding have also discussed the issues of the precarious situation of the poor class, gendered labor roles and overall hypocrisy of the patriarchal society in their literary works. In 1751, Fielding wrote a treatise titled *Late Increase of Robbers*. However, it is also undeniable that their novel focuses on some elements of crime in early eighteenth-century Britain.

In another instance of exploration of a woman's adjustment with prevalent patriarchal social norms of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* focuses on the emotional exploitation of the servant girl and her rebellion against the exploitation. This novel is in epistolary form. The opening chapter of this novel gives background information on Pamela's parents. They are the victims of poverty, and at the age of fifteen, Pamela works as a servant girl. The work discusses Pamela's uplift from the poor class to the middle class. Her mistress gives her an opportunity for education. She also becomes the victim of patriarchal norms however; she tries to resist and eventually succeeds to some extent. Sarup Singh in *Marriage in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (1995) discusses *Pamela* and quotes Margaret Doody. Doody says that this novel is "quite revolutionary in its own depth", a view that is quite agreeable because Pamela fights against social norms until the very end of the novel. Although her struggles differ from those faced by Moll Flanders, Pamela does not face as many upheavals.

After the death of his mother, Mr. B. tries to seduce her with all his power. Sarup Singh in the same book indicates that Mr. B. uses and abuses his power as a man, employer, and as a member of the governing class. In this novel, Richardson has tried to portray the defensive spirit and resilience of the servant girl. When Mr. B. tries to seduce

her in the locker room, she reacts aggressively and says that if her master is going out on real duty, she should have the right to object. Mr. B. is also a typical hypocrite like the other eighteenth-century men. He initially promises his mother that he will take care of Pamela, but after her death, he breaks the promise. He assures Pamela that he would send her to her parents but instead sends her to prison. In the later parts of the novel, she suffers a number of hardships. She thinks that it will be better to go to her parent's house than lose her honor. In this novel, the Squire also tries to destroy Pamela's honor, but Mrs. Jervis protects her, even though she does not treat Pamela fairly. While Mrs. Jervis 'protects' Pamela, she also tortures her mentally. In other words, she acts as a female agent of the patriarchal system.

Pamela's marriage with Mr. B. is also problematic in many ways. While she rebels against all social norms from the beginning until the end, she accepts the person who tries to molest her and forgives him despite all his immoral deeds. This decision provides her with a social position in this marriage, she loses her ideal nature. She also rigorously follows all the preordained social norms. Any adultery or pre-marital sex was an unpardonable crime in a patriarchal society for eighteenth-century women. But there were no rules for a man to be faithful towards his wife in a sexual relationship. Due to these stringent social norms, she loses her power. After marriage, women were not allowed to decide for their husbands. Sarup Singh in the same book, observes, "The wife should bear with her husband even when he is in the wrong, should be flexible, should overcome by sweetness and complaisance though not slavishly, should show no reluctance to oblige and obey him, and, if he is set on a wrong thing, should not dispute with him unless it is a really important point, but do it first and expostulate afterward" (Singh, 1995, p.. 95). Mr. B. preaches to Pamela about dressing, child-rearing, her conduct as a wife, and how to behave with his friends. Pamela rejects his ideas to some extent and thinks that she can reform her husband with her sweet nature. But her approach is quite ambiguous.

### **Gendered hierarchies and virtue**

Renowned scholar of 18<sup>th</sup> century English studies Christopher Flint in his essay '*The Anxiety of Effluence Family and Class (Dis)Order in Pamela*', mentions that Richardson, in this novel, tries to challenge the institution of an aristocratic family. He states, "In seeking to explain



the contemporary popularity of *Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded*, critics often point out that as a master printer, pious Protestant, strict family authoritarian, and political conservative, Richardson, and by extension of his art, perfectly embodied a bourgeois class that was consolidating its power, challenging aristocratic institutions of control, and transforming cultural as well as economic means of production”, (Flint, 1995, p. 109). Flint, in his works like *Family Fictions: Narrative and Domestic Relations in Britain, 1688–1798*, published in 1998 explores gender roles, social hierarchies, the middle class and how the domestic space was where all these dynamics played out. Fielding focuses on this type of “disorder” in the family in his novel *The History of The Adventures of Joseph Andrews* where Fielding tries to establish relations between Pamela and Joseph Andrews. Joseph Andrews is the son of Mr. Wilson, who loses his financial status due to his pursuit of women. At the end of this novel, it is shown that Pamela and Andrews are siblings.

In this novel, Fielding has portrayed reversed gender roles. Ms. Booby, after the death of her husband Thomas Booby, shows her affection for Andrew, trying to seduce him on more than one occasion. However, her plan has been foiled by Andrew and she expels him from the job and the lodge. Andrew meets his friend Fanny but their economic conditions prevent them from marrying each other. In this relationship, Fielding indicates how economy and marriage are interwoven with each other and how both issues were incomplete without each other in the early eighteenth century. Both Andrew and Fanny are subjugated by the aristocratic class represented by Lady Booby, tries to create hurdles in their relationship in many ways. Like Lady Davers from *Pamela*, Lady Booby is also the type of woman who can create problems for poor-class people, particularly women. In their novels, both Richardson and Fielding have tried to portray that in eighteenth-century Britain there was a hierarchy among the women as well. At the end of this novel, all plans of Lady Booby fail and Joseph Andrew and Fanny unite with each other.

This novel also discusses crime. On more than one occasion, Andrew’s friend Adam has rescued him from thieves. But thieves do not get any punishment in this work. Like other novels, *Joseph Andrews* presents a glimpse into the various social issues of eighteenth-century English society. James Cruise, in his essay *Fielding Authority and New*

*Commercialism in Joseph Andrews*, states, “To Henry Fielding, an ambiguous aristocrat, the influence of commerce and the part it played in rewriting patriarchal authority poses a serious problem to social and moral order”, (Cruise, 1984, p. xx). In his other essay titled ‘Percept, Property, and “Bourgeois” Practice in Joseph Andrews’, Cruise indicates how Fielding has critiqued the moral hypocrisy of bourgeois society. The characters of Richardson and Fielding’s novels acquire social positions to some extent unlike the characters in Defoe’s novels who struggle a lot and hardly get any appropriate place in society. Fielding and Richardson have not only portrayed the social realism of contemporary society but also explored the vision of revolt against social norms. One of the most important aspects of social realism is the representation of society’s ills through its institutions. In the words of Lionel Trilling, the family is a “narrative institution” (Trilling, 1972, p. 139). In the texts discussed in this paper, the family or rather, the domestic space forms an important site that exposes the nature of human relationships in 18<sup>th</sup> century English society. The three novelists discussed in this essay have criticized the evils of English society and exposed how the intrusion of the public and social in private lives affects the family unit. The didactic nature of their narratives is critical to understanding 18<sup>th</sup> century English society and its evolving nature in the backdrop of the rise of the English middle class as an economic and social force.

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