

**Classic Novels:
Meeting the Challenge
of Great Literature**

Parts I–III

Professor Arnold Weinstein



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Born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1940, Arnold Weinstein attended public schools before going to Princeton University for his college education (B.A. in Romance Languages, 1962, magna cum laude). He spent a year studying French literature at the Université de Paris (1960–1961) and a year after college at the Freie Universität Berlin, studying German literature. His graduate work was done at Harvard University (M.A. in Comparative Literature, 1964; Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, 1968), including a year as a Fulbright Scholar at the Université de Lyon in 1966–1967.

Professor Weinstein's professional career has taken place almost entirely at Brown University, where he has gone from Assistant Professor to his current position as Edna and Richard Salomon Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature. He won the Workman Award for Excellence in Teaching in the Humanities in 1995. He has also won a number of prestigious fellowships, including a Fulbright Fellowship in American literature at Stockholm University in 1983 and research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1998 (in the area of literature and medicine) and in 2007 (in the area of Scandinavian literature). In 1996, he was named Professeur Invité in American literature at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris.

Professor Weinstein's publications include the following: *Vision and Response in Modern Literature* (Cornell University Press, 1974), *Fictions of the Self: 1550–1800* (Princeton University Press, 1981), *The Fiction of Relationship* (Princeton University Press, 1988), *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (Oxford University Press, 1993), *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life* (Random House, 2003), and *Recovering Your Story: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison* (Random House, 2006). He has just completed *Northern Arts: The Breakthrough of Scandinavian Literature and Art from Ibsen to Bergman*, to be published by Princeton University Press in 2008. His latest project is *Literature and the Phases of Life: Growing Up and Growing Old*, under contract with Random House, with an expected completion date of 2009.

In addition to his career in teaching and writing, Professor Weinstein has produced a number of courses for The Teaching Company, including *The Soul and the City: Art, Literature and Urban Life*; *Drama, Poetry and Narrative: Understanding Literature and Life*; *20th-Century American Fiction*; and *American Literary Classics*.

Lecture Two

Defoe—*Moll Flanders*

Scope: Daniel Defoe, arguably the father of the English novel, is our first great journalist-author: He was curious, with a sharp eye for street life, and equipped with a plain style. As inheritor of the *picaresque* novel—a work of satire, looking at society from the bottom up—Defoe makes his protagonist in *Moll Flanders* a woman, and turns her loose on the streets of London. The result is a modern story of cunning and survival, revealing the resources available to people without station or power.

Moll Flanders is a self-described artist who uses disguise as the key to her monetary and erotic successes; her world is governed by the rule of exchange. Often criticized as philistine and hypocritical, Moll may surprise us with her peculiar honesty and integrity. Ultimately, Defoe offers us a double story: Moll's (visible) ongoing adventures in deception as well as her own (invisible) spiritual bookkeeping. This last accounting, what the reader sees versus what the other characters see, constitutes that "inside story" that is the ultimate purview of fiction itself.

Outline

- I. We begin this lecture series with *Moll Flanders*, written by Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) and published in 1721.
 - A. As we'll see, this seemingly straightforward narrative is filled with masks, disguise, lying, and scheming.
 - B. At a key moment, Moll asks a man she has loved: "Do you not know me?" The existential issues inherent in this question are at the core of this early-18th-century novel.
- II. Defoe has long been considered the father of the English novel, even though he inherited an established picaresque tradition. We may also regard him as a great journalist, with a sharp eye for current events in early-18th-century London.
 - A. The *picaresque* novel is of Spanish invention, dating back to the mid-16th century and relating the affairs of a *pizaro*, a lowlife figure. Critics have claimed that such novels have no plot but are strictly episodic.
 1. From an aesthetic point of view, the episodic nature of the picaresque novel may be a weakness, but it also prompts us to ask: Does life itself have a pattern?
 2. The genre is most known for its bottom-up angle of vision, as the authors of such works satirize the arrangements of the wealthy or powerful from the perspectives of beggars or thieves or con men. Picaresque novels are rich in information about the kinds of resources available to people without resources.
 3. This tradition can be said to live on in fiction of every century: Not merely Defoe's work but Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrate the vitality of the model.
 - B. As a "journalist," Defoe published papers and pamphlets on virtually all the issues of his age: religious controversy, duels, bankruptcy, insurance, care for the elderly, and conditions for the mentally ill.
- III. Defoe's signature appears to be his plain style and his prosaic—as opposed to poetic—view of life.
 - A. The writing itself takes on a conversational, unadorned style, with few allusions and few flourishes. It is attuned to modern life.
 - B. Defoe is our great witness to the emergence of the middle class; he celebrates enterprise, mercantilism, and hard work.
 1. His views on industriousness and profit have been seen in terms of Protestantism and the work ethic. The focus in Defoe's books is on the individual in *this* life; he doesn't address religious salvation or transcendence.
 2. For modern readers, his work raises the question: Is there no conflict between fattening your purse and saving your soul?
 3. The commonsensical Defoe is visible in his world-famous *Robinson Crusoe*. This story of a man abandoned on a desert island could have been an existentialist nightmare. In Defoe, it becomes a tale of *homo economicus*: Get busy and organize the island.

- IV. *Moll Flanders* brings all these factors into play, while adding one more fascinating twist: The protagonist is a woman.
- A. The story of an innocent country girl corrupted by city life was a familiar topic for the 18th century. London, a thriving business capital, was growing by leaps and bounds. This same story is unforgettably imaged in Hogarth's print series *A Harlot's Progress*.
 - B. Some readers assert that Moll's story is modeled on the real-life adventures of female criminals. In his preface, Defoe claims that her story is a moral tale of remorse, but is it?
 1. Moll, an orphan without money or papers, attempts to succeed in a world regulated by class and wealth. Her goal is to become a gentlewoman, which for Moll means gaining a measure of independence. Her only tools for achieving that goal are her beauty, her body, her wit, and her cunning.
 2. When she's younger, Moll tries to make a wealthy marriage, usually by appearing to be a woman of means. As she ages, she becomes a thief.
 3. Moll's activities as a thief are perfectly suited to Defoe's plain style, and the result is an utterly materialist definition of the "good life": money, lace, linen, and silver. These things are measurable; what about the things that are not measurable—morality, emotion, the soul?
 - C. The novel has been severely criticized as philistine and soulless. Its moral claims have been thought hypocritical. But Defoe shows us Moll's inner life with unflinching honesty.
 1. When her first husband dies, Moll enumerates how much money he left her and tells us that her two children were "taken happily off my hands...." Here, she seems interested only in the material life.
 2. Later, she describes a clever plan for stealing from the upper-class resident of a home during a fire. She feels remorse afterward, but says, "I could never find it in my heart to make any restitution. The reflection wore off and I began quickly to forget the circumstances that attended the taking them [the stolen items]."
 3. Here, Defoe seems to say that her remorse is real—it's just not very powerful. We're not without moral values, but life makes us callous, and those values surface only occasionally.
 4. In this view, Defoe's book makes others look pretentious and hollow. He seems to ask: How morally scrupulous is any life?
 - D. Moll's sense of how to succeed is linked to her dexterity and wit, but it is not alien to a kind of inwardness.
 1. Moll's first husband was, in fact, the younger brother of her first lover. Moll loves the older brother desperately, but it is the younger brother who takes her seriously and persuades his family to allow the marriage to take place.
 2. After her husband's death, Moll confesses that she never loved him, despite his kindness toward her. Instead, she is obsessed with his brother: "And I never was in bed with my husband that I wished myself in the arms of his brother.... In short, I committed adultery and incest with him every day in my desires...."
 3. Defoe shows us in this remarkable passage that the world of surfaces (Moll in bed with her husband) is echoed by a world of memories and other relationships (the world that takes place in her mind). We can't help bringing that world into the world in which we live.
- V. Moll's erotic and economic successes would appear to hinge on her talent for disguise and self-presentation. The virtues of being incognito are crucial.
- A. Moll can never tell people who she is because of the risk that she would be hanged as a thief. Still, thieving is a form of artistry in this book, a creative activity. For Moll, the desire to steal verges on the pathological.
 - B. Some have argued that disguise is the modus operandi of modern urban life. Most of our relationships are secondary, and we tend to keep our "histories" hidden. Like Moll, we find virtue in invisibility.
 - C. In contemplating a marriage to yet another lover, Moll lists her own transgressions but promises, "I will make him amends if possible by what he shall see for the cheats and abuses that I put upon him which he does not see."
 1. This is a statement of Moll's ethics, and it's a form of bookkeeping. She knows that her past is checkered, but she will try to live in such a way that makes up for that checkered past.
 2. With this bookkeeping, the novel creates a dialectic between what is hidden and internal and what is public, our words and actions in relationships with others.

3. Although disguise is part of this book and we tend to think of disguise as fake, in fact, the novel is stunningly honest, taking the measure of who we are over time.

VI. The pendant to disguise in this novel is confession.

- A. Characters confess throughout the book and not only in church. Moll herself is intensely social, and disguised though she may be, she needs to share her experiences with others.
- B. When Moll is finally taken to Newgate Prison, a minister moves her to open up, and she relates to him her history. Confession, not disguise, is the final truth of the novel.
- C. The legacy of *Moll Flanders* is that our lives are much longer than any of the shorthand versions of them we have. The full title of the novel is *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, Etc. Who was born in Newgate, and during a life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five Times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv'd Honest and died a Penitent*. Such a title calls into question any neat view of a human life, and suggests that all of us lead picaresque existences over time.

Essential Reading:

Daniel Defoe and Albert J. Rivero, *Moll Flanders: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*.

Supplementary Reading:

John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe: A Critical Biography*.

Arnold Weinstein, *The Fiction of Relationship*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Defoe's heroine has often been criticized as soulless and driven exclusively by materialist values. Do you agree with this assessment? Does this make *Moll Flanders* more—or less—relevant to a modern American audience?
2. Defoe's novel seems obsessed with the notion of disguise and self-concealment. What do you make of the urban issue here: that one is always incognito in an anonymous big city? Do you agree or disagree with the argument that disguise might be a form of self-enactment? To what extent do you think you yourself go about in disguise?