

# The Fate of the Eighteenth Century Bastard: Illegitimacy and Determinism in *Moll Flanders*

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**Abstract:**

*The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, more commonly called *Moll Flanders*, is an English novel by Daniel Defoe, first published in 1722, that details the exploits of the titular character from birth to old age. Moll is an illegitimate child, whose mother was a felon that Moll never knew. She is beautiful, cunning, and even becomes skilled, due to her time working as a seamstress for a gentlewoman and a housemaid for a wealthy family early in her life. Throughout the course of her life, Moll marries five times, once to her own brother, becomes the mistress of a married man (known as the “Bath gentlemen” for the city in which they met and lived), falls into a life of thievery, and eventually becomes a felon transported to the colonies in her attempts to escape the poverty and misery that often accompany bastard children.

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The eighteenth century has often been called the “century of illegitimacy” in which the concept of illegitimacy was viewed and treated as a birth defect, a disease of the soul that produced an innate depravity in the bastard child.<sup>1</sup> These misbegotten children are seen as marked from birth by the plague of illegitimacy to live a life diseased by the sin of their conception. The course of this “disease” often culminates in criminality. Through a study into the fictionalized life of Moll Flanders and historical documents of the time, one can see the stereotypical course of actions that becomes the life of an illegitimate child in the eighteenth century. They are marked by their natural condition to suffer a fate reserved to the bastard. Because they are the product of a sin, they are bound to lead a life of sin – a life of ill-conceived plans fated to them based on their ill conception. Illegitimates of the eighteenth century historically fell into a life of crime. This trend makes it seem predestined that bastard children should become criminals due to the

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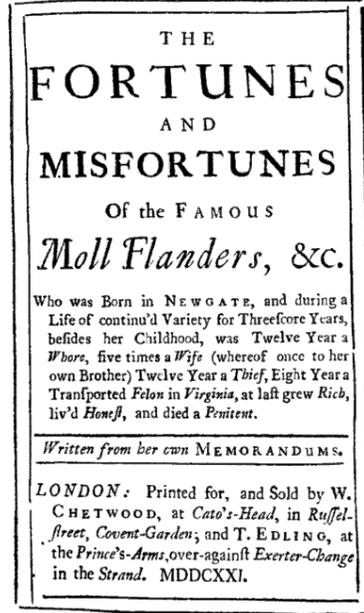
spiritually criminal nature of their existence. Illegitimate children seem to be destined from the very transgression that brings about their existence, to live in sin and crime, never able to escape the mark of illegitimacy that plagues them and determines the life they must lead. The life of the bastard, indeed, seems to be a doomed one, and this fated, stigmatized existence of the eighteenth century bastard is seen through Moll's life and the circumstances surrounding it. Through Moll's incest, criminality, and illegitimate child of her own, Daniel Defoe creates a masterfully depicted narrative of the life of a victim of this age of illegitimacy and exposes the nature of such as one doomed to a fate determined by merit of a less than immaculate conception.

“Through Moll's incest, criminality, and illegitimate child of her own, Daniel Defoe creates a masterfully depicted narrative ... of illegitimacy...”

Of Defoe's depiction of Moll Flanders, Lisa Zunshine asks, “was it possible to portray a female foundling as ultimately not tainted by the problems associated with bastardy at a time when the renewed cultural interest in foundling narratives pointedly reflected the painful necessity to deal with socioeconomic and moral repercussions of illegitimacy on an everyday basis?”<sup>2</sup> Moll, however, is not a character meant to appear untainted by her illegitimacy. Quite to the contrary, Moll is tainted by the stigma of illegitimacy in every area of her life. Defoe does not aim to give a foundling history without the influence of the repercussions associated with illegitimacy, but gives Moll's history with the pointed goal of exhibiting the life that most often belongs to the eighteenth century bastard. Defoe points to Moll's baseborn state so many times in the novel that it is clear that giving her story with an emphasis on her illegitimacy is a main focus of Defoe's. Being unable to extricate the story of his foundling from the stigma of illegitimacy that Zunshine points to is a tool that Defoe uses to show how intertwined the life of a bastard is with fate. Because the bastard is stigmatized by the sins of the parents, he is doomed to follow a path of sin determined upon him by his nature as a sinful product, and also by the society surrounding him who believes him to be sinful in nature. With this in mind, it is clear that Defoe is not trying to separate Moll from “the problems associated with bastardy,” but uses these problems to highlight the fate of the common bastard and show the social conditions that perpetuate the fate of these illegitimates.

### Innate Depravity and Blamelessness

Moll's state as an illegitimate child sets her up to fall into a series of sins due to her nature of having been begotten out of sin. This condition of the bastard throughout the novel and other eighteenth century records seems to be the driving force behind the path that they take in life, and the fate which they inescapably fulfill. From the title page of the novel, Defoe makes this inescapable course of Moll's life throughout the narrative clear: "The Fortunes & Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, 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."



Moll Flanders Title Page

Moll has an innate depravity about her, due to her nature as a misbegotten child, which leads her to fall into the various sins that conduct the course of her life, such as thievery and incest. The justification for her continual misgivings is that she is touched by the devil to perpetrate the crimes that she does. Justification of these sins is only necessary in the novel in order to fully establish the idea that Moll is not completely at fault for her faults, but that she is fated to fall into these things by nature, or by the disease that she is born with – illegitimacy. She is continually trapped into the sins that she commits, creating a sense of innocence and blamelessness about Moll, even as she continues in her wicked actions throughout the course of the novel. When Moll describes her first transgression – beginning an affair with the elder brother of the family she is living with – she uses language that illustrates trapping. The brother “had thus baited his hook” in attracting Moll, and therefore trapped her into sin, rather than choosing to do so, free of snare.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, when Moll first begins to steal, it is not of her own accord that she does so. It is her condition as an illegitimate that places her on the path to this criminal behavior. She is not free to truly

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make her own decisions, as she is fated by the sin of her beginnings to be deviant. It is almost as if, because of her sinful nature, a vein of wickedness runs through her very being, making her more susceptible to vice. Of her fall into crime, Moll says, “the devil carried me out and laid his bait before me.”<sup>4</sup> Here again, much like the “snare” she falls into with the elder brother, Moll has been trapped by sin, rather than entering into it willfully.

Moll seems to constantly be tormented over the sins that she commits. This torment is part of the reason that she must constantly find justification for her transgressions. Justification of this sort finds itself in the fact that it is in the illegitimate’s nature to perpetrate sins, and it becomes a necessity of the bastard to internally justify their crimes. Conscience is constantly plagued by the innate depravity of their condition. Moll, acting as representation of the common illegitimate for Defoe, often engages in “casuistical thinking” in order to justify her sins to herself, or more often, to talk herself into the “trap” that tempts her. “Casuistry” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, “that part of Ethics which resolves cases of conscience, applying the general rules of religion and morality to particular instances in which ‘circumstances alter cases’, or in which there appears to be a conflict of duties. Often (and perhaps originally) applied to a quibbling or evasive way of dealing with difficult cases of duty.” This evasion of morality in certain cases is used by Moll to arrive at justification for the vice in which she is indulging.

### **Oedipal Cycle**

One sin that Moll is particularly tormented over is the incest that she commits in marrying her half-brother. Here, again, Moll is completely blameless in the act of marrying her half-brother, as she has no knowledge of her origins or of her mother after transfer to the colonies. Her incest, the most personally destructive sin in her life, links directly back to her nature as a bastard, as she would not have the potential to commit the act if she was a legitimate child. Her illegitimacy thus seals her fate in this way by rendering her unaware of her origins, and therefore vulnerable to this transgression. Ellen Pollak makes the very astute association of Moll’s incestuous life to that of Oedipus: “Like the story of Sophocles’ Oedipus, another memorable literary figure whom circumstance early removes from the place and knowledge of familial origins, it demonstrates that families are biologically determining and that incest is a possibility always present in not knowing where one belongs.”<sup>5</sup>

Pollak is exactly correct in this assertion that, much the same as Oedipus, Moll is only able to commit this transgression by merit of the fact that she has no knowledge of her family. What Pollak does not point to in her statement of this oedipal connection, however, is the fact that Oedipus' actions are fated, and that the same can be said of Moll's. The distinct situation of Moll's incestuous relationship proceeding from her lack of knowledge of familial connection is clearly a reflection of the story of Oedipus. Because of this clear link, the argument can be made that Defoe employs this connection to antiquity in order to reinforce the idea of fate working in Moll's life. Oedipus' incestuous life is fated by an oracle. This direct link to fate through the connection to Oedipus gives the sense that, in much the same way that Oedipus is unable to divert the course of actions determined to be his by the gods, Moll is unable to escape the depravity that she is fated to by the sinful nature of her very existence. Moll herself knows "not by what ill fate guided" that she fell into the sin of incest, but it is clear that even she believes a force greater than herself works to determine the path of her life.<sup>6</sup>

“...Moll is unable to escape the depravity that she is fated to by the sinful nature of her very existence...”

### **Criminal Origins**

The clearest connection between illegitimacy and determinism in *Moll Flanders* can be seen through Moll's criminal origins. Moll's mother was a criminal, which strengthens the idea that Moll is innately more susceptible to crime, given a biological proclivity to it. Even more in the way of fate in Moll's criminality is the fact that she comes into the world in a criminal institution. Moll is born in Newgate Prison, the very place that she returns upon arrest for her own crimes. Moll's beginnings in Newgate quite clearly foreshadow that she will again return to her birthplace, as fate determines her to follow the same course as her mother, who puts her in the position of bastardy through yet another sin. Moll's illegitimate nature coupled with her birth at Newgate seems to give her no other option but to fall to her innate depravity and commit the very same sins as her mother, which she does in both her criminality and illegitimate child of her own. The connection of Moll's criminality to motherly depravity is strengthened even further in the course of the novel, as her chief influence in falling to criminal acts is her governess, Mother Midnight. Of this figure, Robert Erickson says,

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“If *Moll Flanders* is in many ways a searching examination of the meaning of Fate in the role of a “woman of the world” who becomes a criminal and finally a wealthy “Penitent” on her own plantation in Virginia, the one character in the novel who has the most decisive influence on her career as a thief is her Governess.”[7] Moll’s governess teaches her how to be a thief, much in the way that Moll’s true mother gave her an innate knowledge of wickedness from the circumstances around her conception. The “mother” figure in *Moll Flanders* becomes extremely important in determining fate, or “Fate” in Erickson’s opinion, as it is the transgression of Moll’s true mother that gives her a sinful nature, and Mother Midnight’s instruction in thievery that gives her the skills to act upon her moral ineptitude.

Moll’s prison birth alludes to her fate to once again be imprisoned, but even though she seems linked to crime from birth, it is still not a personal descent into crime of her own free-will that lands her in Newgate later in her life. She is, as previously shown, snared by the devil into crime. When the devil “laid his bait” for Moll, she had no choice but to fall into the sin, as her very existence proceeded out of sin.<sup>8</sup> This justification is so necessary to create the dynamic that Moll is a victim of her vice, that the same placement of blame on the devil is repeated in the very next paragraph: “This was the bait; and the devil who I said laid the snare, as readily prompted me.”<sup>9</sup> Moll’s justification here is used to, once again, give her an air of blamelessness for her actions, as she is merely a product of her sinful nature. Along with placing blame on the devil, Moll engages in casuistical thinking in order to make her sin seem not as wicked as it truly is. Dorothy Van Ghent makes an interesting argument about Moll’s justification for her crimes, saying: “But what, objectively, is the relationship of Moll’s moralizing thoughts to her adventures? Her adventures are criminal, but she herself is not a criminal type; she is not a woman of the underworld, but a woman of the bourgeois world; her aspirations are thoroughly middle-class – she wants, above all, economic security and middle-class morality.”<sup>10</sup> While these things might very well be true of Moll, it is more likely that the moralizing thought is used not to establish her as a woman that is better than her situation, but to show her as a woman wishing not to become that which she is fated to. Van Ghent asserts that Moll is “not a criminal type,” but she, in fact, is by merit of the innate criminality passed to her by her mother and the sin by which Moll herself came to be.

A criminal life is the most common kind led by bastards of the

eighteenth century; often due to the ill-treatment misbegotten children suffer because of their condition. *Moll Flanders* demonstrates the ill-treatment of illegitimates as she, early in her life, falls into the hands of gypsies before escaping. Illegitimate children are unfairly given a stigma by their parents. They are seen as sinful in nature due to the sins committed by their parents, and are regarded as almost less human than a legitimate child, as they are considered corrupt and irredeemable from their innate depravity given to them by the transgressions of their parents. Because of this, bastards of the eighteenth century often endured a life of neglect and abuse due to the idea that they were base in nature. This ill-treatment suffered by bastards caused many to fall into a life of crime in order to have enough to live. Ironically, it is that thought that pervaded life in the eighteenth century, that illegitimates were fated to fall into a sinful life, that ultimately pushed them to come to just that fate. Through abuse and neglect, and a pre-conceived notion that these children were meant for nothing more than crime to begin with, illegitimate children became subject to the fate that was assumed upon them, furthering the determinism of illegitimacy in this age. Many children born as a result of illicit relationships were given to the care of other families, much like Moll is taken into the care of the gentlewoman and then a wealthy family. Unlike Moll, however, these children were often neglected in these families and not taught any skills or means by which to earn a living once grown.

### **Historical Documents and Literature**

The Red Basil Book, a historical record of a Manchester parish published in 1797, gives accounts of the treatment of “the unfortunate offspring of illicit amours” and details the course of events that leads to the situation of illegitimate children into homes where they are neglected. Thomas Battye, recorder of the Red Basil Book, attests that families were often given “hush money’ for bastard children,” and that this practice resulted in “the fathers have an indemnification from the town for any future expense.”<sup>11</sup> Because of this “hush money,” many people would take on a child and pocket the money, leaving the child to neglect. After years of neglect and misuse, the bastard would have no marketable skills and would, of necessity fall into crime. Of course, the individuals responsible for the care of the child could not be at fault for the fall of the bastard into a life of crime; for they were destined by birth to do so no matter into what circumstances they were placed.

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The criminality of bastards does not proceed out of ill-treatment alone, though, as Moll is treated rather well in her youth. Criminality can be better linked to the moral criminality of the parents of illegitimate children. While the neglect of a child is a contributing factor to the turning of an illegitimate into a criminal, the ill-treatment would not occur if illegitimacy was not a stigma that marked the child for a life of sin, predestined from birth. It can be seen that society viewed bastards as naturally cursed to be depraved. Illegitimacy is a disease that infects a child at conception and remains with them for life. Mary Wollstonecraft was particularly familiar with the stigma of illegitimacy and its function as a disease on the victim of illicit affairs. In *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, Maria says of Jemima, an illegitimate woman, that it is “as if she had been a beast of prey, or infected with a moral plague.”<sup>12</sup> Keenly stated in this passage is the fact that the illegitimate child is plagued by the immorality that brought about his existence. In the case of Jemima, much like Moll for a period, she falls into prostitution as a result of her bastardy.

### **Moll's Own Bastard**

Much in the line of prostitution, Moll becomes a kept woman to a gentleman at Bath for quite some time. The product of this illicit affair gives Moll an illegitimate child of her own. In this way, fate is once again working in Moll's life, as she follows in the path of her mother yet again in having a bastard child. Defoe shows in the progression of generations from Moll's mother to the Bath gentleman's child that illegitimacy begets illegitimacy. This trend becomes evident in other works and historical documents of the eighteenth century. It is a clear and natural progression for a bastard to produce another bastard, as fate dictates that they fall into a life of sin. For some, a life of prostitution can obviously lead to the birth of an illegitimate child. For others, a life of crime can lead to the necessity of illegitimate birth in order to live by merit pleading one's belly, as Moll's mother does. Fate makes this progression happen because the fate of the bastard is guided by the sin associated with the nature of his existence. Susan Greenfield asserts that eighteenth century society “suggested that a mother's imagination and desire affected her child in utero, primarily in negative ways.”<sup>13</sup> This thought process of the eighteenth century can absolutely be applied to the fate suffered by the bastard, as the desires of the mother to commit the sin that produced the child are present with her during pregnancy, and thus passed to the child. Greenfield goes on to say,

“a mother’s desire could create a child with such severe birth defects it was designated a “monster;” a being “seen as a visible image of the mother’s hidden passions.”<sup>14</sup> The baseborn child is this “visible image of the mother’s hidden passion” and illegitimacy is, in fact, the “birth defect” of the bastard, as it stigmatizes the child and because of their innate defectiveness, they are fated to fall into a life that precipitates this deficiency transmitted to them prenatally.

Most telling about the “hidden passions” of Moll is her treatment of her defective child. Although Moll had 12 children over the course of her five marriages, she loves her bastard child seemingly much more than any of the others. The child that she has with the married Bath gentleman is the only one that she really speaks about caring for and that she truly wishes to keep with herself. This seems to indicate a link between her own illegitimacy and the illegitimacy of her child. She wishes to keep her child and love him because she sees herself in him much more than her other children, as he is created of the same moral depravity that she is. He is the “visible image” of Moll’s “hidden passion,” as Greenfield says, and it seems as though she wishes to save him from the “defect” of illegitimacy by taking good care of him. She truly enjoys this child, and describes the boy and her attachment to him, unlike her mentions of any of her other children, saying, “a charming child it was”, and calling him “a fine lovely boy.”<sup>15</sup> She cares for this child for five years, much longer than any of her other children, and is genuinely unhappy to part with him. In having to part with other children, Moll is always happy to be free of the burden of having to support the child, but in the case of her bastard son, she would rather keep and care for him than give him to the care of the Bath gentleman. Of having to leave her child to the care of his father, as she is unable to support the child effectively, Moll says, “It was death to me to part with the child.”<sup>16</sup> Moll here does what is best for her child out of love. This shows the true affection that she holds for her illegitimate child, which sets him apart from all of her other children and creates an interesting dynamic of an illegitimate’s concern for another “mongrel.” Moll sees her own illegitimacy in her son and seems to reach for a better life for him in order to perhaps break the cycle of fate that affects her and others born of iniquity.

### **Conclusion**

Through the character of Moll Flanders, her incestuous iniquity, fall into criminality, and continuation of illegitimacy through the conception of her own illicit child, Defoe creates and exposes a stereotypical

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representation of the life and fate of the eighteenth century bastard, a commonality that so pervaded the society of that age. *Moll Flanders* shows the innate depravity believed to be a part of an illegitimate child at work, and plays off of the social conditions that allowed this perception of bastardy to exist and be carried from generation to generation. Defoe shows the state of the bastard as stigmatized and exposes the fact that the treatment of such people offers them no course of action but to follow in the path laid before them by the sinful acts of their parents. By natural condition and societal perception, bastards of the eighteenth century were doomed to fall into a life pushed upon them as if by fate – giving way to the persistence of illegitimacy in the society and the depiction of such in cultural narratives such as the ill-fated, notorious bastard, Miss Moll Flanders. Though Defoe works to expose the societal influence on illegitimacy, but does little to suggest a solution to the problem. While he shows the struggle of the illegitimate through the story of Moll, he upholds the treatment of bastards through his use of the concept of fate as seemingly more than cultural pressure.

*Illegitimacy and Determinism in Moll Flanders*

1 Zunshine, Lisa. *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth century England*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. print.

2 Ibid.

3 Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. London, UK: Arcturus, 2009, print.

4 Ibid.

5 Pollak, Ellen. *Incest and the English Novel, 1684-1814*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. print.

6 Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. London, UK: Arcturus, 2009, print.

7 Erickson, Robert A. *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth century Fiction*. New York, NY: AMS Press Inc., 1986. print.

8 Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. London, UK: Arcturus, 2009, print.

9 Ibid.

10 Van Ghent, Dorothy. "On Moll Flanders." Spector, Robert Donald. *Essays on the Eighteenth Century Novel*. Indiana University Press, 1965. 3-18. print.

11 Battye, Thomas. *The red basil book, or, parish register of arrears, for the maintenance of the unfortunate offspring of illicit amours; with a farther development of most shameful and unprecedented acts of abuse in the town of Manchester. Part the first*. Manchester, 1797. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

12 Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1975. print.

13 Greenfield, Susan C. *Mothering Daughters*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002. print.

14 Ibid.

15 Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. London, UK: Arcturus, 2009, print.

16 Ibid.

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