

**E-Study Material  
for  
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British Literature: The 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

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**The Theme of Greed in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders***

Greed is known as an intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, property, and food. Being greedy means one wants more and more of something; the more he or she attains, the more he or she wants and is never satisfied. Potential consequences of unchecked greed include bankruptcy, destitution, and even criminal punishment. One of the major themes in *Moll Flanders* is greed. Moll's greed for money leads her to moral disintegration: she joins prostitution and later becomes a thief. Moll was always determined to become a gentlewoman rather than working as a household servant. But Moll's idea of gentlewoman was quite different from the idea held by others. The idea of gentlewoman Moll had in her mind was a neighbor who appeared to make her living by her needlework. Though Moll's nurse explained that the woman was in fact a prostitute; but without understanding what prostitute means, Moll determined to become like her who do not do housework. Moll's determination to become a gentlewoman cultivates in her the greed for money because in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> England, people were very conscious about social positions. Marriage between rich and poor was not a common thing. In order to get a better husband and a life of gentlewoman Moll need to have an amount of money. As the novel proceeds the readers get to see that Moll as a determined and independent character refuses to changes her goal in life despite the means she had to employ.

For Moll, people are commodities and the relationships are mere business transactions. Moll's first act of prostitution thrust upon her unknowingly. At the beginning of the novel, while she

was living with the family of a gentlewoman, she was seduced by the eldest son into becoming his lover. "...professing a great deal of Love for me, he told me it was all an honest Affection, and that he meant no ill to me; and with that he put five guineas into my hand, and went away down Stairs". An in another instance she says, "...he took these Freedoms with me...When this was over he stay'd but a little while, but he put almost a Handful of Gold in my Hand..." Moll also accepts a bribe to leave him (her first love) and marry his younger brother whom she never loved. Moll never had any deep emotional attachments with her husbands; she chooses her husband on the basis of their social position. She believes that marriage does not really matter, as long as she has enough money. After the death of her first husband, she goes in search of another gentleman to remarry without bothering about her children. After getting married five times whatever money and property she gained was not enough for her and her greed for money leads her to prostitution and thievery. Moll's acts of prostitution show that she will carry out illegal practices in order to get money. There are many instances in the novel where Moll's involves in thievery which expresses the theme of greed. In an instance of the novel, Moll gives her son a stolen watch and says that she has stolen it from a gentlewoman's side at a meeting house in London and this is the only thing of value she has to give him. Moll allows her morals to disintegrate while trying to fulfill her need for money.

By using the character of Moll and her greed for money, Defoe has presented the condition of women during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century England. During that period in England, it was difficult for single women to survive: unable to live honestly on the wages of a maid, women were often forced to turn into whores or thieves. The moral lesson that Defoe has for his readers is that "to survive one must fight with the weapons one has". Moll Flanders can be considered as a good example of the criminal of that time, who is forced into the life of crime and dishonesty by the social conditions. Moll was left with very limited alternative options to survive; in fact this constant battle of survival is imposed on the poor by the society itself leading women like Moll to live the life of a criminal. It is evident that Moll chose the path of sin and became a criminal because she had no money to feed herself and live according to the moral standards of human life. As she turned out of doors to the wide world, she had no other option than becoming a thief to eat and to live.