

Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*: Re-thinking Identity through Reality and Fiction.

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Abstract

As a “component of identity”, Defoe’s language in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* emphasizes the re-thinking of identity through reality and fiction. Defoe was able to use new means of language that engulfs a new identity to the novel through woman identity (re)construction. He challenges both the marginal identity of women and that of the novel as a despised literary genre compared with the classical decorum of poetry and drama.¹

The present study doesn’t only confer a philosophical and psychoanalytic entity to the novel it rather underlines its ideological and literary ethos. It brings to light the theory of autobiographical fiction which deals with identity knowledge and shows how the experience of the *self* develops the novel premises. Nevertheless, Defoe’s novels are not just mere additions in the field of literary studies, i.e., an abstract theoretical category to be added to Marxist, New Critical, or Deconstructive approaches to the study of “Identity”. It would be prerequisite to drop a line on the thematic analysis of woman identity (re)construction from an ideological point of view which has an impact on the “literary horizon” of *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. We observed how the novel’s language is in harmony with both Defoe’s vision of the wor(l)d and his novel’s reception. Defoe’s woman *self*-representation reshapes autobiography into a liberating model that can adjust a new identity to the literary genre itself. He retrieves from the patriarchal ethics, philosophy and canon and moves to new narrative modalities that affect the means throughout which we recognize the wor(l)d.

I. The patriarchal society and Defoe’s woman (re)constructed identity:

Some Feminist theorists examined the symbolic dimensions of the novelist’s woman identity (re)construction articulated through the collective imagination of 18th

¹ Defoe did not respect the literary forms and norms like his contemporary « *University wits* » such as Swift, Dryden et Pope.

century in England². In fact, Defoe's protagonists Moll and Roxana compel the individual's social integration which cannot be realized without mixing the two facets of consciousness together: the individual and the collective. The heroine's private life is inseparable from her social involvement. Her identity is expressed through this double self-belonging which is singular to her self-consciousness evolution.

In the 18th century, women struggle to fulfill their identity (re)construction was entangled by the ideological ethics of the patriarchal society. Women who craved to self-determination were frequently associated with vanity which seems a prominent concept in both novels.

Roxana is such a woman, ruined because her immoderate vanity and ambition can only be satisfied at the expense of the love and trust which she desperately needs. Her life is her punishment, and her story Defoe's expression of his tragic vision of the human lot.³

Similarly, with a remarkable lucidity Moll shows how she is fully conscious of her wickedness: « I had almost unbounded stock of vanity and pride, and but a very little stock of virtue ».⁴

In this perspective, Richard Baxter unfolds the denial of certain behavior through a catalogue determining the Christian ideals and the puritan ethics:

“passion”, “imagination”, “lustful pleasures”, “Love songs”, “worldly and idle talk”, “romances and other idle and tempting books, vain sports and pastimes, drinking, tedious meals, vanity of apparel, useless knowledge and news” and above all “ease and idleness”⁵

The English society of the beginning of the 18th century witnessed numerous economic, political and social changes. The spread of Puritanism, Individualism and Capitalism transformed the English citizen to a new individual different from the preceding centuries. Moll and Roxana are deeply influenced by the new socio-economic conditions which lie behind their respective predicaments. They are desperate widows

² Helen Moglen, *The Trauma of Gender*, University of California Press, 2001, p. 2.

³ Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*, Introduction & Notes copyright: David Blewett, Penguin Books, 1982, p. 24.

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, Norton Critical Edition, New York, 1973, p. 25.

⁵ Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, p. 128-222. In, Charles H. George, “A Social Interpretation of English Puritanism”. *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 25, No. 4. (Dec, 1953).

who fight against poverty with whatever means they can undertake. Defoe tended to frown upon this characteristic and confined them in a spiral of criminality (both are prostitutes and Moll is a famous robber) where the same circumstances bring them to the same point. Their confusion echoes their mind and gives an impression of chaos. They survive in a male-dominated world and relegated to a second position. They struggle to improve their status; yet, their social function is entangled with a series of ideological “norms”. The moral conduct of the two widows is corrupted because of their vanity.

Defoe’s critics refer to the psychological potential of puritans which is related to the doctrine of predestination. They perceive that the puritans dexterity enable them to be « (...) experts in psychological dissection and connoisseurs of moods before it made them moralists », to an extent that « forced them into solitude and meditation by requiring them continually to cast up their accounts»⁶. According to M. E. Navak Defoe’s portrayal of the human spirit reveals his moral mission as a *dissenter* and a member of the *Reformation Manners Club* movement with, among others, Swift and Steele.⁷ His prose writings, such as the *Review*, unveil his spiritual convictions:

I firmly believe, and have always had such convincing testimonies of it that I must be confirmed atheist if I did not, [in] a converse of spirits, I mean between those unembodied and those called soul, encased in flesh. (...) I had never any considerate mischief or disaster attending me, but sleeping or waking I have had notice of it beforehand.⁸

The recurrent use of adverbs (*firmly* and *always*) shows how the self-experience is deeply inspected. The resonance of the personal pronoun *I*, accentuates the personal endorsement of such an experience. Yet, the dilemma of the personal experience nourished by (*soul*) and (*flesh*) unveils the paradox and the turmoil of the human self-tugged between these two polarities. It’s the case of the alienated protagonists of Moll and Roxana who incarnate women identity (re)construction through a tormented consciousness.

⁶ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, New York: Macmillian Company, 1993, p. 53.

⁷ Novak M. E., *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

⁸ Daniel Defoe, *The Review*, Vol. VIII, 1711-12, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010, p. 225.

In both novels Defoe's representation of woman identity (re)construction differs from his male protagonists. Contrary to the ambitious vigor of Robinson Crusoe that makes him compel the ideological convictions of his society, Moll and Roxana challenge their patriarchal society because of their marginalization. Moll wants to become a gentlewoman and Roxana wants to remain among the gentry. Men in the 18th century benefited from the power of their having money; women fed this vicious circle by accepting to sell themselves: "When a woman is thus left desolate and void of council, she is just like a Bag of Money or a Jewel dropt on the Highway, which is a Prey to the next Comer". (*Moll Flanders*, 101) Each time Moll marries or manages to be kept as a mistress, there is a sudden « Blow » that drastically changes her circumstances which emphasizes the vulnerability that women underwent. The protector whom Moll tends to ask for guidance is ironically transformed into dissipater of money. He sees in women only the materialistic fortunes, « Bag of Money ». The narrator modulates her words to convey an implicit message and the accent is put on women's frailty: they are the prey of rapacious predators.

Thus my Pride not my Principle, my Money, not
my Virtue, kept me Honest ; tho' as it prov'd, I
found I had much better have been sold by my
comrade to my brother, than have sold myself as I
did to a Tradesman that was Rake, Gentleman,
Shopkeeper and Beggar all together . (*Moll
Flanders*, 48)

We observe a duality that reflects the heroine's shattered self between the contradictory values. Her new identity is defined through new departures in life experience and through the association of the contraries using opposed signifiers: « *Pride* » / « *Principle* » and « *Money* » / « *Virtue* ». We observe how the heroine tries to reinvest the writing tool in expressing her identity (re)construction using a materialistic terminology. In fact, the signifiers used in her confessions do not reflect the corresponding context of the signified i.e., redemption and the search for salvation. Hence, in his novels as elsewhere, Defoe advocates different and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards the materialistic spirit of his age where the lucrative purpose occupies a major value on the detriment of love.⁹

⁹ Richard Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977.

During this era there were few opportunities for women to be respectable and autonomous apart from the marriage alternative or prostitution. Defoe heavily condemns marriages made for economic reasons in *Conjugal Lewdness* (1727)¹⁰. Roxana, for example, is viewed as an over-ambitious woman who rejects the marriage offer to a wealthy Dutch merchant and prefers to remain the mistress of a prince. She is seen as incapable to control her vanity. Besides, Roxana expresses her lucid consciousness about wickedness: « I had a most unbounded stock of vanity and pride, and but a very little stock of virtue ». (*Ibid.*, p. 25) In so doing, she epitomizes woman self-turmoil shattered between fragility and force, obedience and rebellion. According to Blewett, Roxana plays a double role:

Roxana is such a woman, ruined because her immoderate vanity and ambition can only be satisfied at the expense of the love and trust which she desperately needs. Her life is her punishment, and her story Defoe's expression of his tragic vision of the human lot.¹¹

Contrary to Roxana we observe that at the end of her life Moll controls her moral conduct respecting the socio-economic ethics of the society. Her zeal is viewed as a means to foster her self-determination. This image crystallizes the transformation of the traditional puritan ideals into actions of innovation and improvement:

And the form of the old zeal, now turned into a secular world needing the old faith at least intermittently as the new devotion to the world falters with failure, gives us a pattern of character that is one of the remarkable creations of fiction.¹²

Indeed, the heroine's identity (re)construction reflects the author's portrayal of self-consciousness evolution through fiction. Defoe sheds the light forces which challenge the scale of values; subsequently we are softer in our judgment than we would ordinarily be towards the two whores, Moll and Roxana. We deem the criminality but

¹⁰ Daniel Defoe, *Conjugal Lewdness or Matrimonial Whoredom: A Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed*, (1727), Ed. M. E. Novak, Gainesville, Florida: Scholar's facsimiles & Reprints, 1967.

¹¹ Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*, Introduction & Notes copyright: David Blewett, Penguin Books, 1982, p. 24.

¹² Martin Price, « Defoe's Novels ». In, *Daniel Defoe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Max Byrd : Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1976, p. 30.

we don't condemn the criminals. If they are thoroughly dishonest, (Moll deceives many men and becomes an expert thief, Roxana spends all her life as a mistress and causes the death of her own daughter), they tell us about their secret sins and we become the accomplice of their actions. Moll and Roxana lie to others, but it is to protect themselves as well as to stop others thinking ill of them. Necessity is echoed through the Biblical verse "Give me not poverty Lest I Steal" where it seems natural that Moll and Roxana do not want to starve, and this makes us accept their transgression of the laws of society as they are in contradiction with their own interest.

As it is clearly shown, the study of *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* suggests a new expression of identity (re)construction based on a sensibility and an ethos that reflect the spirit of the age. The two novels reveal specific aesthetic aspects. Indeed, within the thematic framework of the story (the content), it is necessary to take into account the semiotic structures (the form) of the narrative. Thus, the novel triggers a precise moment in History with an intrigue and a narratology in search of a new identity. While the study of *what* is told we can analyze *how* the novelist tells the story. As a literary work of art, form and content of the novel contribute to the creation of a new aesthetic conception: fiction. Through, the creation of new writing modalities Defoe's fiction accentuates its own value and restitutes its distinctive identity construction as a literary sub-genre.

II. The Representation of Woman Identity through Reality and Fiction

Defoe's novel was often the object of very contradictory appreciations and criticism. The critics, such Ian Watt and Michael Boardman, formulate subtle and complex strategies of the writing rather than thematic dilemmas relative to the challenge of the 18th century society. In fact, the various language devices of narration and stylistic figures of speech, such as irony, constitute an important subject of debate following Watt¹³. These critics highlighted other complexities in the contribution of the Defoe to the creation in the novel. Similarly, for the feminist and Marxist critics¹⁴, Moll

¹³ We can refer to numerous scholars who dealt with Defoe's works, among others, David Blewett, Maximilian E. Novak, John Richetti, Lennard Davis, Ian Bell, James Sutherland and G.A. Starr.

¹⁴ Among the feminist critics we state: Ellen Pollack, Lois A. Chaber, Pat and Kathryn Rogers. The Marxist critics are namely C. Flynn and Hummel.

and Roxana are perceived as victims of both the male chauvinist sexual oppression and the emergence of capitalism in the beginning of the 18th century.

For both heroines the « fortunes » and « misfortunes » represent a passage from the state of naivety to the state of de maturity and self-consciousness evolution:

O let none read this part without seriously reflecting on the Circumstances of a Friend and want of Bread; it will certainly make them think not of sparing what they have only, but of looking up to Heaven for support, and of the wise Man's Prayer, *Give me not Poverty lest I Steal.* (*Moll Flanders*, 149)

I cou'd not in the height of all this fine doings, I say, I cou'd not be without some just Reflection, tho' Conscience was, as I said, dumb as to any Disturbance it gave me in my Wickedness; my Vanity was fed up to such a height, that I had no room to give Way to such Reflections. (*Roxana*, 110)

In the first confession it seems clear that a neat polarisation about the cognitive faculty is underlined through a series of verbs like « think », « looking up » and « reflecting ». Moll's reaction, as such, engulfs a cautious trial to plead her cause implementing a spiritual terminology as « Wise Man's Prayer » and emphasizing the importance to the word « Wise » with the spiritual aspect of prayer. Roxana, on the contrary, accentuates her guilty self while focusing on the omnipresence of vanity which. Her confessions show a demolishing guiltiness confronted with her self-consciousness evolution; she seems incapable to relinquish to her wise « reflections ».

In Defoe's era, the novel's intertextuality¹⁵ takes different forms, and moves from the allusion to the textual citation of the Bible: « Give me not Poverty lest I Steal ». It crystallizes a dual relationship between a realistic tone of the story and a moral lesson transmitted by the novelist. Indeed, Defoe's representation of the heroine's

¹⁵ According to Mikhaïl Bakhtin, every text is constructed, explicitly or not, through the revival of other texts. No work of art is created *ex nihilo*, and the novel is not an exception. This phenomenon is based on logical evidence: having got many readers, authors inflect the trace of the reading process through their texts. Nevertheless, the *intertextuality*, as a constitutive dimension of the novel, can scramble the spot of the enunciative voice which is the case of Defoe's novels. In, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Paris Gallimard, DL, 1987, pp. 265-7).

fortunes and misfortunes reflects her self-consciousness evolution through the text conception of a double chronology. The controversy lies in the amalgam between *History* and *Story* and in the movement of the self-reflexive writing fluctuating between reality and fiction as it appears openly in *Roxana's* preface: « That the foundation of this is laid in Truth of fact; and so the Work is not a Story, but a History ». (*Roxana*, 5) The novelist uses of the prefaces to warn the reader about his didactic intention and alludes to this objective as follows:

Scenes of Crime can scarce be represented in such a Manner, but some may make a Criminal Use of them; but when Vice is painted in its Low-priz'd Colours, 'tis not to make People in love with it but to expose it; and if the Reader makes a wrong Use of the Figures, the Wickedness is his own. (*Roxana*, 36)

Defoe calls his reader to detect the correct “allegorical images” of the novel (Fable) which incite to virtue and comprise a real life lesson. The novel, as his contemporaries expect it to, aims at representing the didactic evolution of the hero and the development of his identity (re)construction. It should reflect an intrigue, combining a fluid presentation of truth and a progressive instruction of both: the hero and the reader. In this context, Lennard J. Davis, claims that: « Novels work, then, by denying their own mode of production as mere fictions and also by creating the illusion through the use of the median past tense and mimetic techniques that the text is somehow close to – if not completely – reality. The frame of the novel insists the work is true while the technique of the novel aims at creating the illusion of reality. (...) Thus, like ideology, the novel's point of reference is not history, from which the novel stands autonomously aloof, but the social process of signification, the world of “lived” so opposed to “actual” experience. In this view, realism can be seen as a function of ideology and ideology can be seen as embodying the same process as are used in the realistic novel »¹⁶.

From a stylistic point of view, in the dawn of the Enlightenment, the ontological context of the novel belongs to a global system of expressing the self. Thus, the novel sets up the premises of fictional autobiography and shows how it affects the

¹⁶ Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fcitions: the Origins of the English Novel*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.p. 221.

ideological and the literary norms. Indeed, Philippe Lejeune¹⁷ elucidates two main features of autobiography: the study of the self and the relationship between *I* and *otherness*. According to him autobiography embeds a universal vocation to express the individual's identity through a divergent multiplicity. It also reflects a duality between the individual self-consciousness and the social consensus.

We have already observed how Defoe conveys a dual vision of the wor(l)d which challenges the social ethics and exposes the individual's self-determination. To apprehend his representation of identity (re)construction we have to shed the light on the strategies and implications of his autobiography. Thus, the writer expresses himself freely without any restrictions, partially on behalf of the heroine, he especially uses fiction as a cover to release his convictions.

In *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* Defoe immortalizes the vitality of narration movements that sway between different narrators and, as a result, traces the evolution of their identity (re)construction through writing. Right from the start we are invited to consider Moll and Roxana's revelations as a secret *History* narrated through a *Story* of the first person, omniscient and omnipresent narrator. Throughout their lives the two protagonists will constantly conceal their real identity. Both choose the information they deliver to us, they lie by omission and tell little to conceal a lot. They remain likable to the reader because we are under the impression that they conceal from others, but that we, readers, are their favorite confidants. As they confess their shortcomings we witness their regrets. Though, they are talkative about their emotional life, we do not have many details about their partners and husbands; not their names but a detailed list of their estate and possessions. They feign the utmost sincerity and some passages reflect their moments of abandonment which testifies the distress of the heroine or disclose her scheming mind.

The storytelling is therefore affected by the heroine's/narrator's manipulation. Both heroines act in the same manner with their readers who are expected to distinguish between their real self and their fictional self. Defoe's fluctuating tone reflects his oscillation between patriarchal conservatism and tolerance, optimism and pessimism, morality and condemnation. These deconstructive strategies of writing do not merely expose, but most importantly work within the realm of the dialectical

¹⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, Editions : Le Seuil, Paris, 1975.

relationships of his paradoxical concepts. This fluctuating tone is reminiscent of Derrida's postulate that language is a container to all human oppositions. For Derrida, no interpretation has the final word because the text is like a *Pharmakon* (in Greek means both a remedy and a poison, it cannot be determinate as fully remedy or fully poison). It is a site of overlapping and conflicting meanings. There is no correct or incorrect reading. Reading and misreading and every representation is a misrepresentation. There are two ways of deconstructing the literary text.

Moreover, the impressions reflected by the protagonist and the author's involvement with the heroine/narrator's ideals accentuate the inter-subjectivity between the real self and the fictional self. The move from a real History to a fictional Story, from past to present, from fact to fiction, elicits the writer's use of two points, two moments, two places, two beings, two universes, two demonstrations which affect the means throughout which we recognize the wor(l)d. Of this polarization we shall retain that it is necessary to scrutinize the pragmatic use of the language structures and highlight their implications. The conception of the novel shows how it develops fiction from just a tool of communication into a larger scope to (re)construct identity.

Moll's and Roxana's individual and collective self operates, above all, on/through the textual impulse of language. The misogyny, the differential treatment and oppression of women are mere factual representations of their identity which is compensated through fiction. Defoe's narratives represent a release and an identity compensation to the self. Obviously, the use of a new wor(l)d makes the individual – whether a character, a narrator or an author – expose his inner feelings and realize his/her identity (re)construction.

Defoe's physical and mental endeavors (works and social preoccupations) are likely to show that the predominant, traditional, verbal and visual representations of woman self in the English culture are not mere reflections or representations of a biologically -given "female" nature- that is natural and unchangeable. He shows that another way of life for women is possible, and he gives it voice in the characters of Roxana and Moll. He uses a female *persona* to point out the need to educate women but according to their natural capacities and social expectations. He supported women's education and wrote an essay about this issue claiming that:

I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civilized and a Christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence, while I am confident had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves. One would wonder, indeed, how it should happen that women are conversable at all, since they are only beholding to natural parts for all their knowledge. The soul is placed in the body like a rough diamond, and must be polished, or the luster of it will never appear. And 'tis manifest, that as the rational soul distinguishes us from brutes, so education carries on the distinction, and makes some less brutish than others¹⁸.

Defoe's female characters Moll and Roxana are narrators who make us share what Defoe observes in his life experience. . The purpose behind confessing their deplorable situation is to be redeemed at least in the eyes of the reader. Reporting their confessions allows them to expurgate their guilt and acquire a new identity. Besides, the retrospective voice of autobiography seems to be the best way to reflect the movement of presentation. The naive voice of the heroine changes into a mature and a conscious narrator. The two protagonists have made a clear distinction between what they were then, and what they are now. The narrator has to condemn and distances herself from the heroine she was because it is not credible for a criminal to moralize the innocent readers. Moll and Roxana have to reveal their dishonesty to prove their true identity. This also convinces us of their fictional identity as a repentant heroine (Moll) or a heroine who is conscious of her wrongdoings and just regrets (Roxana). Defoe unveils the inner feelings of his heroines, even the bitter ones. Moll, for example, wants to be a gentlewoman and likes to be courted by the wealthy men:

I was now *as above*, left loose to the World, and being still Young and Handsome, as everybody said of me, and I Assure you I thought myself so, and with a tolerable Fortune in my pocket, I put no small value myself : I was courted by several very considerable tradesmen. (*Moll Flanders*, 47)

¹⁸ Daniel Defoe "An Academy for Women". In, *An Essay upon Projects* (1967), Menston : The Scholar press, 1969. pp. 282-304.

We clearly observe the excessive use of quantifiers to describe her pretenders “several very considerable tradesmen”. Similarly, in spite of Roxana’s claim that: “To Woman ought rather to die than to prostitute her Virtue and Honour, let the Temptation be what it will” (*Roxana*, 23), the conformity to the moral convictions of society is measured through the superficial priorities which pursue one single purpose: the accumulation of money.

In fact, the morality present in Defoe’s treatises is to be found in the judgments of Moll and Roxana when they become old women. Yet, as real human beings, they unconsciously remember with delight how well they manage all their adventures; their vanity and pride espouse their ego. Through their fictional self we find them condemn their sexual behavior without making any excuses, but in their real intimate self they excuse it because of necessity. Defoe shows the discrepancy between reality and fiction. The homogenous balance between the two entities conveys a new identity to the realistic tone of the novel and its fictional tone.

Defoe’s narratives present the need for anonymity and insist upon the autobiographical dimension of the work. As we have observed above in the prefaces of both novels, the narrator warns the reader about the author’s editorial intervention: the story is Moll’s and Roxana’s, but the style and the moralizing tone are attributed to the editor. *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* need to be revisited in the light of the specific context of the early Enlightenment. Defoe’s representation of women identity (re)construction goes along with his struggle to insure the identity of the novel as a complex literary genre compared to drama and poetry. Thus, Defoe was able to transform fiction into a disguised reference to the real fact of women. His novel is realistic in its referential and justificational procedure and is a fictional prospect in its ideological ambition and innovation.

In this archetypal world the reader can perceive women’s marginalized actual self and accepts her illusive image through a fictional self that the novelist creates to her. His woman self-representation is swaying between marginalization and determination, loss and insurance, reality and expectation. Consequently, the reader will be, at the same time the object of the *make-believe* representation introduced in the two prefaces, and the accomplice of the imaginative fictional reflection:

But I leave the Readers of these things to their own just reflections, which they will be more able to make effectual than I, who so soon forget my self, and am therefore but a very indifferent Monitor. (*Moll Flanders*, pp. 4-5)

And if the Reader makes a wrong Use of the Figures, the Wickedness is his own. In the mean time, the Advantages of the present Work are so great, and the Virtuous Reader has room for so much Improvement, that we make no Question, the Story, however meanly told, will find a Passage to his best Hours; and be read both with Profit and Delight. (*Roxana*, 36)

Defoe dwells on the crucial role of the reader to perceive and discern reality from fiction. Consequently, the novel's writing and reading are intertwined. The author's undeniable originality resides in his embodiment of women's status through paradox and ambiguity. Therefore, between his fact-based journalistic tone and the pseudo-autobiography of *Moll* and *Roxana*, there was only one step that Defoe undertakes: the fictional arena.

In reality, Defoe is considered as the creator of the realistic novel, "the father of the novel" as Ian Watt calls him¹⁹. The literary genre aimed at meeting the needs of readers. The ambivalent attitudes developed in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* embody the conflict that was latent in Defoe. Throughout his life he was constantly torn between his spiritual heritage and the desire to live his life freely. If the two novels appear different in content, one ends with a fortunate status and the other with a tragic fate, they only reflect the complexity and the paradox of any human essence. Of course, Defoe was well aware of the difference between the hero and the ordinary man. Thus, the gap existing between the ideal, as expressed in his treatise *Conjugal Lewdness*, and the virtual reality of fiction explored in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* accentuates woman identity (re)construction as a reflection of the conflicting predicaments of the human soul torn between virtue and sin.

¹⁹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, University of California Press, 1957.

Defoe employs popular English (the vernacular) which bestows his readers with the same pleasure when reading the adorned language use of « *the wits* » or other genres as poetry and drama. The new identity occulted to both heroines as rebel and challenging the social conventions liberates women from the yoke of the patriarchal society and the novel from the classical decorum. Maximilian E. Novak evokes Defoe's rhetoric concerning the study of the "human nature" as a method and not as a doctrine, stating that:

From Defoe, then, words were merely the means of picturing the idea, "The thing it self", in the mind of his reader. According to Locke's theory, the idea might be made clearer by pictures or descriptions, and we think of Defoe's belief that language was a means of making things seem concrete and vivid, his adherence to realism, to facts and objects, is not surprising. But what is more important about the passage from the *Review* is his intention to use this talent for a didactic purpose – to create a fable depicting the evil which Sacheverell's sermon brought upon the nation.²⁰

Defoe claims that the novel's style is a means to preserve the interlocution *with* and the interpretation *by* the reader. In *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, the narrator sets up a dialogue between her and the "virtual reader". In *Moll Flanders*, starting from the preface, *The Relator* declares that "the penitent part" will be appreciated so much with "Brightness and Beauty" than the part which presents the criminality of the heroine. Yet, contrary to a narrator who is showing a certain confidence in his capacity to convince, the author refers to his distrust towards the reader: « (...) it's because there is not the same taste and relish in the Reading, and indeed it is too true that the difference lyes not in the real worth of the subject too much as in the Gust and Palate of the Reader » (*Moll Flanders*, p. 4). The novelist tries to defend himself against the anticipating criticism and drops the responsibility on the reader's shoulder. yet, according to Richetti: « Defoe's aggressive stance toward his reader should not be taken too

²⁰ Maximilian E. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man, op., cit.*, p. 158.

seriously, since he prided himself on his inventiveness and took pleasure in his capacity to meet challenges of this kind as both a thinker and writer »²¹.

Therefore, Defoe's intention is not limited to entertain and instruct the public. By reading *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, the reader is introduced to the fictional diction of the novel which is different from the former genres of *Romance*. The act of reading the novel, as Barthes demonstrates : « fait de la vie un destin, du souvenir un acte utile, et de la durée un temps dirigé et significatif. (...) L'acte littéraire, suprêmement ambigu, n'accouchait d'une création consacrée par la société qu'au moment où il a réussi à détruire la densité existentielle d'une durée jusqu'alors sans signification »²²

Both the ideological and stylistic ethos of the novel opens up new vistas to Defoe to give his work new strategies and endows it with new implications. The identity (re)construction struggle of Moll and Roxana echoes the novel's fight against its despised position as a literary genre. The duality between these two polarities appears as an invisible border but nevertheless existing in the fictional wor(l)d vision. Thus, the synchronic reading of Defoe's novel is conceived as a potential element that would have for purpose to describe his diachronic methods used in the literary creation. According to Genette, the novelist's creative self emanates from the following verve: « Le rôle de la personnalité créatrice y est assez affaibli pour que l'enquête critique se tourne spontanément, à leur propos, vers les goûts, les exigences, les besoins qui constituent ce que l'on nomme couramment l'attente publique »²³. The concept of Genette's "virtual reader" demonstrates that the novel allows its reader to go through the eyes of a narrator, to visit parts of the country where he/she will never go really. He invited us to read the novel not only as a fiction delving into the truth of the "human nature" but also as an orchestration of the mind's muse. The novel identity (re)construction transforms the ordinary readability of its realistic code into a more complex fictional code.

²¹ Daniel Defoe, *The Family Instructor*, In, John Richetti Ed , *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth Century Novel*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 43.

²² Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, Éditions du Seuil, 1991, p. 32.

²³ Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris, Editions Le Seuil, 1972, p. 103.a

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