



Family Disintegration in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*

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Abstract

Family disintegration causes the children to live in a constant state of turmoil, as the continuous absence of the father or the mother or both makes the children lose safety. Many studies refer to this problem as a modern problem that began to spread in societies in the modern era, and attribute it to the evolution in societies, while in his Moll Flanders (1722), the English novelist Daniel Defoe (1660 – 1731) had given a sample for such a problem, as he embarked on a mission to explore the essence of it; tracing at the same time the consequences that would later on result from it. The novelist let Moll (his protagonist) tell her own story; referring to her family background that led to her social delinquency. The study follows the analytical approach for studying the causes of the problem, stating the results reached by the research, in terms of indicating the essential role of parents in shaping the individual's personality, as well as stating the recommendations made by the researcher.

Keywords: Family disintegration; Daniel Defoe; Moll Flanders; child delinquency; female delinquency

Introduction

Undoubtedly, family relationships are the highest and most sacred relationships whose seed begins between two individuals by marriage and then grows into individuals by childbearing. The family is considered the ideal social system for children because it is the medium in which the child is brought up and receives social principles and values. It is the first school in which the child receives the lessons from which he or she will start for a larger and wider life. Nevertheless, this social system may be exposed to some problems that eventually undermine it. One of these problems is disintegration. One of the most important reasons for this social disintegration is the absence or abandonment of one of the parents, for some reason or other, from the basic roles entrusted to him or her, the matter which often leads to creating conditions for deviation of family members, especially children. From here, the study embarks to discuss this serious social problem, taking from the novel *Moll Flanders* as an example to demonstrate that it is an age-old problem, which has become increasingly prevalent in human society today. At the same time, the study attempts to explain its causes and then suggest solutions.

In his novel *Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe conveyed a picture of a socially dysfunctional family, or rather families as the novel follows the story of a girl who was born as an orphan in a prison (Newgate Prison in London) to a mother who was convicted of theft and therefore was imprisoned, and whose

husband had been absent from her, but the reasons were not mentioned. Thereby, the seeds of family disintegration had been sown in advance.

It is worth mentioning that though some critic attribute the literary title of 'the father of the English novel' to the English novelist Henry Fielding; nevertheless, others attribute it to Daniel Defoe (Bartleby, n.d., para. 1), as he "is considered to have fundamentally shaped the novel as an emerging genre of English literature" (British Library, n.d., para. 1). For his part, the critic Walter Allen believes that Defoe's "title to be considered the founder of English journalism is as great as his claim to be father of the novel" (1954, p. 38), as, according to Allen, "[w]hen, in the second decade of the eighteenth century, the novel really emerged it did so from a man to whom art and literary theory meant nothing, from a writer who was not a gentleman, but a tradesman dealing in commodities" (p. 37). Hence, "Defoe ... is often considered to be [their] first novelist" (Watt, 1966, p. 83). Not only that but also his contributions to this field of literature had opened the way to what later came to be described or to be known as the "realistic novel". In this regard, Elizabeth Drew points out that "[i]n spite of the fact that Defoe was pioneering in new territory, neither he nor the contemporary reading public seem to have been aware he was, or to have made any claim for him. By hindsight we hail him as the inventor of the first realistic novel", (1963, p. 38), which is a literary genre through which the writers began to adopt new themes that simulate real life with its real problems and real characters.



Commenting on this new trend in prose writing, Drew observes that –

[i]t was a small but a very important step when Defoe, taking advantage of all these new interests and mores, and using a gift very personal to himself, published stories about strongly individualized human beings, set in authentic contemporary environments, acting out their problems in a patterned through somewhat crude plot sequence, and using the language of ordinary speech. Very few writers have created both a new subject matter and a new form for its embodiment, but Defoe (though he seems to have been unaware of it) did both, and united the highly educated and the semieducated into a reading public for his innovations. (p. 26)

Thus, the new prose writers began little by little to move away from the romance of the seventeenth century, as the new literary tendency “perhaps ... needed such hardheaded attention to the realities of life to drag prose-narrative out of the generalized idealities of the earlier stories into the actual world of eighteenth-century living” (Bernard, 1984, p. 73), and that “the persons carrying the action became individualized: they were analysed in all their complexity, and the social pressures on them were minutely detailed” (p. 70).

In addition to Drew, Robert Barnard hails Defoe as being “[t]he great (if unconscious) pioneer of the English novel ... the author of five or six narratives that laid the foundations for the novel proper” (p. 72), whose novel *Moll Flanders* more than any other of his novels illustrates this new tendency, and in which “Defoe goes to great length to convince his readers that what he is telling in is not fiction, but a true story” (p. 73).

Moreover, through the process of searching for the answers to the questions about the writer who created the novel as a new literary form, and whether this creation is out of ‘genius’ or ‘accident’, Ian Watt in *Chapter Two* of his *The Rise of the Novel* assumes that –

the appearance of [their] first three novelists [Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding] within a single generation was probably not sheer accident, and that their geniuses could not have created the new form unless the conditions of the time had also been favourable, it attempts to discover what these favourable conditions in the literary and social situations were, and in what ways Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding were its beneficiaries. (1966, Ch. 2, p. 9)

Thus, as a highly experienced man and prolific writer, Defoe did not miss to render some of the social problems that were prevailing through his age, making from life a source of inspiration for his literary themes, and of his fiction a window or windows to look through which, to use Henry James’ expression, “over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find” (Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1908, x). So, Defoe’s

novels come to reflect the new picture of life which is distilled from his real experience and insight. In his *Moll Flanders*, he sheds the light on some of these ‘conditions of time’ that affect the ‘social situations’, which in turn affected the life of the English families and produced a group of social phenomena, especially the phenomenon of family disintegration. In it he presents a panoramic portrait of a woman, called Moll, from childhood to old age.

Materials and Methods

The study has taken from Daniel Defoe’s novel *Moll Flanders* a sample to collect and analyze textual data to examine the importance of one of the serious themes that related to man in general and to children in particular which is the theme of family disintegration. The researcher has adopted a qualitative analytical research methodology to examine the experiences of a female orphan whose family disintegration had led to her social and moral loss.

Literature Review

First published in 1722, Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* has been tackled and investigated by so many studies regarding its clearly apparent themes like Vanity, Gender and Society, Sex and Money, Poverty and Morality, Moral Disintegration, Virtue vs. Vice, Repentance vs. Vice, ... etc., which all focus on the results or outcomes of the extreme circumstances on the destiny of its heroine; yet, the underlying cause behind the deviant path taken by this heroine, who was led astray by a social problem, namely family disintegration, was not addressed. Thus, the researcher intends in this paper to tackle this theme by tracing each phase of the heroine’s journey and giving a comprehensive overview of the problem that ultimately led to her downfall; and trying at the same time to find appropriate solutions that would alleviate the impact of the problem on broken families and on children in particular.

The Journey of a Heroine Born from the Womb of Family Disintegration

The story proceeds from a first-person narrative, which “portrays neither a stable family life nor secure economic conditions” (Swaminathan 2003, p. 191), or more precisely from a real woman “Moll King, whom Defoe met when visiting Newgate Prison” (Ward, 2022, para. 3), and who chose to conceal her real identity and hide herself behind the name ‘Moll Flanders’, to eventually both came up with a novel in which the novelist as well as the real protagonist, ‘Moll’, intended to spread certain moral lessons.

In his “Preface” to the novel, Defoe explains that “[i]t is true that the original of this story is put into new words and the style of the famous lady we here speak of is a little altered; particularly she is made to tell her own tale in modester words that she told it at first” (Defoe, in Preface, in introduction to *Moll Flanders*, [1722] 1988, p. 3); pointing out that – this work is chiefly recommended to

those who know how to read it and how to make the good uses of it which the story all along recommends to them, so it is to be hoped that such

readers will be more pleased with the moral than the fable, with the application than with the relation, and with the end of the writer than with the life of the person written of. (p. 4)

Stressing further that “this book is recommended to the reader, as a work from every part of which something may be learnt, and some just and religious inference is drawn, by which the reader will have something of instruction if he pleases to make use of it” (p. 5).

The novel begins with the voice of Moll relating her own story life, exactly, from how she was born to a convicted woman for a certain theft and who was escaped from an inevitable retribution for being pregnant of being instead to be transported to the plantations in one of the colonies leaving the child ‘Moll’ to be raised “about half a year old, and in bad hands” (Defoe, 1988, *Moll*, p. 10), to use Moll’s own words who stated in her own Memorandums her miserable fate that was predetermined for her from the day she was born in Newgate prison:

[it is] enough to mention that as I was born in such an unhappy place, I had no parish to have recourse to for my nourishment in my infancy; nor can I give the least account how I was kept alive other than that, as I have been told, some relation of my mother took me away, but at whose expense, or by whose direction I know nothing at all of it. (*Moll*, p. 10)

Thus, the seeds of disintegration had been planted as early as her birth and which later on led her to prostitution, thievery, and ultimately prison. Even before beginning his preface to the novel, Defoe illustrates, in the form of a caption and by words ‘written from her own Memorandums’, the type of life his protagonist was leading. The words by which she summarized her life in segments, the life of the woman,

[w]ho was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu’d Variety for Threes-core 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 Trans- ported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv’d Honest, and died a Penitent. (Caption in introduction to *Moll*, p. 2)

Hence, Walter Allen states that “[they] might call Moll Flanders a sociological novel dealing with the making of a criminal, for the emphasis throughout is on the effect of environment on character” (1954, p. 42).

So, as the novelist illustrates, through the first phase of her life Moll was deprived of her family, as “[she] grew up with no immediate family. Her mother was a convicted felon, and her father is never named” (Kramer, 2012, p. 4), the point which Defoe himself pointed it out explicitly in his above mentioned ‘Preface’, hinting that she “even being the offspring of debauchery and vice”, (p. 3). Commenting on this absence of the father in Moll’s life, Ryan Kramer sees that

“[i]n a time period where father’s ultimately chose their daughter’s destiny, Moll chose her own” (2012, p. 4).

In addition to the parental absence, Moll suffered from the absence of a real social care which is supposed to compensate her for this parental deprivation, an issue that the protagonist, through the novelist or vice versa, condemned. Through her narration of her own story, Moll referred to the shortcomings of the social care system in her country, which would add to her suffering and the suffering of those in her condition, by giving examples of the optimal system of care she is looking for:

I have been told that in one of our neighbour nations, whether it be in France or where else I know not, they have an order from the king that when any criminal is condemned, either to die, or to the galleys, or to be transported, if they leave any children, as such are generally unprovided for by the forfeiture of their parents, so they are immediately taken into the care of the government and put into a hospital called the House of Orphans, where they are bred up, clothed, fed, taught, and when fit to go out, are placed to trades or to services, so as to be well able to provide for themselves by an honest, industrious behavior. (*Moll*, pp. 9-10)

Explaining further:

to [h]ad this been the custom in our country, I had not been left a poor desolate girl without friends, without clothes, without help or helper, as was my fate; and by which I was not only exposed to very great distresses, even before I was capable either of understanding my case or how to amend it, but brought into a course of life scandalous in itself and which in its ordinary course tended to the swift destruction both of soul and body. (*Moll*, p. 10)

Here, Moll puts her hands on the second reason for her state of family disintegration that she suffered from; pointing out her need to a ‘helper’, and if this helper is not in the form of the actual parents, at least in a form of a social law that may compensate and protect her from being lost in the unknowns of life; or even in the form of some true friends who can take care of her, as well as of those children who suffer from the same problem.

In another stage of her life, Moll was exposed to a homelessness-like situation, which she tells from the story that she can recollect, and not by hearsay, of how she “had wandered among a crew of those people they call gypsies” (*Moll*, p. 10), though, as she believes, it was not for long time as, according to her, she “had not had [her] skin discoloured, as they do to all the children they carry about with them” (*Moll*, p. 10); indicating her ignorance of how she came to be among them, or how she got from them (*Moll*, p. 10). Illustrating further of how she was found and taken by the parish officers to be put afterwards under care, Moll states:

I was now in a way to be provided for; for though I was not a parish charge upon this or that part of the

town by law, yet as my case came to be known, and that I was too young to do any work, being not above three years old, compassion moved the magistrates of the town to order some care to be taken of me, and I became one of their own as much as if I had been born in the place. (*Moll*, p. 11)

Thus, according to the arrangement they made for her, Moll was put to nurse, under the patronage of a woman who was poor, yet in better state of affairs, to take care of those poor children who are in the same situation “till they were at a certain age, in which it might be supposed they might go to service or get their own bread” (*Moll*, p. 11), an experience which, according to Moll, was somewhat of good luck to her as, “[t]his woman had also had a little school, which she kept to teach children to read and to work; and having ... lived before that in good fashion, she bred up the children she took with a great deal of art, as well as with a great deal of care” (*Moll*, p. 11); yet, according to Moll, the thing “which was worth all the rest, she bred them up very religiously also, being herself a very sober, pious woman; secondly, very housewifely and clean; and thirdly, very mannerly and with good behaviour” (*Moll*, p. 11). However, in spite of these positive aspects in which Moll grew up until the age of eight, she was in constant fear of losing her family-like stability and fear of being sent at a very young age to work as a maid. She recalls how she “was terrified with news that the magistrates (as [she thinks] they called them) had ordered that [she] should go to service” (*Moll*, p. 11), the matter which prompted Moll to beg her nurse “that if she would keep [her], [she] would work for her, and [she] would work very hard” (*Moll*, p. 12), assuring her that she will be able to earn her living relying on the skill she has learnt from her of needle working and spin worsted. In fact, what Moll fears most is not the work experience by itself as much as she fears the loss of family warmth and the loss of this “good, kind woman” (*Moll*, p. 12), this “good motherly nurse” (*Moll*, p. 12), who calmed Moll down, promised to postpone her leaving for service until she was older, and goes along with her dream to become a gentlewoman, by which Moll means “to be able to work for [herself] and get enough to keep [her] without going to service” (*Moll*, p. 14); this “old gentlewoman” whom Moll promised that she would work harder, and that her nurse would have it all if she let her stay with her (*Moll*, p. 13); the pleas that the nurse finally agreed to, yielding at the child’s request. Nevertheless, after the death of this “good motherly creature” (*Moll*, p. 13), in whom Moll sees a ‘mother’ as “[she] ought rather to call her” (*Moll*, p. 16), Moll moved unwillingly to the third phase of her shattered life, which is a natural result of family disintegration, as after the death of the old nurse, her daughter, a married woman, “came and swept it all away” (*Moll*, p. 17), as Moll puts it. Thence, this daughter got rid of the house as well as the school, leaving the 14-year-old girl and the other children to their fate, the situation that put Moll in confrontation with the wide world; stating:

I was frightened out of my wits almost, and knew not what to do; for I was, as it were, turned out-of-doors to the wideworld, and that which was still worse,

the old honest woman had two-and-twenty shillings of mine in her hand, which was all the estate the little gentlewoman had in the world; and when I asked the daughter for it, she huffed me and told me she had nothing to do with it. (*Moll*, p. 17)

A matter that brought Moll back to the state of orphanhood, homelessness, and loss, as she “had not so much as a lodging to go to or a bit of bread to eat” (*Moll*, p. 17). However, her new state led her to live with a family of one of the benefactors with whom Moll had spent a week as an invitation at their home, a year ago before the death of the old nurse. After the lady knew what had happened to Moll, she searched for her and brought her to live with them. Actually, the search for a family, and precisely for a mother, made her accept the invitation, assuring the readers that she “went with them, bag and baggage, and with a glad heart” (*Moll*, p. 18), to the extent that she no longer wants to fulfill her innocent dream of being a gentlewoman; pointing out that “[t]he fright of [her] condition had made such an impression upon [her] that [she] did not want now to be a gentlewoman, but was very willing to be a servant, and that any kind of servant they thought fit to have [her] be” (*Moll*, p. 18). Then, according to the desire of the Mayer family, which Moll had previously met during their visit to the nurse’s house, she moved to live with them, as she had known the lady, Mrs. Mayoress, and her two daughters, who were kind to her and used to laugh at her naïve dream of becoming a gentlewoman. Thus, Moll moved from one family to another. Being the product of a disjointed family, there was no difference for her in the comparison of which family is better for her, noting that “[she] could not be better than where [she] was” (*Moll*, p. 18).

However, at Mrs. Mayoress’ home, where Moll is known as ‘Mrs. Betty’, fate smiled to her, as she starts to get education, for “the lady had masters home to teach her daughters to dance[,] ... to speak French and to write, and others to teach them music” (*Moll*, p. 18). And because of her constant presence with the daughters, Moll managed to learn “by imitation and inquiry all that they learnt by instruction and direction; so that, in short, [she] learnt to dance and speak French as well as any of them and to sing much better” (*Moll*, p. 18). Thereby, at this stage of her life, she got some kind of family stability; indicating:

in all this part of my life I not only had the reputation of living in a very good family, and a family noted and respected everywhere for virtue and sobriety and for every valuable thing, but I had the character of a very too sober, modest, and virtuous young woman. (*Moll*, p. 19)

Also, pointing out that her living among a family has fortified her and kept her from “any occasion to think of anything else or to know what a temptation to wickedness meant” (*Moll*, p. 19). Thus, the protagonist as well as the novelist confirms once again the importance of a socially and even morally cohesive family on the personality and behaviour of a child or adolescent. Commenting on the importance of the early years of upbringing in building the personality of an individual in

general and of the child in particular, Aideo Laila points out that the first few years of a child's life are where he develops his personality in the future, determining how he behaves, what kind of person he wants to be, both mentally and emotionally; and that if the child is not trained, educated and brought up in a balanced manner, it leads to maladjustment, poor mental health, and anti-social behavior (2013, p. 59). Thus, as far as Moll concerned, being with such a family has somewhat compensated her for her original family and granted her the desired familial warmth. Nevertheless, soon she starts getting into troubles for the family has two sons, who, though "it was [her] misfortune to be very well with them both, but they managed themselves with [her] in a quite different manner" (*Moll*, p. 19). As for example, taking advantage of Moll's naive personality and playing on the strings of her feminine ego, the elder one "baited his hook and found easily enough the method how to lay it in [her] way" (*Moll*, p. 20), playing, "an opener game" (*Moll*, p. 20), to use Moll's own words. Recalling her memories of these attempts, Moll revealed to the readers:

[f]rom this time my head ran upon strange things, and I may truly say I was not myself, to have such a gentleman talk to me of being in love with me and of my being such a charming creature, as he told me I was. These were things I knew not how to bear; my vanity was elevated to the last degree. It is true I had my head full of pride, but, knowing nothing of the wickedness of the times, I had not one thought of my own safety or of my virtue about me. (*Moll*, p. 22)

Therefore, though indirectly, Moll, refers once again to her condition of not being armed with the basic knowledge, mainly with the patriarchal family instructions that may immunize her against the evils of the time, which lurk especially in the human beings, particularly these evils that lurk in men-folk, for she had fallen in the same dilemma that Thomas Hardy's heroine, 'Tess', fell in, who, after her misfortune with the villain Alec, had blamed her ignorant simple mother of not immunizing and telling her that "there was danger in men-folk?" (*Tess*, [1891] 1960, p. 106) Although the latter had a mother and a family to whom she can come back to, to embrace her and heal her sorrows, the situation with Moll is different, as the disintegration of the family that she had suffered from since her childhood threw her into the wind, and put her in confrontation with 'the wickedness of the times', to eventually fall into the abyss; as the absence of family and her lack of a friend, or a helper, which is an issue that Moll expressed over and over as she recounted her story, led to her downfall and to end up like any prostitute who had her own price, as the elder brother used to give her some money for his evil desires every time he is with her, to the extent that "[she] had nothing of value left to recommend [her], either to God's blessing or man's assistance" (*Moll*, p. 28), to use Moll's own words. What is worse is that the younger brother, Robert (Robin), who despite his family's disapproval, proposes to her. To make matters worse, the elder one, in order to break his promises to

her and evade her, advises her to accept his brother proposal, "and the remembrance of what [they] have done may be wrapt up in an eternal silence, as if it had never happened" (*Moll*, p. 36), as he puts it, putting her in a dreadful condition and in a situation that she feared, which is to be "a whore to one brother and a wife to the other" (*Moll*, p. 29). For fear of losing her fragile family position and "of being dropped by both of [brothers] and left alone in the world to shift for [herself]" (*Moll*, p. 51), Moll had to submit and acquiesce to the new situation, saying:

[t]hus he wrought me up, in short, to a kind of hesitation in the matter; having the dangers on one side represented in lively figures and, indeed, heightened by my imagination of being turned out to the wide world a mere cast-off whore, for it was no less, and perhaps exposed as such, with little to provide for myself, with no friend, no acquaintance in the whole world out of that town, and there I could not pretend to stay. All this terrified me to the last degree, and he took care upon all occasions to lay it home to me in the worst colours. On the other hand, he failed not to set forth the easy, prosperous life which I was going to live. (*Moll*, p. 51)

Thus, she moved into another vicious circle of family disintegration. After being manipulated with in the name of love by the elder son of the family, Moll gave her consent to the younger brother with whom she spent five years through which she had two sons by him.

It is noteworthy to note here that the Mayoress family itself reflects a state of family disintegration, although the matter is not directly raised as in the case of Moll's, where there was no family bonding in the full sense of the word, as the Mayoress family lacks the presence of the father, as "he was a man in a hurry of public affairs and getting money, seldom at home, thoughtful of the main chance" (*Moll*, p. 49). Besides, there were bickering between the sons and their sisters, especially when discussing some issues, one of these is Robin's request to marry Moll. Moreover, the elder brother, who was afraid that his relationship with Moll would be exposed and feared for his interests, did not hesitate to cheat his brother and did not scruple to hand over "his whore into his brother's arms for a wife" (*Moll*, p. 52).

However, after the death of Robert, the young woman, once again, was "left loose to the world" (*Moll*, p. 53), left with two sons to be "taken happily off [her] hands by [her] husband's father and mother" (*Moll*, p. 53). Resolving to live her life, Moll determined "to be married or nothing, and to be well married or not at all" (*Moll*, p. 54), for maybe in this step she would be able to find both family and economic stability. During the process of searching for a suitable marriage which requires her to be mingling with some men, Moll indirectly renders a scene of men who were chasing their pleasures, leaving behind wives and children who deserve their attention and money, by stating:

[i]t was indeed a subject of strange reflection to me, to see men in the most perplexed circumstances,

who were reduced some degrees below being ruined, whose families were objects of their own terror and other people's charity, yet while a penny lasted, nay, even beyond it, endeavouring to drown their sorrow in their wickedness; heaping up more guilt upon themselves, laboring to forget former things which now it was the proper time to remember, making more work for repentance, and sinning on as a remedy for sin past. (*Moll*, p. 58)

Thus, conveying in more detail pictures of disintegrated families or on their way towards disintegration due to the misbehavior of one of the parents, especially the father who wastes his money "for a lewd treat or a wicked embrace" (*Moll*, p. 58) at a time when "the honest wife ... perhaps had not a half-crown for herself and three or four children" (*Moll*, p. 58). Imagining the scene more deeply, Moll added: "and perhaps the poor weeping wife comes over to him, either brings him some account of what his creditors are doing and how she and the children are turned out of doors, or some other dreadful news" (*Moll*, p. 58); concluding,

and this adds to his self-reproaches; but when he has thought and pored on it till he is almost mad, having no principles to support him, nothing within him or above him to comfort him, but finding it all darkness on every side, he flies to the same relief again, viz., to drink it away, debauch it away, and falling into company of men in just the same condition with himself, he repeats the crime and thus he goes every day one step onward of his way to destruction. (*Moll*, pp. 58-59)

As shown above, the theme of family disintegration is emphasized again, but this time through stories and pictures of other families other than the main story of the protagonist.

Anyway, to continue following the main heroine's path, Moll finally succeeded in getting a husband. Her second husband was a linen-draper with whom she spent two years, only to leave her later fleeing from the police and the creditors because of his excessive debts. Running from her husband's debts and hiding from his creditors, Moll experienced another episode in the chain of her disjointed life as she had to leave her house and take lodgings in a private place under the name of Mrs. Flanders (*Moll*, p. 57). Contemplating her new complex family situation and emphasizing once again her lack of a friend who may compensate for the absence of parents and play the role of an advisor to support and advise her in her position, Moll states:

I was a widow bewitched, I had a husband and no husband, and I could not pretend to marry again though I knew well enough my husband would never see England any more if he lived fifty years. Thus, I say, I was limited from marriage, what offer soever might be made me; and I had not one friend to advise with in the condition I was in, least not one I durst trust the secret of my circumstances to, ... (*Moll*, p. 57)

Nevertheless, owing to live in destitute Moll, immersed more and more in the vortex of disintegration, was obliged to marry illegally, as she was not a widow nor a divorced woman, for the third time to an owner of a plantation in Virginia. And here more than anywhere else in the novel, Defoe emphasized his theme by conveying a case of family disintegration, which occurs when spouses are separated from each other for any reason, and the lineages of children are lost among them. And this is exactly what had happened to Moll, as it turned out later that Moll had married without prior knowledge to her half-brother; and that her mother-in-law is her real mother. Recalling her condition after hearing the story of her mother and of making sure that this woman is her real mother, Moll described the difficult situation she was put in against her will, saying:

I wanted much to retire and give vent to my passions; and let any one judge what must be the anguish of my mind when I came to reflect that this was certainly no more or less than my own mother, and that I had now had two children, and was big with another, by my own brother, and lay with him still every night ... I was now the most unhappy of all women in the world. (*Moll*, p. 78)

However, despite her discovery of this terrifying truth, the thing that was more important to her was family stability. In fact, the state of loss, the emotional deprivation, and family disintegration that she suffered from did not allow her to recognize the true meaning of family and the sacred familial connection between siblings to the extent that she wished she had not heard of the story and that everything would have been fine if the story had never been told to her; it had been no crime to have slept with her spouse because she had had no idea he was her relation (*Moll*, 78). Nevertheless, the horror of the bitter truth struck her like a thunderbolt so that she no longer knew what to do; especially since she was alone and without support, as she always says that she lacks a friend or a relative who could guide her on the way. Expressing her complex and insufferable situation, Moll illustrates:

I had now such a load on my mind that it kept me perpetually waking; to reveal it I could not find would be to any purpose, and yet to conceal it would be next to impossible; nay, I did not doubt but I should talk in my sleep and tell my husband of it whether I would or no. If I discovered it, the least thing I could expect was to lose my husband, for he was too nice and too honest a man to have continued my husband after he had known I had been his sister; so that I was perplexed to the last degree. (*Moll*, 78)

In the meantime, for fear of losing both the mother and the husband (her actual half-brother), Moll "lived therefore in open avowed incest and whoredom" (*Moll*, p. 79).

Eventually, after enduring the most intense strain, and after her relationship with her husband deteriorated somewhat, due to the bitter truth, Moll resolved to put an end to this relationship which was built on a disjointed foundation from

the beginning. Reflecting on her husband's (half-brother) accusations of being 'unkind wife' and 'an unnatural mother' who "could entertain such a thought without horror, as that of leaving [her] two children (for one was dead) without a mother and never to see them more" (*Moll*, pp. 80-81), Moll confirmed his accusations. She admitted that "[i]t was true, had things been right, [she] should not have done it, but now it was [her] real desire never to see them, or him either, any more" (*Moll*, p.81). As for his second accusation of being 'unnatural', Moll sets the record straight, saying: "and as to the charge of unnatural, I could easily answer it to myself, while I knew that the whole relation was unnatural in the highest degree" (*Moll*, p. 81). Thereby, she hints to the essence of the whole problem, precisely of the basis of the original problem that led and will lead to many social problems in the near future. After uncovering the case to him, yielding to his insistence on revealing the reason, the half-brother did not comprehend the horror of what he was hearing at first, to end up sad and melancholic. And though he would be well at times, nevertheless, according to Moll,

the weight of it lay too heavy upon his thoughts, and went so far that he made two attempts upon himself, and in one of them had actually strangled himself, and had not his mother come into the room in the very moment, he had died; but with the help of a Negro servant she cut him down and recovered him. (*Moll*, p. 91)

Thus, in addition to drawing another picture of a disintegrated family, though with different reasons behind its disintegration, the novelist at the same time sheds light on the harm that this problem causes to individuals and society in the short and long term.

In fact, the incident of Moll's story with her half-brother is not a fantasy that the novelist wanted by it to add some excitement to his novel, as life is filled with dozens, if not hundreds, of similar stories as a result of family disintegration. As an example, in his "Couple Discovers They're Siblings – After a Decade of Marriage", Steven B. Ockerman has mentioned similar incidents of people who have been coupled with each other, whether by marriage or intimate friendship, and then discovered later on that they are a brother and sister. One of these incidents about a couple who "recently shocked the online community when they announced the discovery that, after 10 years of marriage, they are actually brother and sister" (2023, para. 1); saying:

[w]e would like to think that what happened to this couple is a one-in-a- million occurrence. However, we did a quick internet search and it simply wasn't the case. Long-lost siblings ending up in accidental relationships happens more often than you might think. (para. 5)

Under the section "Why it's important to know your family", Ockerman illustrates that "these cases of siblings and half-siblings ending up in relationships stem from the fact that children don't know the identity of their biological parents" (para. 10), the matter that brings us back to the root of the

problem, i.e., family disintegration. Likewise, Valerie Hanley has stated in an essay another story of a young couple who "have revealed how they fell in love ..., moved in together, had a child – and then discovered they were, in fact, half-brother and sister" (2010, para. 1). But the biggest disaster is that despite these relationships are considered incest and are rejected by the law, some of these couples decide to stay together, as is the case of another couple who have fallen in the same situation, and who said that "they were stunned but vowed to stay together and have more children" (Herald online, "Couple discover they are siblings", (2010, para. 2).

However, as for Moll, she could not come to terms with her extraordinary situation. So, she resolved to depart her disintegrated family, leaving her mother, half-brother, and her two children. It is noteworthy to note here that Moll, for the second time, though reluctantly, leaves her children. Heading towards England, Moll arrived in London after a stormy voyage with a large portion of her belongings ruined. So, she travelled to Bristol to collect her missing goods, then to the Bath, with the hope that something will occur and improve her situation. There she met a woman who looked to be sensitive to her condition and was so kind as to reduce the rate of Moll's lodging in her house. Meanwhile Moll was in another process of finding a suitable husband for "[she] had no settled income" (*Moll*, p. 93), although her search process was somewhat difficult because the place is "full of snares" (*Moll*, p. 93) to use Moll's own words, for the men there were not looking for wives, but mistresses. However, while living with her landlady, Moll met a gentleman who lodged in the same house and whose wife was under the custody of some relatives due to her being mentally unstable. Finding him agreeable to her, and she to him, and with the recommendation of her cunning landlady, Moll agreed to benefit from the man financially and live with him as a friend at first. Thus, the situation continued with them as such for near two years till one day they treaded too near the brink, as "[she] exchanged the place of friend for that unmusical, harsh-sounding title of whore" (*Moll*, p. 102), and she ended up pregnant with a child. After giving birth to a boy, she lived financially prospered for some years. Nevertheless, her sense of security was incomplete, for "[she] wanted nothing but to be a wife, which, however, could not be in this case" (*Moll*, p. 104). That is why she was constantly worried about the disintegration of her already illegitimate family for "knowing well enough that such things as these do not always continue" (*Moll*, p. 104). About this point Moll says that –

men that keep mistresses often change them, grow weary of them, or jealous of the them, or something or other; and sometimes the ladies that are thus well used are not careful by a prudent conduct to preserve the esteem of their persons, or the nice article of their fidelity, and then they are justly cast off with contempt. (*Moll*, p. 104)

So, "[she] lived six years in this happy but unhappy condition" (*Moll*, p. 105), for realizing that to live "in this manner with him, and his with [her] was certainly the most undesigned thing in the world" (*Moll*, p. 104). Eventually, her

fears come true as her lover fell ill and his news were cut off from her as he was at that time live with his wife and her relatives. Though she made several attempts to contact him and wrote him letters explaining her financial need to pay the rent, and provide their baby supplies; nevertheless, her attempts failed. And at the end he abandoned her, renouncing in a letter his forbidden relationship with her and promising to take care of the child (*Moll*, p. 109), the matter that shocked her and destroyed her fragile family stability, realizing “that [she] had been no less than a whore and an adulteress all this while” (*Moll*, p. 109), and comprehending that she was not only forsaken by her original disintegrated family, but “that [she] was left as if [she] was abandoned by Heaven to a continuing in [her] wickedness” (*Moll*, p. 109). Therefore, being greatly perplexed about her new circumstances, Moll decided to forsake her son who was her first and only child to survive out of three children she had given birth to during her time living with this man; thus, drawing for her child in advance a life that might resemble her own. Thereafter, once again, Moll was left to face the world “loosed from all the obligations either of wedlock or mistress-ship in the world, except [her] husband the linen-draper” (*Moll*, p. 111) whom she no longer heard about, but this time as a woman who was almost two decades older. Besides, she was alone with no acquaintance, which was, according to her “one of [her] worst misfortunes” (*Moll*, p. 112), for perhaps the presence of loyal friends, companions, and acquaintances would compensate for her family warmth and would be her true support upon which she could rely. Illustrating how some people, especially if they are women, are in need of mentors around them, Moll states:

I had no adviser and, and above all, I had nobody to whom I could in confidence commit the secret of my circumstances to; and I found by experience that to be friendless is the worst condition, next to being in want, that a woman can be reduced to: I say a woman, because 'tis evident men can be their own advisers and their own directors, and know how to work themselves out of difficulties and into business better than women; but if a woman has no friend to communicate her affairs to and to advise and assist her, 'tis ten to one but she is undone. (*Moll*, p. 112)

Explaining further that the lack of supportive people made her “a loose, unguided creature and had no help, no assistance, [and] no guide for [her] conduct” (*Moll*, p. 112); realizing more and more the importance of family and of its cohesion. Expressing her feelings about her need for family warmth, Moll admits that she “wants to be placed in a settle state of living” (*Moll*, p. 112) and draws the type of family life that she dreams of. Expounding further, Moll adds:

Had I happened to meet with a sober, good husband, I should have been as true a wife to him as virtue itself could have formed. If I had been otherwise, the vice came in always at the door of necessity and I understood too well, by the want of it, what the value of a settled life was to do any- thing to

forfeit the felicity of it; nay, I should have made the better wife for all the difficulties I had passed through, (*Moll*, pp. 112-113)

So, heading towards a new scene of her life in an attempt to reach her goal in finding stability, as well as avoiding “the terror of approaching poverty” (*Moll*, p. 113), Moll was constantly on the move looking for a way to save her remaining amount of money. During her search, she met a person who works as a clerk and who in turn suffers a state of family disintegration. He told her that he “[has] a wife and no wife” (*Moll*, p. 118) whom he “wish her hanged” (*Moll*, p. 118), for she was a dishonest woman and who, taking advantage of his being out of England, had entered into a relationship with an officer of the army and “had had two children in the meantime” (*Moll*, p. 118), and that though he tried to maintain their family relationship, “yet she ran away from him with a linen-draper’s apprentice, robbed him of what she could come at, and continued to live from him still” (*Moll*, p. 118). That is why he asked Moll for advice of “what must a poor abused fellow do with a whore? What can [he] do to do [himself] justice upon her?” (*Moll*, p. 119) Thus here, Defoe through Moll or vice versa, gives another example of a disintegrated family only with different reasons; as here the wife’s deviance for vice, by inclination not by necessity, is responsible for this disintegration. However, trying to find a way out of this dilemma and free himself from the shackles of his disintegrated family, the clerk asks Moll to marry him, presenting her several proposals. Convinced by his last suggestion, Moll gave her consent and, though reluctantly, agreed “that [she] would sign and seal a contract with him, conditioning to marry him as soon as the divorce was obtained, and to be void if he could not get it” (*Moll*, p. 123). Meanwhile, Moll continued her wandering journey in life, by going to Lancashire with her friend, a north-country woman with whom she lodged while was in London, and who later on introduced Moll to her brother, thinking that Moll had great wealth. Courted by the woman’s brother and swallowing the bait that the alleged brother had a wealth, Moll agreed to be married to the this man who is ranked the fifth among her husbands, whether legitimate or illegitimate, disregarding at the same time her promises to the clerk who was attempting to free himself from a scandalous wife and promised himself unlimited satisfaction in his new option, (*Moll*), who “was now giving up herself to another in a manner almost as scandalous” (*Moll*, p. 126), as his wife might be. However, after about two months of her marriage, things began to unfold for Moll as well as for her new husband, who turned out to have been deceived by the same lie. Also, she discovered that the woman was not his sister, but in fact she was his mistress for two years before. Shocked by the truth and unwilling to continue with this marriage, which was built on deception, James, or ‘Jemmy’ decided to put an end to it and abandoned Moll, leaving her a letter explaining in it his regret. Nevertheless, he soon returned to her explaining his love and his inability to stay away from her. Although they resumed their family life, they differed in opinion about finding a lifestyle that would guarantee them a decent living. Hence, after agreement on how to communicate with each

other, they decided to separate, each following his project in an attempt to find a successful project that would bring them together. So, he headed towards Ireland; meanwhile she waited in London, and if he failed, they would try her project in Virginia.

Though Moll discovered that she was pregnant with James' child, she preserved her correspondence with the banker, because she did not want to lose him, the matter that reflects her lack of the meaning of family, and that her fear of want and poverty has overcome her devotion to her marital relationship. What is more dangerous and strange in her behaviour is that she "resolved to have him if he continued in the same mind as soon as [she] was up again; for [she] saw [...] apparently [, she] should hear no more from [her] husband" (Moll, p. 140). Meanwhile Moll's new circumstances had called her to meet a woman, who manages the affairs of unmarried mothers, and who later on became her friend, her guide, her governess, and the keeper of her secrets to whom Moll decided to unbosom herself about her dilemma and confusion between an absent husband she knows nothing about and an offer of marriage from the banker. And because she did not have a proper family upbringing and did not understand the meaning of the sacred family bond, Moll listened "by the help of [her] own inclination" (Moll, p. 151) to her new 'governess' who without any moral or religious deterrent, as is the case of any woman who lives in an immoral environment that does not respect family standards, advised and convinced Moll that her marriage "was no marriage but a cheat on both sides, and that as [they] were parted by mutual consent, the nature of the contract was destroyed" (Moll, p. 151). As for exposing the issue of the boy that Moll had given birth to, this governess, whom Moll started to call her as 'mother', advised her to give him to strangers, the issue which was a terrifying obsession for Moll who wished that "those women who consent to the disposing their children out of the way, as it is called for decency sake, would consider that 'tis only a contrived method for murder, that is to say, killing their children with safety" (Moll, p. 152). Arguing further, she states:

[i]t is manifest to all that understand anything of children that we are born into the world helpless and incapable either to supply our own wants or so much as make them known, and that without help we must perish; and this help requires not only an assisting hand, whether of the mother or somebody else, but there are two things necessary in that assisting hand, that is, care and skill; without both which, half the children that are born would die, nay, though they were not to be denied food, and one-half more of those that remained would be cripples or fools, lose their limbs and perhaps their sense. (Moll, p. 152)

Indicating further that she,

[questions] not but that these are partly the reasons why affection was placed by nature in the hearts of mothers to their children; without which they would never be able to give themselves up, as 'tis

necessary they should, to the care and waking pains needful to the support of their children. (Moll, p. 152)

Taking from her experience as a child who had suffered family deprivation due to the disintegration of her family, Moll concluded:

[s]ince this care is needful to the life of children, to neglect them is to murder them; again, to give them up to be managed by those people who have none of that needful affection placed by nature in them is to neglect them in the highest degree; nay, in some it goes farther, and is in order to their being lost; so that 'tis an intentional murder, whether the child lives or dies. (Moll, p. 152)

In fact, Moll's craving for maternal care was revealed through her sad feelings when the governess, denouncing Moll's fear for her newborn that he would not find the required affection, asked her "if [she] was sure that [she] was nursed by [her] own mother" (Moll, p. 153), to the extent that the sheer expression made Moll shiver and turn pale, trying at the same time to convince herself that "this creature cannot be a witch or have any conversation with a spirit that can inform her what [Moll] was before [she] was able to know it [herself]" (Moll, p. 153). Hence, the novelist, through his protagonist, once again emphasizes the role of family, which is centered here in the presence of the mother as one of the two basic pillars on which the family is built and settled, in the life of children.

After she got rid of her baby, she married 'her gentleman', the banker, with whom she hopes to build a healthy family relationship, determining that "if [she] must be his wife, if it please God to give [her] grace, [she]'ll be a true wife to him and love him suitably to the strange excess of his passion for [her]; [she] will make him amends ... for the abuses [she] put upon him, which he does not see" (Moll, p. 160); contemplating "[h]ow happy had it been if [she] had been wife to a man of so much honesty and so much affection from the beginning!" (Moll, p. 159) Nevertheless, her felicity did not last, as after five years of living with ease and content with her husband, with whom she had had two children, "a sudden blow from an almost invisible hand blasted all [her] happiness and turned [her] out into the world in a condition the reverse of all that had been before it" (Moll, p. 165), for her husband died due to a huge financial loss. As a result, she was once again "left perfectly friendless and helpless" (Moll, p. 166); thus she lived for two years in a distress as "[she] had no assistant, no friend to comfort or advise [her]" (Moll, p. 166), the matter that prompted her to sell her house and most of her goods; and for fear of approaching misery and want, she turned up into a thief who, with the help of her old governess who for the time being works as a pawnbroker, turned into a dexterous, i.e., a "complete thief, hardened to the pitch above all the reflections of conscience or modesty" (Moll, p. 177). Though she was able to earn her living honestly as "[she] was not at a loss to handle [her] needle" (Moll, p. 177), yet she "knew not what course to take" (Moll,

p. 176), and maybe, according to her “it was very probable [she] might have got [her] bread honestly enough” (*Moll*, p. 177), “[but her] fate was otherwise determined” (*Moll*, p. 178); first by being a child who belongs to a disintegrated family, a child of a convicted mother and unknown father; a child who was left with a foster mother; a child that tramped with gypsies, and then raised by several families. Second, as an adult woman, she became a mistress; a wife for five times; and a lost woman for whom a procuress and pawnbroker becomes a ‘mother’, a dexterous thief becomes a ‘comrade’ and a ‘teacher’, and a highwayman becomes one of her husbands, to end up eventually in prison, precisely in Newgate Prison, “the place of [her] unhappy birth and of [her] mother’s misfortunes” (*Moll*, p. 179).

Thus, with this kind of life, Moll certainly will be led, as Defoe illustrated through the course of the novel, to fall into the snares of life, such as falling into the clutches of bad company, or wicked creatures, just exactly like her old governess, her tempter, whom, in turn, seems that she had suffered from a sort of family disintegration, because also, owing to “falling into another sort of company, she turned midwife and procuress and played a hundred pranks” (*Moll*, pp. 186–187), as she shared a little of her history with Moll. For this reason Moll states: “I mention thus much of the history of this woman ..., the better to account for the concern she had in the wicked life I was now leading” (*Moll*, p. 187). Here Defoe indirectly points out how family disintegration led someone to have bad companions, the matter that his protagonist repeatedly mentioned and assured more than once that her lack of a refuge (as a result of family disintegration), a friend, and a trusted person made her fall into the clutches of this woman, as she assures “I had no recourse, no friend, no confidante but my old governess, and I knew no remedy but to put my life in her hands” (*Moll*, p. 192), which is a state that is attributed to the ‘Lack of Identity [a]nd Direction’, and which is one of the many effects of parental absence on children, as, according to Tabitha Mwai: [w]ithout understanding who you really are, you are more likely to follow the crowd and allow anyone with the slightest bit of interest of you into your life” (“Parental Absence ...”, section: ‘General Effects of Parental Absence’, 2018, para. 6). Around this dilemma in Moll’s life, Susan Patricia Tym McGarr in a study, in which she discusses the ‘Deficient Motherhood’ in some of the English Novels, attributed this deficiency, when compared to the high criteria of maternal excellence, to:

[e]ither the mother fails because she does not exhibit the appropriate maternal sentiments that would propel her to perform the duties of the ideal mother, or she is absent and forced to leave the mothering of her child to others. These others – substitute mothers – are also deficient in some way. (2008, para. 2)

Also, Tina Jakobsson in her study of ‘The Defense Mechanisms of Moll Flanders’ observes that “Moll Flanders’s childhood created mental and emotional patterns that would come to shape her personality and affect her behavior” (2020, p. 2); indicating further that “the ordeal of being handed from

one caretaker to another and not experiencing proper stability would have had negative effects on any child” (p. 21).

In fact, the issue of family disintegration and its close relationship with the delinquency of children and juveniles into the world of crime has been covered by many academic and psychological studies. As an example, a psychological study has registered that Juveniles from “broken homes” are more likely than those from intact families to become delinquents (Rebellion, 2002, 103 – 136); and around the same problem Stacey J. Bosick and Paula Fomby (2018) indicate that “[t]he structure and stability of families have long stood as key predictors of juvenile delinquency” (‘Abstract’, para. 1). In another body of research, researchers have examined the relationship between family disintegration and delinquent behaviour, as in the study that is conducted by Hadi Saleh Muhammad and Saba Hassan Abdel Ali, in which they find out that –

[t]here is a group of dysfunctional Factors that affect the family system, causing it to lose its influential and effective role in society. At the forefront of these factors is family disintegration, whether resulting from the death of one or both parents, divorce or separation, or whether resulting from family weakness and bad family behavioral practices. This weakens the family fabric, and often leaves devastating effects on children, including homelessness, begging, or delinquency. (p. 645, [The researcher’s translation])

And this is exactly consistent with what had been dealt with in one of Defoe themes in *Moll Flanders*, as the family disintegration of his protagonist contributed to her delinquency.

Thus, as the novel illustrates, Moll was heading towards her inevitable end, which is the end of most people like her, a matter that is confirmed by her, as she states: “[i]t seemed to me that I was hurried on by an inevitable fate to this day of misery, and that now I was to expiate all my offences at the gallows” (*Moll*, p. 240). Thereby, and as one of the Arab saying goes that “you cannot tempt providence and always triumph” (‘FOOD FOR SPIRIT’, 2010, p. 8), Moll was caught at last and sent to the place from which she began her journey of disintegration and which she described as follows:

[t]hat horrid place! ... the place where so many of my comrades had been locked up and from whence they went to the fatal tree; the place where my mother suffered so deeply, where I whence I expected no redemption but by an infamous death—to conclude, the place that had so long expected me, and which with so much art and success I had so long avoided. (*Moll*, p. 240)

Nevertheless, she manages to have her sentences reduced with her Lancashire husband whom she met in the same prison and both are transported to one of the colonies, and from there return to England to live out the rest of their days in harmony and prosperity after meeting her son whom she had with her

half-brother, who in turn handed her the inheritance that her mother had left her.

Thus, 'the moral' behind her story and behind the novel as a whole is, and as Moll states: "indeed, of all my history is left to be gathered by the senses and judgment of the reader; I am not qualified to preach to them. Let the experience of one creature completely wicked and completely miserable be a storehouse of useful warning to those that read" (*Moll*, p. 236). Hence, Rafaela Culuchi Benfica, observes that "the novel encompasses more than it purports to convey" (2024, para. 3). Finally, and to put it briefly, the history which is retold by Moll to explain though indirectly what had happened to her, and which is intentionally invested by the novelist, is to serve the theme of family disintegration.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the novel of *Moll Flanders* constitutes a comprehensive study of a serious social problem which is family disintegration. Although some consider this problem to be as a modern phenomenon and attribute it to the development and complexity of societies, the study shows that it was a prevailing social problem as well. In it the novelist takes the role of a sociologist who tackles the problem in terms of children's behavioral deviations due to their loss of either one or both of their parents, because of the death or divorce or some other reasons.

Through his presentation of the problem, Defoe reflects how such children were left dispersed and left to be responsible for supporting themselves, no matter what they would be exposed to, the matter that would end with most of them deviating from the right path, in addition to their inability to build cohesive families. Hence, the study through this novel raises awareness of this social problem and its implications on society as a whole.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary victim in all family problems and bad marriages in different societies are the children, who bear the consequences of the wrong actions done by either parent, especially given that they are the weaker party. Thus the study recommends the followings:

- Do not separate the child from his family, regardless of their circumstances.
- Preparing institutions to accommodate this problem by caring for children who lose their parents, for some reason or other, and protecting them from delinquency.
- Providing reform associations that undertake to raise awareness and help family members to face various family problems and crises by educating families about obtaining advice from psychologists to talk about the problems they face; besides, raising their awareness about the need to maintain family communication by maintaining dialogue and mutual respect which in turn helps to maintain family cohesion.

- To protect lineage, the legal system must not obscure the true identity of orphans or children adopted by other families to avoid incest cases, an example of which is given in the novel in question, and which occur repeatedly in such cases.
- The social care system in any country must work to provide a job or work that would provide a source of livelihood for orphaned children after they reach adulthood.

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