

Compare and contrast the importance of female morality in Daniel Defoe's 1722 novel Moll Flanders and Middlemarch by George Eliot, 1871. Examine the view that church, state and "men make the moral code and they expect women to accept it." (3) Emmeline Pankhurst

Throughout Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), female morality and its cultural importance in dictating the behaviour of the characters is a major theme which features continually. Emmeline Pankhurst's statement "men make the moral code and they expect women to accept it" (3) also plays a relevant role in both texts and expresses a historic social standard for women; unchanging between these periods. Whether it is conveyed through religious influence, class stratification or male power in business and marriage, the rigid female moral code described in both novels has been created by these factors. Although writing a hundred years apart, Defoe's and Eliot's description of women's moral behaviour and position in society is surprisingly consistent, but the characters they use to describe moral aspects of life are very different. It could be argued both authors allow their protagonists, Moll and Dorothea, to attempt to escape society's expectation of female behaviour but they choose to introduce the struggle of female morality in contrasting manners.

From the beginning of *Middlemarch*, religious vigour and moral virtues are deeply rooted in the character of Dorothea and influence her conduct in many ways. She is initially shown to have "a pure beauty supported by her plain dressing and garments" perhaps resembling "the Blessed Virgin" (4). Dorothea often attempts to express puritan ideals of self-sacrifice and devotion through her behaviour. The quotation "'a cross is the last thing I should wear as a trinket.' Dorothea shuddered slightly." demonstrates a practised disdain for anything trivial and Eliot uses the verb "shuddered" to create a physical repulsion for perceived immoral behaviour. The evangelical movement strongly influenced Eliot's presentation of Dorothea. Religious stricture played a vital role in Victorian England and was a constant throughout new industrialised cities. Many churches held on to puritan beliefs and "there was a trend towards religious respectability" (4). For a woman of Dorothea's class, religious respectability was essential, however Eliot often mocks her hypocritical behaviour. The quotation "trying to justify her delight ...by merging them in her mystic religious joy" expresses Dorothea's same shallow desire for the jewellery as her sister Celia but Eliot criticises Dorothea's need to "justify" human emotion in order to be seen as devout and pious by others. Critics have argued that the contrast between Celia's down-to-earth behaviour and the aloof attitude of Dorothea alludes to Jonathan Swift's character Celia, meaning "sky" (7), in his 1732 poem "The Lady's Dressing Room". He satirizes how women hide their "physical humanity" (7) to appear angelic and ethereal and Eliot uses Celia's grounded nature to highlight Dorothea's fascination with spiritual concerns.

In contrast to Dorothea's religious roots, Moll Flanders in Daniel Defoe's novel 150 years earlier initially appears to have little faith in God. The author expresses an unguarded and frank insight into the struggles of a woman far from religious innocence. Defoe demonstrates her faults in the quotation "knew not how to bear; my vanity" and shows how her weaknesses lead to immoral behaviour. He uses uncompromising and shocking language in the quotation "threw me on the bed...he went further than decency permits me to mention" and Moll's unmarried state increases the immorality of her actions. She is shown to dismiss the moral and religious code and for a contemporary reader, her actions are scandalous but Defoe also forces the reader to be more sympathetic to her misfortunes. Defoe "was always very tolerant of others" (11) and believed in "religious freedom and political freedom" (11) but was, himself "a good puritan at the same time" (11) and this understanding attitude is demonstrated through Moll's sins and imperfections. From her birth in Newgate Prison, the reader is exposed to the hardships she will face. Contextually, it was common that "Pregnant prostitutes might be chased from parish to parish since the authorities would not want to have to take charge of the unwanted infant" (23) and Moll's position allowed little

support from the church. Her “mother pleaded her belly, and being found quick with child” but was still placed in prison with no true care for her daughter. Due to lack of support, it could be argued that Moll cannot be blamed for her lack of morality as she had no example to follow and therefore Defoe criticises Christianity. On the one hand, her disregard for the accepted standards has obvious disadvantages both social and spiritual. However, it also allows her a sense of freedom which other women from a different class could never hope to achieve due to the religious dictation of behaviour. Even though depicted as “fallen from social standard”⁽¹³⁾, Moll is shown to enjoy this life with all her flaws. Defoe’s lighter and humorous tone shown in the quotation “liberty and all the opportunity to be gay” not only entertains but reminds the reader not to dismiss criminals for their sins but to realise they are human. Although her behaviour is outrageous and moral practices doubtful, Dr Beth Swan, in her analysis of Moll Flanders, explains “We're forced to see her as an individual, to learn what life is like ... born to be an outsider by virtue of birth and poverty. We have to recognise her as a person, who suffers and triumphs, loves and loses, a person with fundamental good qualities but capable of moral weakness, someone rather like us in some ways.”⁽¹³⁾ Moll understands “there are temptations which it is not in the power of human nature to resist”⁽¹⁾ and Defoe creates her to comically enjoy her “triumphs”⁽¹³⁾ and flaws. She refuses to let moral principles hinder her successful life as a prostitute and thief and although the reader criticises her decisions at the beginning of the novel, a sense of understanding is gradually achieved and the portrayal of Moll changes.

Throughout Middlemarch, the depiction of Dorothea also changes and there is a clear internal movement in her from superficial adoration to an understanding of real human needs. Lydgate’s financial and moral issues are treated by Dorothea with kindness and compassion in the quotation “to your friends we believe in your future, your power to do great things”. Earlier in the novel Dorothea did not view Lydgate’s problems as important and her grander moral issues ranked far superior. Eliot allows Dorothea to break away from the moral obligations of her class and generously gives “much money...took some of it every year” to support her friend. Dorothea “believes” in Lydgate and does not reprimand him for his mistakes unlike the punishing contemporary views preached by the church. Although George Eliot was a “devout Christian in her youth”⁽⁵⁾, her views on the church adapted over time. In Rosemary Ashton’s introduction, she looks at Eliot’s historical approach to the bible and the influence of her friends known as the “freethinkers”⁽²⁾. Contextually, the Victorian era was one of questioning old beliefs and “scientific advances such as Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution made it more difficult for many educated people to accept the literal truth of the Bible.”⁽⁶⁾

Ashton describes how in Eliot’s translation of “the Essence of Christianity” from German in 1854 Feuerbach “examines the psychology of Christian faith”⁽²⁾ and concludes that “Christianity is the essence of human feeling projected on to an imagined God”⁽²⁾. Eliot illustrates how the sanctity of human relationships is as important as the connection between man and God. Dorothea’s change in behaviour from the “false belief in virtues of misery” to “self-forgetful ardour” perhaps represents Eliot’s rejection of puritan values and ideals of female morality. The various moral deeds of the female characters valued by the reader are not due to a higher power but a humane belief in helping and supporting others. Pamela Erens from the Paris Review claims that “Eliot makes it clear that Dorothea is no saint but rather a morally immature young woman”⁽¹⁷⁾ and her development from naive to experienced is a moral teaching to the reader to be realistic and kind, to become “psychologically complete”⁽¹⁷⁾. Perhaps Eliot took inspiration from Jane Eyre, written 24 years earlier by Charlotte Brontë, as Jane also experiences a moral journey and achieves an inner balance.

By the end of the novel, Moll receives forgiveness from God and although contrasting with Eliot’s teachings on humanity, both authors allow their protagonists to adapt when they achieve a fuller understanding of Christianity. Moll found “I neither had the heart to ask God’s mercy, or indeed to think of it ...the completest misery on earth,” and for the first time, Defoe presents Moll as

regretful and religious. In prison, she begins to look back on her life's decisions and "I began to say my prayers, which I had scarce done". Some argue that her repentance is "shallow"⁽¹⁾ as she is too old to benefit further from illegal activity but nevertheless, her reflections make the reader question and analyse their own morality. In this way, religion has a strong impact on the portrayal of female morality; both positive and negative. For Moll, she achieves a stronger religious affinity. The original title page created by Defoe further reveals his religious message. Moll's immoral acts are depicted here "wife...thief...felon"⁽⁸⁾ and although uncompromising and shocking to a contemporary reader, the concluding statement "grew rich, lived honest and died a penitent" demonstrates a psychological completeness achieved through religious moral behaviour. This is similarly demonstrated in the portrayal of Dorothea as "I have a belief of my own, and it comforts me...That by desiring what is perfectly good... we are part of the divine power against evil". Religious "belief" is deeply fulfilling to both Moll and Dorothea which is a view typical of their period.

However, George Eliot also demonstrates the danger of obsessive self-sacrifice through the matrimony of Dorothea and Casaubon. Her desire to meet religious expectations and sacrifice emotional satisfaction ends disastrously. Eliot allows Dorothea to suffer to not only present the foolishness of her religious ideal, but also to highlight the terrible marital position many women of her class faced. Matrimony was regarded by the gentry as a business deal to maintain wealth and title, however once married, any property became the possession of the husband. Women had very few rights and their husbands made the "moral code and they expect women to accept it"⁽³⁾ (Emmeline Pankhurst). Dorothea and Casaubon's case exemplifies the aristocratic morality: "as Mrs Casaubon, she is bent to her husband's wishes and prejudices...she has no property on her property." The verb "bent" suggests how Dorothea has had to adapt against her will and not only does she have no control "on her property" but must further serve her husband even without his affection. The quotation "How can I have a husband who is so much above me...he needs me less than I need him" maybe expresses the cold serious nature of marriage in the 19th century where neither partner emotionally benefits. It is clear Casaubon does not want an affectionate relationship with his wife but expects her loyalty, "love and comfort"⁽²²⁾ on his terms. Dorothea must remain faithful to her husband as a "figure of purity".⁽²²⁾

Throughout his life, he controls her and limits her personal development as he believes "women are too light of mind not to find 'classics, mathematics that kind of thing' too taxing." Perhaps this is due to the fear that she will supersede his success and improve on his research and although unfair, society obliges Dorothea to conform. Even when Dorothea uncovers that all Casaubon's studies are "labour all in vain," she "still has sympathy towards her husband." This highlights her "strong sense of duty". In the Victorian era, duty and morality are synonymous and the Saturday Review critically assessed "If Middlemarch is melancholy, it is due perhaps to its religion being all duty, without ...hope." In this way, perhaps Eliot depicts religion as being penitence and "duty" driven rather than a joyous celebration and emotionally fulfilling.

While Eliot does demonstrate the male influence on female morality and duty, she also alludes to female independence. In the structure of the novel, Eliot begins each chapter with a profound and philosophical moral teaching or complex reflection covering German, Latin, French and Spanish for example "pues no podemos haber que queremos, queremos aquello que podremos." Such quotations including "because we cannot get what we like, we must like what we can get" emphasise to the reader the erudition and education of the author. From the biography by Rosemary Ashton, Eliot's indictment of the male control in morality is inspired by her own encounters. Herbert Spencer "...whom she nearly married only he found her too morbidly intelligent"⁽²⁾ bears similarities to Casaubon and he shares the expectation that women should be quiet, meek and foolish; intelligence is "morbid"⁽²⁾ and immoral. These views and stereotypes were so influential at this time that in order to be taken seriously as a novelist, Mary Ann Evans wrote under the pen name of George Eliot. She further rewarded female intellect through her characters and according to Hutton "Her heroines are not merely lovers of men or objects of their adoration, as

in the previous novelists [perhaps such as Defoe]; they are women of intellect and feeling, capable of taking their share in the progress of society.”⁽¹²⁾ It could be argued that Eliot reflects her own development, intelligence and views through the character of Dorothea. She employs sly humour in Dorothea’s didactic tone and insightful teachings to emphasise her views on female morality. To a modern audience, it may be difficult to relate to Dorothea’s strong Christian values. However, Eliot’s affectionate teasing connects the reader with Dorothea’s desire for moral and intellectual independence.

As a comparison, Eliot also demonstrates the immorality of men in these cases: “Mr. Bulstrode’s illegal ways... Mr. Featherstone’s illegitimate child, Mr. Vincy’s indifference to his children.”⁽¹²⁾ The hypocrisy and concealed pasts of these characters make them morally inferior to their female counterparts and perhaps Eliot utilises her power as the author to criticise men who misuse their social standing. Featherstone, for example, manipulates people with money and power to achieve his own aims. Casaubon tries, after his death, to punish Dorothea with his money and prevent her remarrying. Even Celia’s husband aims to condemn Dorothea’s happiness and believes emphatically “there was something repulsive in a woman’s second marriage.” Although customary for a woman to marry again, Sir James believes it is an immoral act and pities her decision; “a feeling of desecration for Dorothea”. Eliot’s powerful use of the adjective “repulsive” highlights to the reader the importance of female morality and conforming to social standards in the respectability of her whole family. Some argue that Eliot depicts “female characters as victims of a male dominated system”⁽¹²⁾ but *Middlemarch* has also been dismissed as an anti-feminist text as Eliot appears to accept the limits of society and its expectation for women to behave morally and men immorally. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue further that “Eliot internalizes the patriarchal culture’s definition of women and thus resists identification with her own sex”⁽¹⁶⁾. In part, her characters do have to “internalise patriarchal...definition of women”⁽¹⁶⁾ to be accepted, as suggested by Gubar, but it is clear that Eliot supports her protagonist’s development and female “identification”. While the female characters are not free from society’s restrictions, and Eliot conforms to the ideas that female respectability depends on marriage, Eliot ensures that “women triumph inwardly,”⁽¹⁶⁾ instead. She ironically places the immoral male characters in minor roles and refers to them only through the association of her female protagonists, who achieve success in their own right. Contemporary readers would have been shocked “by the new perceptions of man and universe that are alien to their own”⁽¹⁵⁾. These modern ideas would have been difficult for male readers to accept and they may have disapproved of the negative portrayal of male characters.

This theme of moral independence and rebellion against a patriarchal society can also be found in *Moll Flanders*. Moll’s first scandal was her marriage to her lover’s brother. Firstly, the immorality of a relationship outside of marriage would be shocking enough to a contemporary reader. However, Defoe further establishes Moll’s immorality in her casual indifference to deceit shown by the quotation “I was not obliged to tell him that I was his brother’s whore”. The uncompromising language in “brother’s whore” establishes Moll’s hard attitude to love depicted throughout the novel and her desire for money and marriage. While her decisions were radical and had negative consequences, Defoe gives her moral choices. The quotation “As low as I was in the world... I should despise a man that should think I ought to take him on his own recommendation” expresses how she accepts her mistakes, acknowledges her position but knows her own mind and cannot be persuaded by others. She does not allow men to control her moral or immoral behaviour and in this way, she is courageous and not restricted by the social situation of that time. Perhaps Defoe conveys some modern feminist values regarding emotional independence through Moll’s control of her own body but it is difficult to overlook the crimes she committed.

Through Moll’s various experiences in adulterous and incestuous relationships, Defoe explores aspects of the law appealing to a contemporary reader from both a moral and legal standpoint. When her husband left for France, communication would have been almost impossible and although in the eyes of the law she had a moral obligation to him, unsupported and financially unstable, it

would not have been uncommon for women in her position to remarry without a legal divorce. She was to some extent “a widow bewitched... I had a husband and no husband” and as a widow she exploits her position to gain advantage. Moll’s other mistakes in matrimony include her accidental marriage to her brother shown in the quotation “I was not your lawful wife and our children were not legal children... that I am your own sister.” Whilst Moll’s adventures are highly unrealistic and the fluid and unstructured nature of the text supports the scandalous escapades, it is interesting that Defoe does not strongly condemn Moll. Dr Beth Swan maintains that “Moll has committed, sometimes deliberately and sometimes not, several very serious offences in terms of moral and secular law...cohabitation and having numerous partners simply wasn't an option for a woman unless she was a prostitute,”⁽¹³⁾ and contextually it would have been difficult for the reader. Defoe however, rather than depicting her as an angel or “whore” provides a rounded view of a woman with a realism which often can be misunderstood today. She is likeable and relatable to a modern audience and perhaps a humorous and engaging character for contemporary readers. Standards of morality need not be dictated by the male characters and Defoe’s criticism is instead of the society she lives in. Critics, such as Mitchell state that prostitution for Moll is a trade and the “only form of capitalism easily open to women of the time”⁽¹³⁾. From a sympathetic modern perspective, it is true as Mitchell suggests, that there was little alternative for her decisions and Holzner comments from a feminist viewpoint that “In Moll Flanders, Moll Flanders was merely a victim of the male centric society. She was driven by all the forces of the world to pursue the immoral things.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Without a doubt she is materialistic when it comes to men and marriage but she must be respected for a pragmatic and realistic approach to survival regardless of a moral viewpoint. However, what Defoe strongly criticises is her enjoyment in exploiting her male partners and her shameless dishonesty. She marries many times, however at the heart of her marriage is an immoral greed and Defoe ensures this never makes her happy. Much like Rosamond in Middlemarch, marriage is viewed by Moll as a business deal to increase income as she states “we were married and very happily...but his circumstances were not so good as I imagined”. London’s rapidly changing economic and social climate in the 18th century shaped Moll’s views on class, financial gain and marriage⁽²⁰⁾. Sarah Damewood, a modern English student, describes that for Moll, the “biggest asset is herself”⁽²¹⁾ and her desire to achieve success is often at the expense of her moral values. She uses her feminine qualities to her advantage and even views her “children in economic terms”.⁽⁹⁾ The quotation “two children... taken happily off my hand” demonstrates the little value she places in emotional and human connection, perhaps reflecting the society she lives in. She “happily rejoices in the lack of responsibility”. According to Damewood, Moll “believes she is worth something”⁽²¹⁾ which stimulates her desire for financial independence and she does not seek acceptance from the reader. Whether the reader criticises or supports Moll’s determination, without a doubt, her class and social position have played a role in her morality and behaviour.

It is clear to the reader that Dorothea’s rebellion against social expectation is dramatically different to Moll’s disregard of moral obligations, however the influence of class undoubtedly plays a large role in female morality. Eliot represents the “three social classes of Victorian society through her female characters - gentry, middle class, and working class. She details the moral values of society and demonstrates how ‘Dorothea, Mary and Rosamond are... the product of their classes.’”⁽¹²⁾ Rosemary Ashton describes “In the town of Middlemarch, people are classified in accordance with their material lives, which in turn affect their spiritual lives.”⁽²⁾ This self-absorbed attitude is portrayed in the character of Rosamond. She relies so heavily on her image that “Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts ... she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.” Eliot’s indictment of the Victorian education system is clear as Rosamond only “acted” what was expected of her. This “frivolous kind of schooling society tolerated even demanded for women”⁽²⁾ focused little on substantial values or morality and therefore she, like Moll, cannot fully be blamed for her selfish and egoistical attitude. She was taught to value beauty and a

“fortunate” marriage, so it is not surprising that she is “immature”⁽¹⁰⁾, requires constant attention and has little empathy for others. The quotation “if I had known how Lydgate would behave, I would never have married him...I had innocently married this man with the belief that he and his family were glory to me!” shows little sympathy for her husband’s debt. Instead of supporting him, she pities her own position and thereby Eliot emphasises that she is an artificial creation of the education system.

Conversely, Mary comes from a modest working class family and disregards the graces and conventions the middle classes cherish. As she has no money to depend on, her moral integrity is much more important and Eliot supports Mary’s virtues which Rosamond lacks; honesty, compassion and realistic expectations. She juxtaposes both Rosamond and Dorothea as “she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behalf, and when she was in a good mood she had humour enough in her to laugh at herself.” The word “illusions” perhaps references Rosamond’s idealistic dreams of money, marriage and comfort but it is Mary’s, “ability to laugh at herself” which makes her a more relatable and likeable character. By creating such strong female roles from each class, Eliot not only shows the effect social context has on their perception of morality and the importance of it but also infers that the women achieve a form of moral superiority regardless of society’s expectations.

These moral freedoms are not always obvious and can be difficult to appreciate from a modern viewpoint. George Eliot’s writings have been criticised by Virginia Woolf as “the fates of Eliot’s heroes ‘end in tragedy or in a compromise that is even more melancholy’”.⁽¹⁴⁾ Although in her personal life she achieved happiness atypical of social norms and lived with the married philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes, her writing is nevertheless restricted by her historical context. It could be said that she does “compromise”⁽¹⁴⁾ by writing a happily married ending for Dorothea but there is a sense of affection for her character and a desire for her to be happy. Her marriage to Ladislav is one of equals; both in spirit and “mutual understanding”⁽⁷⁾. Eliot knows the social limits placed on her and as Ringler further implies, her message to the reader is to inspire realistic moral “feminine aspirations in the real world of men”.⁽¹⁴⁾

In conclusion, both Defoe and Eliot consistently explore the importance of female morality and the influence society has had on their female characters. Although the depiction of Moll and Dorothea is different and their own beliefs contrasting, female morality and its value are essential to the novels. Religion, men and class are shown to restrict female morality and, to some extent, in both novels “men make the moral code and they expect women to accept it.”⁽³⁾ It is clear that both authors portray a fondness for their protagonists and grant them freedom and happiness despite these limitations placed on them. They also allow their female protagonists to thrive and attain a freedom within the boundaries of society and further encourage the reader to consider the changes that female morality has faced over time.

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