



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale  
in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali  
(Ordinamento ex D.M. 270/2004)

Tesi di Laurea

**The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century  
Literature:  
An Insight into *Moll Flanders* and  
*Tom Jones***

**Relatore**

Prof. Flavio Gregori

**Correlatore**

Prof. David John Newbold

**Laureanda**

Elisa Pavan

Matricola 834136

**Anno Accademico**

2015 / 2016

# Index

<b>Introduction</b>	p. 3
<b>Chapter 1</b> The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Society	p. 9
1.1 Definition of orphan	p. 9
1.2 The Poor Law system	p. 11
1. <i>Nursing</i>	
2. <i>Institutionalisation</i>	
3. <i>Apprenticeship</i>	
1.3 The London Foundling Hospital	p. 20
1. <i>Thomas Coram and the history of the London Foundling Hospital</i>	
2. <i>Organisation</i>	
3. <i>Authors' opinions about the London Foundling Hospital</i>	
<b>Chapter 2</b> The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Literature	p. 28
2.1 Factual orphan and fictional orphan	p. 28
1. <i>A new genre: the novel</i>	
2. <i>Characteristics of the fictional orphan</i>	
3. <i>How authors engage with the orphan problem</i>	
2.2 Eighteenth-century familial structure	p. 39
2.3 Male and female orphans in fiction	p. 43
1. <i>Fictional male orphan</i> <i>Annesley v. Anglesey</i>	
2. <i>Fictional female orphan</i>	
<b>Chapter 3</b> The Female Orphan in Context: Daniel Defoe's <i>The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders</i>	p. 55
3.1 Plot	p. 56

3.2	Analysis of the female orphan	p. 68
	1. <u>Moll's defining personality as a fictional female orphan</u>	
	2. <u>Orphans' ignorance of their origins and their resulting misery</u>	
	3. <u>Moll's tendency to lie in order to reach her goals and the female orphans' likely future as criminals</u>	
	4. <u>Moll's reflection on women's condition</u>	
	5. <u>Female orphans' redemption through punishment</u>	

#### **Chapter 4** The Male Orphan in Context: Henry Fielding's

*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* p. 86

4.1	Plot	p. 87
4.2	Analysis of the male orphan	p. 102
	1. <u>Gender and sexuality</u>	
	2. <u>Illegitimacy</u>	
	3. <u>Eighteenth-century attitude towards orphans and how Fielding engages with social problems</u>	
	4. <u>Tom's identity</u>	

**Conclusion** p. 115

**Bibliography** p. 116

# Introduction

Illegitimacy in the eighteenth century concerned both government and society in England up to the point that it was considered a plague hard to be eradicated. This work will give a brief insight of the situation of bastardy and orphanages in the 1700 England in order to be able to better understand the climate into which some of the best known eighteenth-century novels were written. The eighteenth century saw an increase in the number of illegitimate children in England, demographers all agree on this point. This upsurge influenced every field in the life of the population and, more importantly for this work, it influenced also the narrative tradition. An almost endless succession of texts reveals the huge impact this phenomenon had also on writers' minds.

However, the reasons of this incredible variation are the more various and debated. One of them can also be found among the laws of regulation of marriages. In 1753 Lord Hardwicke introduced the so-called "Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages", according to which parental consent was mandatory on marriages between children under the age of twenty-one. The act was meant to prevent marriages designed by penniless opportunists. Those priests who decided to celebrate the wedding in spite of the fathers' approval "would be tried and transported".<sup>1</sup> If the illicitly married couple had children, they would be considered illegitimate.

Illegitimacy was therefore considered a significant social issue that the English government tried to solve through a system called "Poor Law". The first chapter of this work will be almost exclusively dedicated to the historical aspects in which the orphan was involved, whereas the other three will mainly focus on the literary side. In order to fully understand the government plan for the regulation of illegitimacy and the care of orphans, it may be worth clarifying who

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England*, Columbus, The Ohio University Press, 2005, p. 9

were the citizens involved, namely who was the orphan and how many different kinds of orphans inhabited the eighteenth-century England. The first section of this dissertation will be dedicated to explain what was meant with the term orphan, and how different connotations of this figure are transferred in literature.

After having clarified the several various sides of the term orphan, a second section of this work will briefly analyse the “Poor Law” system of regulation of bastards and foundlings. This system was the first real act of regulation after the medieval vagrancy laws and was passed by Parliament in 1601. After the first main act was approved, several other supplementary laws were added to try and improve the critical state of affairs. Cheryl Nixon describes the situation as follows:

Under the Poor Law, the orphan, like all of the poor, is subject to statute-defined, parish-implemented regulations concerning the distribution of poor relief based on the place of residence, the ability to work, and the need for necessities such as food and clothing.<sup>2</sup>

The orphan was part of a much larger system of care for the poor and was therefore neglected. The system was structured into steps, the initial nursing and fostering, the subsequent workhouse care, and the following apprenticeship, by which the orphans were left to support themselves through their own capabilities. During the eighteenth century the Poor Law partially changed its organisation because of the introduction of laws focusing on sexual immorality, which was supposed to be the basis of illegitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

The main institutions to take care of the “poor orphans” were the workhouses, the charity schools and the foundling hospitals. Their aim was to take care of the foundlings during their childhood and send them to the more suitable apprenticeship structures. The orphan embodied most of the problems of eighteenth-century society and this is the main reason why this figure

---

<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood and Body*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 55

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.53-57

was so used in literature. The authors were encouraged by this personified figure to write about social problems and venture possible solutions to them. One of the most valued ideas to help foundlings and give them better opportunities in life was to create new kinds of institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Many authors, Defoe and Fielding among others, used their skills to encourage a significant change in the Poor Law system. Defoe, in particular, favoured the opening of the London Foundling Hospital for many years, and supported Coram's efforts for the construction of this new institution. Their understanding and care of this phenomenon gives an idea of the huge impact this situation had on society. In 1739 the London Foundling Hospital was opened by Thomas Coram, and became the most important institution for the care of abandoned children in England at that time.

For decades it was thought to be populated by orphans of one or both parents. However, more recently it was discovered that many host children had one or even both living parents. Some of them were born from single mothers who could not afford to take care of them. In addition to poor single mothers, there were those children born from illicit relationships.<sup>5</sup> In both cases taking care of the bastard children meant shame for the families, and, especially, for the mothers. The father was usually able to keep his name unknown to the population of the village or country where he lived.

After having analysed the laws of regulation of illegitimacy and the situation of orphans in eighteenth-century England, this work will take into consideration the figure of the orphan in literature. It may be worth underlining that, although the eighteenth-century novel understands the Poor Law, it tends to try and solve the poor orphan problem by escaping it rather than engaging with it.<sup>6</sup> Defoe and Fielding use the orphan and his/her adventures as a means of stressing a society that needs reformation: a reformed orphan is the symptom of a reformed

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 73

society. They both highlight the background of the orphan, filled by social, economic and moral challenges.

These authors identify the cause of these problems with a lack of institutions for child caring and, by using the factual orphan in novels, they try to suggest possible solutions. During a period characterised by many changes in society – the industrial revolution, the upcoming of the middle classes, and the ever rising problem of the poor – authors used to emphasise, through the powerful means of the novel, the need to provide legal support for those abandoned children. The second chapter will give an initial presentation of the “rise of the novel”, before analysing the fictional orphan as used in this new-born genre.

The orphan in literature has some fixed characteristics: self-determination, mobility and ambition, a range of possibilities not strictly prescribed by the plot, and the ability to change. Orphan-centred novels analyse the social issue of the orphan from the inside: by positioning the foundling as central to the plot, the author is allowed to focus on the problem from a preferential way, namely the mind of the orphan itself. However, the fictional orphan differs from the factual orphan on a characteristic. The fictional orphan can start his/her life as a poor orphan but usually he/she becomes a valued orphan before the end of the novel. This favourable circumstance usually happens because authors aimed at giving a positive message, and a possible solution to the social plague of abandoned children.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, this work will focus on the different treatment committed to male and female orphans in novels. As Eva König explains, “novels are a means of inculcating in subjects ‘the social and psychological meanings of gender difference’.”<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the eighteenth-century social background, this work will thoroughly analyse the fictional orphan as used by the authors

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-12

<sup>8</sup> Helene Moglen, *The Trauma of Gender. A Feminist Theory of the English Novel*, in Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Vicissitudes of the Eighteenth-Century Subject*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 4

to emphasise their contemporary social problems. One chapter will be dedicated to the female orphan, and a second part will be conversely left to the analysis of the male orphan. In order to be more precise and concrete, the analysis will be based on two novels that will be taken as example of the contemporary literary tradition. As far as the male orphan is concerned, attention will be paid to the well-known novel by Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. On the other hand, for the female orphan plot the reference novel will be *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe.

*Moll Flanders* embodies the figure of the poor orphan who starts her life as an abandoned child. Her mother is imprisoned in Newgate and, consequently, Moll is not a true orphan. The transportation of her mother to Virginia for her crimes will set the final reunion of mother and daughter. Moll has all the characteristics of the eighteenth-century fictional orphan, she is self-determined and has a range of ambitions. She is able to change her miserable situation, and flee from the fate that generally awaits poor orphans. She aspires to become a gentlewoman and manages to do it by virtue of a nurse that takes care of her and acts as a teacher. Later in the novel, she will be helped by other characters, the mayor's wife among others: she will keep Moll with her, giving the girl the opportunity to become a gentlewoman "by education". She will become also a gentlewoman "by name" by virtue of her marriage with Robin, the younger son of the mayor.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the novel, Moll is the protagonist of a series of adventures, illicit affairs and dishonest actions. She becomes a thief and she is eventually sent to prison, after five marriages, at the age of 50. She marries her true love when she is already an old woman and she is even reunited to her mother. She ends her life as a valued orphan, even if she is an orphan who made her own life.<sup>10</sup> This is the most important difference between a male and a female orphan in fiction: the male orphan is usually an already propertied orphan who has to live into troubles and adventures

---

<sup>9</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 28

<sup>10</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 13

but in the end is recognised as a legitimate heir of an important family. The female orphan is, in contrast, an actual poor orphan who has to make her own life in order to become a valued orphan, she is hardly ever recognised as a legitimate heir of a rich family.

In *Tom Jones* this difference of gender can be clearly seen. Tom is a foundling, discovered by Mr Allworthy on the bed of Paradise Hall, and brought up almost like a son by the squire. His cousin Mr Blifil tries very hard to make Tom's life a nightmare because he knows before the others his legitimate kinship with the family. Tom is therefore part of the series of adventurous trials typical of the orphan plot but he always stands out for his elegance. At the end of the novel, Tom Jones is recognised as a propertied orphan and can have his happy ending by marrying the only woman he truly loved. In the novel every character that meets him for the first time recognises him as a gentleman for his manners and his behaviour. Even if he is not irreprehensible, in particular with regard to his sexual behaviour, he is forgiven for his sins and justified by the author himself. Moll Flanders, on the contrary, is never forgiven for her incestuous marriage, and, to expiate her thieving behaviours, she is forced to jail.

Social mobility is extremely related to the orphan's plot, because, by being without family and social position, the orphans embody the desire of upwards mobility. However, the process of reaching wealth abundantly differs for male and female orphans. A man can achieve a better position in society through his own individuality, that is to say by virtue of a new profession, of his personal merits, and, therefore, of his personality. Conversely, a woman can only achieve respectable gentility by marrying upwards. This was the eighteenth-century situation: becoming an "unmarried professional woman" was unacceptable both in real life and in novels.<sup>11</sup> Through the analysis of these two novels, this work aims at giving an insight into the gender situation and mobility of orphans during the troubled eighteenth-century period.

---

<sup>11</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., pp. 6-7

# Chapter 1

## The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Society

### 1.1 Definition of orphan

In the eighteenth century the term orphan has a variety of meanings. As Nixon observes:

In both law and literature, the term “orphan” is often used loosely, encompassing many types of children: the unfortunate child victimized by death, the child sent away from the biological family to live with others, the abandoned child left to his or her own devices, the foundling taken in by a replacement family or institution, and the illegitimate child marked by bastardy.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, depending on the orphan’s parents social class, the orphan receives a different degree of care. The wealthy orphan is usually given protection by “legal guardians”, whereas the orphan belonging to the middle classes is likely to be raised by parents who provide for him. The orphan is usually forced to work as soon as he/she reaches the minimum age to be able to be sent to apprenticeship if male, and service if female. The poor foundling is generally left to the care of the parish, which is charged with his/her support until the age for working. The poor orphan can be either given to a “charitable” institution which would provide for the child’s first years of life. The orphan is therefore an individual “of multiple possibilities”.<sup>13</sup>

Lisa Zunshine, in her work *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England*, claims for more rigour in the definition of bastardy. After quoting Samuel Johnson and William Blackstone’s definitions of a bastard – namely a child conceived out of wedlock and an

---

<sup>12</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 5

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

illegitimate baby worth neither a gift from his or her parents respectively – Zunshine gives a thorough explanation of the typologies of orphan during the eighteenth century. She also claims a correspondence of each definition with literature, grouping four categories of viewing the bastard, described below.

- The “threatening pretender to the legal family’s property”<sup>14</sup>, the orphan was generally seen as a threat by the legitimate family, even though there was a law of regulation against their inheriting from the step-family. In literature, this vision of the orphan pointedly reflects the middle-classes’ idea of bastardy itself: this threatening orphan expresses the point of view of the middle classes.
- “Children born to common-law unions among the rural poor”<sup>15</sup>, coming from families of the south and the east of England. Since these families were extremely poor and had little or any inheritance at all to leave, the illegitimate status did not highly affect children, obliged by their condition to work since they were very young. As these children were born from cohabiting but not married couples, there is hardly any mention of them in contemporary literature.
- The upper-class illegitimate children who were generally treated more generously because they were not considered as a threat to the legitimate children, especially if they were female. Problems for succession could only arise when the father had illegitimate male children and not any legitimate heir. However, wealth and richness usually protected upper-class families from economic issues. The aristocratic bastard is not a prominent character in eighteenth-century fiction, even though there are occasional references to him/her in contemporary literature.

---

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings*, cit., p. 2

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

- Children born from unwed serving women later abandoned by their partners.

These children usually experienced the worst of fates because their birth meant shame for the mother, and the likely consequent loss of her employment – in these cases one of the only remaining options for women was prostitution. Moreover, mothers were likely to be punished for charging parishes with fatherless orphans. Consequently, they tried to conceal their pregnancies and get rid of their babies as soon as possible, often also killing their infants. As will be further analysed in the chapter, those mothers able to afford a wet-nurse asked her to be the one in charge of the murder, by letting the child starve, for instance. This category is often used in eighteenth-century literature, usually as a means of stressing the womanising inclination of the head of the house, and the family's anxiety towards unwanted and threatening illegitimate children.<sup>16</sup>

## **1.2 The Poor Law system**

The “Poor Law” system basically consisted in the evolution of the Elizabethan “Act for the Relief of the Poor”, established in 1601. It was meant to explain the step-by-step procedure of the poor caring system. The Elizabethan Statute established that every parish had to set a number of “Overseers of the Poor” with the specific task to provide a future employment to those children whose parents were not able, or were thought not to be able, to personally take care of their children's future. This group determined the taxes to be imposed on the population in order to raise funds for the poor's sustenance, and had the power to assess fines to those citizens who did not respect payments. Furthermore, it registered the names of those children who took

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-5

advantage of the funds and after having provided them with an apprenticeship, placed the grown-up orphans on a suitable living location.<sup>17</sup>

This act was supposed to set the basic rules for the poor's future, and emphasised that the able-bodied poor had to be put to work as soon as possible in order to be able to provide for their own future. As a consequence, the Overseers could focus their attention and the money raised on those truly needy, namely the infirm, the sick or even the aged. Even if the act had to provide regulation not only for the abandoned children or orphans but for all-age poor, children were the primarily emphasised figures. In particular, the orphan, intended as abandoned child or real orphan of one or both parents, was described as a problem by the Poor Law Act. However, since the illegitimate child was only the consequence of someone else's guilt, the orphan could not be made responsible for his/her own condition. During the eighteenth century the orphan was seen as the emblem of sexual immorality.

In 1662 the statute was reformed in the "Act for the better Relief of the Poor of this Kingdom"<sup>18</sup> which paid even more attention to bastard children. According to the newly reformed act, the parish should only provide for those children whose parents were deeply in need, and, therefore, truly not able to pay for their infants. Parents who had willingly abandoned their children only because of their illegitimacy and not for money reasons were, in contrast, forced to pay for them. This statute was also commonly known as the "Settlement Act"<sup>19</sup> because of its focus on the parish of residence of the poor – only those who proved their legitimate belonging to one parish could benefit from the funds raised by the Overseers. The most dramatic consequence of this change affected pregnant women: they began to be removed from one parish and sent to another, because each community did not want to increase the number of the poor to provide for.

---

<sup>17</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 60

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

During the eighteenth century the Poor Law system was furtherly improved and enriched with new rules which primarily focused on workhouses and poorhouses. The workhouses were developed by parishes to provide jobs for the able-bodied poor, whereas the poorhouses had to supply for the infirm. The main aim of this act was to change the already existing “outdoor relief” into an “indoor” one: the poor was no longer given financial help to live in his/her house and was, in contrast, moved to a workhouse regulating all aspects of daily life. As part of this system, the poor orphan had to be helpful and start working as soon as he/she was able to. Consequently, the family was more and more replaced by the institution, and child abuse exponentially increased.<sup>20</sup>

The eighteenth-century philanthropist Jonas Hanway proposed his solution to the child abuse problem caused by nursing neglect. His efforts resulted in the Registers Bill, passed by parliament in 1762, which required the registration of each infant, and of the arrangements set for his/her care – namely nursing arrangements. The Bill saw a further improvement in 1767, when the Hanway’s Act was put into effect. It consisted in the obligation to send to rural nurses those abandoned children left to the care of parishes.<sup>21</sup>

In 1782 the Gilbert Act was approved as a means to regulate child abuse and stop the phenomenon of pregnant women being removed from their parishes. Indeed, it introduced fines for those transgressors that were previously left unpunished. Furthermore, not only did this act provide a reimagining of the Poor Law system, and the possibility for parishes to build common and larger workhouses, but also included thorough instructions on how to take care of different-age children. Those without parents were the only orphans taken in the poorhouse or given to foster care until the working age. Female orphans were then put into service, whereas males were put into an apprenticeship. As Nixon observes, “infants and young children would be committed to the care of a nurse, the five, six-, or seven-year-old child would be placed into an institution

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 60

such as a workhouse, and the 12 or 13-year-old child would be contracted as an apprentice.”<sup>22</sup>

The “institutionalisation of the child”<sup>23</sup> was therefore organised into three main steps which will be individually analysed below.

### *1. Nursing*

Typically, an abandoned child was given to the care of parishes which provided for his/her life. The child was committed to a wet-nurse or a dry-nurse, depending on their needs, or was given to foster care. Consequently, because of the lack of surveillance and attention, this situation led to a condition that encouraged child abuse. During the first half of the eighteenth century children mortality reached its highest peaks. A study by Ruth McClure highlights the seriousness of this phenomenon, stating that about three-quarters of the abandoned children looked-after by parish nurses died every year.<sup>24</sup>

### *2. Institutionalisation*

After their first five years of life, those babies fostered out to a nurse returned to the parish workhouses, their home place until they reached a suitable age for apprenticeships. This was intended to be the living and working place of grown-up men and women, in addition to children. It was meant to teach both work and moral principles to the poor, in order to emphasise the importance of productive labour. The poor orphan was vitally important in the philosophy of this institutionalisation process, because he/she was felt as the starting point of a future without immorality. By inculcating to the poor the fear of God, the spiritual principles, and the importance of work, there was the belief that the future generation of poor would not become as

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-58

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>24</sup> Ruth McClure, *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century*, in Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 58

immoral as the contemporary generation was. Furthermore, it was generally hoped that the grown-up orphans could be useful to the society.<sup>25</sup>

As a consequence of the Gilbert's Act, workhouses increased both in number and in size and became more and more popular during the eighteenth century, as a means of teaching poor children how important and valuable labour could be. In opposition to the workhouses there were the charity schools: private institutions locally supported by the community. The main difference between workhouses and charity schools lay, like their names suggest, on the field of education.

Workhouses focused on the importance of work, and gave its bases to children, whereas charity schools emphasised the importance of education for infants. Reading and writing were primarily taught to children, even though some charity schools combined work and education, similarly to the workhouses, trying to acquaint children with a job they were likely to be doing in some years' time. Jones observes that charity schools were usually founded by religious societies or by benefactors that sponsored them. Neither was it uncommon for parish members to maintain the schools through voluntary actions. Consequently, charity schools did not depend on parish taxes, unlike workhouses.<sup>26</sup>

Since the costs were a primary concern for workhouses, the government studied a plan to avoid troubles: by working, the poor had to collaborate to the wealth of the institution. Children were equally charged with the making of their own clothing, and the cleaning of the house. Moreover, they had to prepare meals for the small community of the workhouse, training therefore for a likely future as servants. Poor children were also allowed to keep their earnings, a useful circumstance that financially helped many orphans. Since they could partially support themselves, they had the opportunity to select their apprenticeships: they were not forced to

---

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, *An Account of the Work-Houses in Great Britain in MDCCXXXII*, in Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 62

<sup>26</sup> Mary Gwladys Jones, *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Puritanism in Action*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1938, pp. 4-20

agree to the worst conditions in order to immediately become apprentices. By virtue of this circumstance many orphans avoided inappropriate serving houses or exploitable apprenticeships.

Theoretically, this workhouse system was able to save many children from ruin, but actually poor orphans were usually sent to apprenticeships when they were too young and still short in money. Furthermore, Hanway's studies evidence a highly critical situation inside the workhouses: they were overcrowded, dirty and, therefore, the ideal place for the circulation and diffusion of diseases. He finds a connection between these bad conditions and the high children mortality rate. The new Poor Law system was passed in 1834 as a solution to these problems – it tried to increase the regulation of the workhouse system by centrally administering it.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Apprenticeship

When the poor orphan reached an age between 11 and 14, he or she would have typically been apprenticed to a master for the expected term of seven years. Through apprenticeship, the problem of the orphan is “solved” in a way that normalizes his or her experience, allowing him or her to undertake work in a way both familiar and common to many children.<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, through the apprenticeship system, the orphan became part of yet another family-like but clearly different institution. A huge number of apprenticeships did not last until the end of the expected period, as a likely symptom of abusiveness and confinement for children. Moreover, the child was primarily seen as an economic object into a system that provided far more opportunities to males rather than females.

Apprenticeships varied a lot depending on the level of poverty. Poor apprentices usually trained children for low-skilled trades, whereas less poor orphans were better educated by their masters who instructed them in the specific field of their chosen trades. Masters were also expected to provide the apprentices with food and lodging, in addition to clothing and the needed

---

<sup>27</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 67

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67

for them to wash. Indeed, the bond between master and apprentice has been described as a “type of family relationship” by Ilana Ben-Amos.<sup>29</sup>

Joan Lane gives a precise explanation of what was meant as apprenticeship during past centuries:

By the eighteenth century apprenticeship was common in all but the highest social levels and by the nineteenth century the system was degenerating into the scandal of the factory child and the pauper apprentice, bound far from home to save the poor rate. Thus a method of training for a respectable adolescent minority became a solution for social problems far too complex and intractable for Victorian parish officials to solve. In spite of its difficulties, when not abused, apprenticeship was at all periods a successful training method for new and traditional occupations in which academic skills were secondary to practical ones.<sup>30</sup>

Apprenticeships were so common because they enabled apprentices to learn the needed skills for an occupation, and therefore guaranteed them a future livelihood without the need to ask for parish support. As far as politics is concerned, apprenticeships were seen as a means of social control, in order to regulate poor work and avoid beggary. The expected term for apprenticeships was seven years and, although it was generally considered too long a period, attempts to shorten it were strongly resisted for centuries. The master had the possibility to change the length of the term according to the age of the apprentice – the training usually did not last after the boy or girl turned 24 years old. In case of female apprentices, the end of the term could correspond to their marriage. For richer apprenticeships, a premium was generally set at the beginning of the term, in order for the family to guarantee a fair treatment of the apprentice. The premium varied according to the richness of the family – apprenticeships were indeed classified into three categories: pauper, charity and normal.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Ilana Ben-Amos, *Adolescence & Youth*, in Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 67

<sup>30</sup> Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600-1914*, London, University College London Press, 1996, p. 8

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

As far as pauper apprenticeships are concerned, premiums were much lower or inexistent and the treatment of the apprentice changed accordingly. Lane observes:

There were two permanent problems in the whole issue of pauper apprenticeship premiums. Firstly, because such sums were raised by the overseers of the poor, understandably preoccupied with saving the poor rate; secondly, because premiums had to be high enough to attract masters to take children whose labour, when young, was generally unprofitable and not balanced by the cost of their maintenance.<sup>32</sup>

The expected age for the beginning of an apprenticeship was 14 years old, as most of the jobs required physical strength and young men were thus preferred to children. Nevertheless, some working fields, such as the textile industry and chimney-sweeping, required younger children. On the one hand, children were smaller and, consequently, more employable in chimney-sweeping – bigger men could not even enter the chimneys. On the other hand, young children were pauper apprentices, and could therefore be employed in low-skilled and intensive occupations without troubles for the firms. Being so young and poor, they were usually also more submissive and harder workers.

During the late eighteenth century there was a growth in the number of young children apprenticed, a symptom suggesting the incapability for parishes to support poor orphans until the age of 14. Parishes tried to “get rid” of the highest number of children by apprenticing them. This phenomenon is likely to be a consequence of industrialisation, as the higher number of young apprentices came from industrialised parishes where poverty had reached a worrying level.<sup>33</sup> Joan Lane observes:

With increasing industrialization, a characteristic of pauper apprenticeship came to be the narrow range of trades to which parish children were bound, unacceptable occupations with low

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-16

premiums. Thus certain trades became increasingly pauperized and this stigma deterred children of respectable families from entering.<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, those children sent sooner to apprenticeships were usually poor orphans, as well as handicapped, bastards and members of big poor families who might live many years without familial support.

Charity schools arranged more profitable kinds of apprenticeship both for the apprentices and for the masters. Children raised in a charity school were usually educated and well used to obedience. Furthermore, as they were able to provide the master with a decent premium supplied by the benefactor of the charity school, masters tended to welcome charity apprentices better than apprentices coming from workhouses. Nevertheless, charity schools sought to select only certain kinds of apprenticeships – the most profitable for children themselves – and in most of the cases they were exclusively opened to men. Moreover, the majority of apprenticed children came from tradesman families and, by learning their dead fathers' job, ought to restore the lost name and importance of their families.

Charity schools had a strong connection with parochial and civil loyalty, and very often demanded to those who once were apprentices and became prosperous tradesmen, to help other children in their future careers. Even though charity school benefactors aimed at helping young people building a profitable career, they were equally universally reluctant to help pauper children. Consequently, the number of children charity apprenticed remained very low as far as the whole British population was concerned.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 73

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-81

## 1.3 The London Foundling Hospital

### 1. Thomas Coram and the history of the London Foundling Hospital

Mortality rates of poor children reached worrying peaks at the beginning of the eighteenth century, mostly as a consequence of epidemics – typhus, dysentery and measles above all – which could not yet be defeated by medicine. Records state that among the 1720s and 30s only in the city of London the percentage of children dead before five years of age reached the 74%. The percentage becomes even more alarming if the situation of workhouses is taken into consideration: the mortality level raises over 90%.<sup>36</sup> It was in this climate of fear for the poor orphans' future that Thomas Coram decided to try and change the situation. In 1739 he founded a charitable institution aimed at making up for the lack of efficiency in the Poor Law system of care for the orphans. On the 17<sup>th</sup> October, after 19 years of campaign brought on by Captain Coram, a Royal Charter was signed by King George II.<sup>37</sup>

The London Foundling Hospital was the first hospital for the poor and destitute in England: there already existed other few hospitals but those were only intended for the sick. From the beginning of the eighteenth century an era of philanthropy started in England – nowadays it is also known as the “Age of Hogarth”, as a tribute to the celebrated artist William Hogarth, universally recognised as a Foundling Hospital philanthropist supporter. This wave of charity partly derived from the teachings of John Locke who postulated the importance of virtue and thus the moral obligation to act in order to help the destitute. During the 1700s, a general belief that church worship was not enough to stop the so-called “waste of life” was spreading around the whole English population.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> BBC – History – British History in Depth: The Foundling Hospital, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/foundling\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/foundling_01.shtml), accessed on 14 November 2016

<sup>37</sup> Coram and the Foundling Hospital, <http://www.coram.org.uk/about-us/our-heritage-foundling-hospital>, accessed on 14 November 2016

<sup>38</sup> BBC – History – British History in Depth: The Foundling Hospital, cit.

Thomas Coram was a successful businessman who established a shipwright's enterprise in the New World before retiring, in 1719, in Rotherhithe, a south-east London district. At the age of 54 he used to enjoy his mornings walking around the city of London, increasing day by day his concern for the huge number of abandoned children dying on the streets. These scenes of neglect and decay deeply scarred him to the point that he decided to try and change the situation.

His plan called for a Royal Charter to create a non-profit organisation supported by subscriptions, but he had to wait until the death of George I to gain the success he hoped for. George II's wife, Queen Caroline, cared about the orphan's cause to the extent of writing a pamphlet on the Foundling Hospital of Paris. Consequently, Captain Coram managed to eventually gain support and, more importantly, many subscriptions for his goal, that finally led King George II to sign a Royal Charter. Two years later, on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1741, the first babies entered the Foundling Hospital, whose temporary site was located in Hatton Garden. In the meantime, the Governors searched a suitable site for the permanent settlement of the London Foundling Hospital, at last built in the Bloomsbury quarter of London, then surrounded by fields.<sup>39</sup> It was considered an ideal location, by virtue of its distance from the centre of the city and, therefore, of the fresh air children could breathe.

The building was composed of two wings, each meant to accommodate 192 children – two for every bed – and was opened in 1745.<sup>40</sup> On the whole, it looked generally plain but for the rooms used for fundraising purposes. Many artists decided to donate their works of art to the London Foundling Hospital, first of all William Hogarth, a great supporter who even housed and took care of some children during their period of nursing out. Being a philanthropist, he devoted his last years to the foundling's cause, convincing few other artists to donate their paintings. His influence was proven to be so powerful that the Hospital Court Room became, in fact, the first

---

<sup>39</sup> BBC – *History – British History in Depth: The Foundling Hospital*, cit.

<sup>40</sup> Gillian Pugh, *London's Forgotten Children. Thomas Coram and the Foundling Hospital*, Stroud, The History Press, 2012, Kindle E-Book, chap. 2

British art gallery. In addition to painters, also the composer George Frideric Händel supported the philanthropic institution by giving charity concerts in the chapel.<sup>41</sup>

## 2. Organisation

Although the Foundling Hospital was born as a private charitable institution to solve the situation of abandoned children on the streets or children trained as future beggars and thieves, caused by the inefficient Poor Law system, it inevitably ended up mirroring at least part of the Poor Law structure.<sup>42</sup> As far as admissions are concerned, some restrictions were initially established: only infants under two months of age could be accepted and they had to be taken to the hospital by the mother or another person in charge, in order for the nurses to examine them. If they were found sick with scrofula, leprosy, venereal or infectious diseases, they would not be accepted by the Hospital.

In relation to other aspects of organisation, the London Foundling Hospital conformed to the European practices. Babies were baptised as soon as they were admitted to the Hospital, and were then housed in the country at a nursing family until they were five years old. When they turned five, they came back to London where they were given some pieces of education and training in line with the expected vocation of the children – boys were trained for apprenticeship or sea service, whereas girls for domestic service. The general thinking was to educate children in order for them to become useful citizens. However, they could not be as educated as legitimate children because they were not thought to be as deserving as them.<sup>43</sup>

Children were usually brought to the Hospital by their mothers, not able to financially provide for them, or too ashamed of admitting an illicit relationship, or even scared of losing their working position because of their motherhood condition. Many babies were given to the

---

<sup>41</sup> BBC – *History – British History in Depth: The Foundling Hospital*, cit.

<sup>42</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., pp. 61-62

<sup>43</sup> Gillian Pugh, *London's Forgotten Children*, cit., chap. 2

institution with the hope to be taken back home if the situation of the mothers improved. In order to make this unlikely desire possible, mothers left a token with the child, a symbol to recognise him or her in case of future reclaim.<sup>44</sup>

The Hospital adopted a detailed procedure of registration for the babies they took care of, similar to all European Foundling Hospitals. Each child was given a leaden label with an inscribed number which referred to a small package containing all the needed to identify the baby, and the detailed information about the arriving of the orphan to the Hospital. Moreover, the London Foundling Hospital was highly attentive towards nurses and, in particular, towards wet-nurses.

The Committee of the Hospital initially selected and inspected nurses to exclude infections. In contrast, once they had started working, they were regularly assessed by local inspectors who controlled their health and their treatment of the babies – children had to be always cleaned and appropriately fed. Local inspectors were mostly volunteers who provided the identification of wet-nurses in the area where they lived, and took care of the administrative tasks such as reporting on the condition of both nurses and children, arranging transports and funerals for those children that did not survive, and paying and arranging for the return of children to the Hospital once they turned five. The local inspectors were in turn controlled by a chief nurse, or Matron – to whom they might report – who was usually a woman, like most local inspectors.

After the opening of the London Foundling Hospital, the situation of abandoned children on the streets did not deeply vary, as the philanthropist institution was not able to accept a huge number of abandoned children – recordings show that only one-third of the babies taken to the Hospital were accepted. Fundraising events were not enough to raise the needed amount of money to support more children and nurses, or to provide a premium for apprenticeships’

---

<sup>44</sup> *Coram and the Foundling Hospital*, cit.

masters. Moreover, both governors and inspectors, including Matrons, were mostly unpaid volunteers who spent a remarkable part of their time helping the institution.

The Hospital's Committee eventually called for help to the English Government, in turn worried about the orphans' situation, their likely future as beggars or thieves, and the high infant mortality rate. In 1756 the Government passed a decree that enabled the Foundling Hospital to receive all the abandoned infants brought to the building among 1<sup>st</sup> June and 31<sup>st</sup> December 1756, earmarking the £10,000 supporting sum.<sup>45</sup>

During the so-called "general reception"<sup>46</sup> period, the number of children brought to the Hospital exponentially increased and more wet-nurses had to be employed, this time even further from London. The Committee struggled to keep meticulous reports of the admitted infants, and to control and protect wet-nurses from diseases and children from abuses. Notwithstanding their inexistent remuneration, Committee members were generally successful in the accomplishment of their duties.

The "general reception" period saw the construction of branch Hospitals in areas thought to be suitable for future apprenticeships for children but not all of them resulted in being useful or well administered. The infant mortality doubled and most of the children could not reach the age for apprenticeships. After four years of Parliamentary help, the English Government began to diminish the funds for the Hospital, thought to be an expensive mistake. The Government feared for its reputation, as more and more complaints arose among the population, reaching also the press and stating that the London Foundling Hospital, with the aid of the Parliament, was helping illegitimacy rather than stopping it. Before blocking all the grants, the Parliament reduced them and asked for the employment in apprenticeships of seven-year-old children, a condition that the Hospital's Committee never accepted.

---

<sup>45</sup> Gillian Pugh, *London's Forgotten Children*, cit., chap. 2

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 2

In 1771 the Parliament made a final donation to maintain the children admitted until that year, and finally stopped its funds. In order to improve its financial condition, the institution approved apprenticeships starting from eleven years of age, and tried to increase the number of concerts at the Hospital's chapel, events that rose quite a high amount of donations. Although the governors always struggled for keeping a money balance, the mortality rate deeply lessened after the closure of the general reception. Branch Hospitals were finally dismissed and fewer children could be admitted. In order to raise more funds, for a certain period children were accepted under a payment, therefore increasing the number of illegitimate children born from rich women and decreasing the number of poor families' children who could not afford the payment. All things considered, the London Foundling Hospital required a huge amount of money to properly work but governors were always able to meet the demand.<sup>47</sup>

### 3. *Authors' opinions about the London Foundling Hospital*

As previously mentioned, the London Foundling Hospital praised the support of many artists, Händel and Hogarth above all. Nonetheless, many authors too were sympathetic to Coram's goal and firmly expressed their opinion on his institution, not only on specifically purposed articles and pamphlets, but also on their novels.

Charles Dickens was perhaps the most devoted to the cause, having written about the Hospital in many of his works. As he lived close to the institution and regularly went to its chapel to pray or listen to charity concerts, he came to know rather well its structure and organisational system. He particularly praised the foundation, giving a detailed record of it, in *Received a Blank Child*, published in 1853 as an article, but he neither failed to mention and praise the founder Thomas Coram.<sup>48</sup> He used the captain's name and good-hearted personality also on one of his best-

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., chap. 2

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., chap. 5

known novels – *Little Dorrit* – in which the name of Coram is given to a maid grown up in the London Foundling Hospital:

[...] the originator of the Institution for these poor foundlings having been a blessed creature of the name of Coram, we gave that name to Pet's little maid. At one time she was Tatty, and at one time she was Coram, until we got into a way of mixing the two names together, and now she is always Tattycoram.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to nineteenth-century authors like Dickens, however, many eighteenth-century novelists manifested their support to Coram's foundation. The need and importance of an institution for the care of poor orphans was close to the heart of contemporaries, who used their skills to attract the attention on the problem. According to them, the Poor Law system did not properly regulate illegitimacy and, therefore, abandoned children. Furthermore, it lacked in administration and control on its own system, consequently studded with abusiveness against infants.

Henry Fielding and Daniel Defoe, among others, prosperously wrote about the importance of a change, forced by the consequences of the Poor Law system. The common opinion, not only among authors but also among other categories of workers, was that the laws introduced to reduce idleness, beggary and thieving had, in contrast, increased the problem. Fielding, in particular, was extremely concerned about the poor orphans' future, and proposed an enforcement in law and the creation of a different kind of workhouse. Conversely, Defoe was more attentive to orphans' individual personalities. He was concerned about the problems connected with orphans' present, namely the abuses by nurses, midwives and a system unable to regulate them.

Henry Fielding suggested a more accurate care of those orphans that were really poor and whose families could not afford their nourishment – he identified them as those who truly needed

---

<sup>49</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, New York, Anboco, 2016, Kindle E-Book, Book 1, Chap. 2

the Government's aid to become future hard workers helpful to the society. On the other hand, he scorned idle orphans and idle families and stated they should be forced to work. He did not postulate the creation of a hospital for poor orphans but was in favour of a more structured workhouse system.<sup>50</sup>

On the contrary, Defoe favoured the opening of a Hospital, as it can be seen reading the essay he wrote in 1728: it focuses on the problem of infanticide, namely children murdered by their own mothers, a problem that seemed to be emphasised rather than limited, by the lack of regulation of criminal law and the Poor Law system.<sup>51</sup> Nixon claims that, “[i]nvestigating the murder of unwanted children, Defoe explains that mothers and midwives engage in this act in part because they will not be found guilty in criminal law courts.”<sup>52</sup> To Defoe, the central problem of the Poor Law system stood in the many opportunities it created to murder the child without many chances for murders to be accused. Moreover, even when the mothers happened to be accused, the jury would always believe in the mothers' version of the child dead by natural incidence. As the title of his pamphlet suggests, Defoe saw a possible solution to this problem in the creation of a Hospital for Foundlings, thus committing to Coram's cause.

---

<sup>50</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 46

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Generous Protector, or a Friendly Proposal to Prevent Murder and other Enormous Abuses, by Erecting an Hospital for Foundlings and Bastard Children*, London, Printed for A. Dodd, 1731

<sup>52</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 42

## Chapter 2

### The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Literature

#### 2.1 Factual orphan and fictional orphan

##### 1. *A new genre: the novel*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, many authors engaged with the orphan problem by discussing it into their works. In particular, they dealt with it in purposely dedicated essays or articles. Notwithstanding these non-fiction works, however, eighteenth-century writers could not resist introducing the orphan figure into their fiction books. Before proceeding it might be worth briefly analysing the eighteenth-century literary situation in England. A recently born genre – nowadays known as the novel – was spreading in contemporary literature, gaining huge success among readers and writers.

As Ian Watt explains, the novel has ever had the ability to “portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.”<sup>53</sup> Being so fond of reality, this new genre could express the variety of feelings experienced by a society undergoing such a sweeping change as the eighteenth-century community. Consequently, a more direct correspondence between common human experience and literature can be found in the genre of the novel. Indeed, the novel was born out of a context in which society was undergoing deep changes that could not be expressed with traditional literary genres like epic or poetry – a new

---

<sup>53</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1956, p. 11

kind of narrative was required to keep up with social changes which so highly influenced contemporaries.

The most important innovation of the novelistic genre was probably its attention to individuality, in contrast to past attention to collectivity. Consequently, novelists had to employ a different kind of style, directly and primarily manifested in the innovation of the plot which became unusual and untraditional. Daniel Defoe was the first to introduce the autobiographical memoir as a novelistic scheme and to submit the whole plot to this pattern. Nonetheless, authors after him followed his path and the novel's usual practice became indeed the use of non-traditional plots which could be totally or partially invented, entirely depending on the writer's will.

Furthermore, the highly important focus on individuality was put to use through the "characterisation and presentation of background".<sup>54</sup> This means that novelists gave proper and common names to their characters, names that identified characters as common people, particular individuals living in contemporary society, rather than suggesting a general type as past forms of literature used to do. Also time and place played an extremely important role in the individualising process: a character could only be individualised if inserted in defined and particularised epoch and country.

The ancient unity of time and space and its confinement to set a work of literature into 24 hours could no longer be employed if a sense of reality was to be given to the reader. Consequently, Defoe, Richardson and Fielding started to provide detailed information about time and place, thus giving the reader evidence of reality. By achieving this goal, authors managed to create in the readers' mind vivid memories of the characters' life moments.

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 16. In addition to Ian Watt, also other authors deal with the rise of the novel. To read more, see Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983; Michael McKeon, *Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985 and *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

The various technical characteristics of the novel described above all seem to contribute to the furthering of an aim which the novelist shares with the philosopher -- the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals.<sup>55</sup>

As Watt observes in the above-quoted passage, the main goal of the eighteenth-century novelists was to be realistic in their works. In addition to all these characteristics, novels still needed a different form of writing, namely prose. Prose – in contrast to poetry or previously accepted literary prose designed to show only the beauty of objects – for instance, had the ability to give a semblance of authenticity, a kind of language commonly used in everyday life and therefore suitable for closely representing it.

The reasons for such a huge success of the novelistic genre are many and varied, but it may be important to underline that, although the novel was born at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a reaction to social changes, it did not immediately acquire a wide variety of readers. The number of literate citizens remained very low for the whole eighteenth century because families were still primarily concerned with working. Poor families could not afford the loss of a working child in order to give him an education. Furthermore, there was not yet an educational system as such, and even in those areas where some classes were offered in order to instruct illiterate children, the teaching system was discontinuous and unfruitful. In addition to these reasons, private education was definitely too expensive for the poor.<sup>56</sup>

During the eighteenth century, the reading public was therefore mostly composed of wealthy citizens and, in particular, of women. Women usually spent the majority of their time at home and could not join husbands in their businesses or pleasure activities. Having more spare time, they enjoyed themselves reading and the novel was a much-preferred genre since it dealt with everyday facts and not with politics, economy or other typically manly fields. In addition to

---

<sup>55</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, cit., pp. 14-27

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

wealthy women, however, there were those maids or servants employed at wealthy families' service who, being educated, had the opportunity to benefit from the library of the family and its light without expenses.<sup>57</sup>

Another obstacle for the spreading of novels, in addition to illiteracy, was the expensiveness of books. However, with the passing of time, novels became more affordable also for poorer but literate social classes. Some novels began to be published in episodes on newspapers, far cheaper than books. Moreover, the so-called "circulating libraries" made their first appearance in the early-eighteenth century and increased in number and success after the first non-proprietary library was established in London in 1740. These libraries gave the possibility to borrow books at moderate charges and, although they offered every type of literature, the novel was the most sought-after genre.<sup>58</sup>

As Watt says, "[a]ccording to Fielding the whole world of letters was becoming 'a democracy, or rather a downright anarchy!'"<sup>59</sup> The literary market underwent a deep change in its internal structure because of the growth of the middle classes. Among this growing level of society there were the booksellers, namely those who filled the gap between readers and authors created by the decline of court and nobility's patronage of the literary world. Since the authors were no longer concerned with literary elite standards and the patrons' satisfaction, they could write more explicitly – thus becoming more understandable to the less educated – and writing speed acquired more importance.

The deepest change which probably caused a whole revolution in the literary system, however, should be identified with the growth of power and self-confidence of the middle classes, to which the majority of successful contemporary authors belonged. Indeed, Defoe and Richardson were part of these growing classes and were therefore able to know and express the

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 58

needs of their audience from their inside.<sup>60</sup> The representation of social problems in novels directly derives from this situation and, in particular, the orphan was seen as a preferred focal point for the analysis of contemporary problems, since it embodied the eighteenth-century social crisis.

A general idea was taking hold among literates that, although the novelistic genre was recently born, it could potentially become more influential than church sermons. Particularly, they hopefully predicted that, if not the new genre as a whole but at least some particular novels – *Pamela* by Richardson above all – would be able to morally influence the population where sermons had failed. The clergy was generally believed not able to communicate and instil moral teachings in parishioners, especially during a period overflowed with illegitimacy and sexual immorality like the eighteenth century was thought to be.

Writers themselves – Oliver Goldsmith or Samuel Richardson, for instance – promoted this attitude in their novels' preface or as a character's way of thinking, stating that even an impoverished author was more familiar with every-day society than a church minister and was therefore more suitable for moral teachings. It was during the Anglican crisis of 1730 that the novel began to be recognised as a legitimate genre and be consequently used as a means of propaganda of different points of view.<sup>61</sup>

As Eva König summarises, the eighteenth century went through a huge amount of changes which deeply affected economy, law, industry, morality, society and also the mode in which citizens saw their own individuality and position in the system:

This period saw the creation of the modern state, the commercialization of agriculture with the resulting displacement of the rural poor, the reorganization of inheritance law, the development of a

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-59

<sup>61</sup> Carol Stewart, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 1-4

credit economy and a modern industrial society, the newly evolving ideology of gender difference, as well as a fundamental change in the kinship system.<sup>62</sup>

In this climate, writers employed their skills to draw the attention on the problems they mostly cared for. Since abandoned orphans were a real concern for the whole English population during the eighteenth century, authors tended to introduce the figure of the orphan in their novels, denouncing at once the social and moral problems the orphan carried with it.

## 2. Characteristics of the fictional orphan

The orphan is above all a character out of place, forced to make his or her own home in the world. The novel itself grew up as a genre representing the efforts of an ordinary individual to navigate his or her way through the trials of life. [...] Being the focus of the story's interest, he or she is a naïve mirror to the qualities of others.<sup>63</sup>

As John Mullan observes in the above-cited passage, the fictional orphan is seen as a figure forced to struggle in order to survive and make his/her own life into the troublesome society. Being abandoned at a tender age and living in an inappropriate child-caring system, the orphan is obliged to be the maker of his/her own future. Foundlings, and especially poor foundlings, do not have families to count on, and in a socially critical situation like the eighteenth century, neither the purposely established institutions are properly able to guarantee them a respectable future or at least the opportunity to build themselves a decent life. Consequently, the factual orphan is traditionally forced to develop a set of fixed characteristics that are therefore also employed in the definition of the fictional orphan's personality.

Firstly, the eighteenth-century fictional orphan is a self-determined character who has to be deeply focused on his/her goal of building a dignified life. The orphan cannot desist from

---

<sup>62</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 3

<sup>63</sup> John Mullan, *Orphans in Fiction – The British Library*,

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/orphans-in-fiction>, accessed on 24 November 2016

struggling unless he/she wants to live in extreme poverty – fictional characters usually embody this characteristic thus being and remaining goal-oriented until they reach their fulfilment. Being “free from parental definition”<sup>64</sup>, an abandoned child can never stop fighting for his/her life, this self-determination is the basis for his/her survival. Secondly, the fictional orphan is a mobile figure with a range of possibilities not prescribed by a strictly defining plot. The foundling is determined by his/her ambitions, vitally important for the chasing of one’s life-goals and for the characterisation of a self-determined personality.

Furthermore, the orphan is “a figure of change”, defined by the loss of the parents, which implicates the creation of two periods in his/her life, a “before” and an “after”. This critical initial situation in the life of an orphan is furtherly stressed in novels, with the introduction of other events which echo the parental loss and force the orphan’s changing attitude. The orphan has to be characterised by a highly developed sense of adaptability to the social environment, in order to be able to change and conform to the different situations for the achievement of his/her final goal.<sup>65</sup>

Although the fictional orphan is given a semblance of the factual orphan, the novelistic character is filled with deeper meanings, since it stands for something else, carries symbolic contents with it, and is the representation of social problems that troubled the eighteenth-century society. Eva König makes a comparison between novel’s orphans and fairy-tale’s orphans. According to her, these figures share many characteristics, like the “socializing functions” and “educational needs” the orphans must perform. It may be worth mentioning the affinities between these two genres in order to better understand another fundamental aspect of the novel.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 8

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>66</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., pp. 1-2

As König explains, basing her considerations on Paul Hunter's theory,<sup>67</sup> the fairy-tale genre should be seen as the novels' ancestor, fallen into disuse with the Puritanism and Enlightenment's suppressions of the early eighteenth century. As a consequence, the novelistic genre, born roughly during the fairy tale's decline, acquired many of its defining elements, combining them with a new narrative style and sticking, in particular, the fairy-tales' educational function into the novelistic tradition.

Nevertheless, in addition to similarities, novels and, especially, novelistic orphans, differ on many aspects from their fairy-tales' fellows, in the most important characteristics of the fictional orphan. Firstly, the novelistic foundling usually belongs to the middle classes, in contrast with labourers and peasants of the fairy tales. Tellingly, the orphan's origins lie exactly in the eighteenth-century growing classes, traditionally characterised by the same self-determination of the novelistic orphan. Moreover, like the social classes it represents, the eighteenth-century fictional orphan aspires to social improvement. Secondly, eighteenth-century novelists try to depict verisimilar orphans whose stories are based on every-day life elements, in contrast with the fairy-tales' use of magic and fantasy.

Hence, the fictional orphan appears as a symbolic figure, filled with meanings and messages, it is a means to give educational teachings and moral notions. The orphan is used to make the reader think and reflect on social and moral problems, and is a fertile figure suitable for many uses and different eras. It is a character which gives the authors the possibility to ideally analyse from the inside the social and moral troubles and it can be charged with different meanings and personalities according to the changing social ideologies.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels. The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, in Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 2. Hunter attempts to provide a reason for the similarities of the novel with the fairy tale, stating that the novel replaced the fairy-tale during its decline in the Enlightenment period.

<sup>68</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., pp. 3-4

### 3. How authors engage with the orphan problem

In the first chapter of this thesis, the Poor Law and its problematic system of child-care have been taken into consideration. The same system is now going to be taken into account from the authors' point of view. As far as the eighteenth-century novels are concerned, indeed, the orphan plot basically differs on a crucial point from reality: the fictional orphan is usually a valued orphan who, by the end of the novel, achieves a higher social position. Cheryl Nixon properly calls this solution applied by authors a "novelistic escape" – even though writers comprehend the Poor Law system alongside the troubles it creates to the society, and, in particular, to the already critic orphans' condition, they seem not willing to engage with it. Eighteenth-century novelists provide marriages into wealth for most of their fictional orphans, thus giving a solution to the orphans' problem which was, in contrast, quite implausible for factual orphans.<sup>69</sup> Eva König furtherly emphasises this concept:

The orphan is a mythologized concept emptied of real experiences, pains and history of its own. Late-eighteenth-century orphans, for instance, tend to be reunited with their families and their misappropriated patrimonies are returned to them – a fate rarely shared by real orphans. That is to say, these orphan figures are 'rewarded' in the cultural imagination for important services done to society.<sup>70</sup>

As previously observed, however, the law itself did not permit patrimonial re-appropriation for illegitimate children – their illegitimate parents could not even donate them money if they were not recognised as legitimate. Whereas such a legitimation was quite an unlikely circumstance in real life, it was a recurrent pattern in fiction. Since individualisation is one of the primarily important reasons for the rise and the success of the novel as a genre, the individual should be both central and properly constructed in eighteenth-century novels. The orphan becomes therefore a trope for writers to stress the subjectivity and make the readers think of the

---

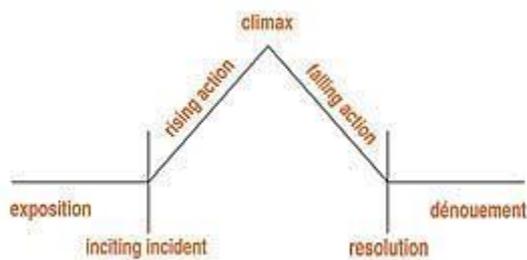
<sup>69</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., pp. 70-72

<sup>70</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 4

social situation from the point of view of a troublesome character: the orphan proves to be a means of structuring the individuality, remaining connected to real social life and its tensions, but at the same time allowing the writer to plot these tensions in the most profitable way.

As already underlined, the fictional orphan embodies some fixed characteristics which are, however, shared with most of the population. Nevertheless, this personality is stressed in the orphan because he/she is forced to a life of struggles. The foundling, being abandoned from a tender age, dramatizes those features due to the experience of loss, the social barriers to be overcome and the making of a self without familial help. Consequently, the orphan has to create everything that a child with parents already possesses and, in so doing, this figure already provides a basic, useful plot for writers. This plot, however, should be integrated and refined to be complete, therefore allowing a huge amount of freedom to the writer.

Traditionally, a plot may include some fixed elements to structure the narration: these elements are important even for a new-born genre like the eighteenth-century novel. The plot structure, diagrammatically represented by the nineteenth-century German novelist Gustav Freytag, contains some recurrent patterns, below represented.



The exposition sets the scene, introducing the characters and giving the background of the actions where the inciting incident happens, thus making the story begin. The story and its path rise until the reaching of the climax – the most exciting and tension-filled moment of the plot – leaving space for the following falling action until the resolution in which the main characters or

some helpmates solve the principal conflict. The dénouement sets the ending of the novel, with the author explaining what actually happened and the characters' feelings about the resolution.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, as far as the characters are concerned, some fixed types are usually present in a novel. With regard to main characters, the narration is based on the protagonist – the central character – a confidante to whom the protagonist reveals his/her plan and, therefore, his/her personality, and one or more antagonists – the opponents to the main character. The action is set by the conflict between protagonist and antagonist.<sup>72</sup>

As can be understood from this very general analysis, the figure of the protagonist orphan struggling against social barriers, and starting his/her life with parents' abandonment, already embodies the main points of the narrative structure – the orphan includes in itself all the stylistic elements needed for a basic plot. Ultimately, the figure of the orphan expresses itself as the perfect device for authors to represent social, moral, and economic contemporary problems, nonetheless leaving enough freedom to make the story interesting and tempting for readers. As Nixon summarises: “The orphan thus integrates character and plot, modeling how an individual can become the protagonist of his or her own life story; the orphan shows how the individual becomes narrative. [...] The individual becomes most meaningful when he or she is narrated.”<sup>73</sup>

In the orphan plot, the antagonist may be the social environment, as also other characters that want to obstacle the main character's self-realisation, his/her own achievement in life, or his/her recognition as a valued individual. Social and economic valuation, however, can be achieved by the orphan through the narration – narration enables the realisation of the orphan, his/her value can be created through the plot. Ultimately, the orphan is a “figure of storytelling”: it is enabled by the possibilities of narration. Nevertheless, it is also a “figure of questioning”<sup>74</sup> – it provides

---

<sup>71</sup> *Freytag's Pyramid*, <http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/freytag.html>, accessed on 28 November 2016

<sup>72</sup> *Character Types*, <http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/character1.html>, accessed on 28 November 2016

<sup>73</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., pp.14-15

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17

the narrative with social issues and at the same time it gives society some possible solutions through its narrative.

Furthermore, the orphan, being a single individual without familial help, brings the message that valuation and self-realisation must come from the inner self. The poor orphan embodies the social problems and, in being employed by literature, it provides any author with a means of stating the authors' solutions to the problem, in addition to providing narrative emphasis on the issue itself. The fictional orphan encourages the eighteenth-century population to focus on the problem of children abandonment and think of legal and moral solution.<sup>75</sup>

## **2.2 Eighteenth-century familial structure**

Before proceeding it might be worth taking into consideration the familial structure in eighteenth-century England. As Ruth Perry underlines, the situation of kinship in England was slowly changing mostly because of economic and political transformations. During the eighteenth century there was an initial and high demographic increase, until its later decrease and the continuation of this trend for the late eighteenth century. Traditionally, sons and daughters tended to be sent out to service by their parents, in order to give them the possibility to maintain an independent existence for a variable time period. Once the service time was over, they came back home to marry late, therefore usually waiting until their parents' death, thus ensuring their inheritance and a wealthy future. In the case of still living parents, children were usually given the responsibility of the landings, from which they could guarantee themselves financial support.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-18

<sup>76</sup> Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 21-23

From the first half of the eighteenth century, the traditional tendency of marrying late suddenly changed, carrying with it a huge increase in births, despite the lost financial security assured by parents' death. One of the reasons for this unexpected social transformation can be identified with the industrialising process that took hold in England sooner than in other European countries. Proto-industrialisation, namely small-scale manufacturing, rapidly spread around the English country, giving citizens the possibility of full-time paid jobs which allowed young men to support themselves without familial help. Furthermore, previously earnings only came from land-owning, and poorer citizens whose families did not possess holdings, could principally earn money by seasonally working on other owners' lands, not having a full-time job onto which to base their subsistence. Consequently, the industrial revolution allowed people to become independent and thus marry sooner than before.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, industrialisation primarily affected the urban centres, provoking a wave of migration from rural areas to growing towns. As a consequence, it became harder for parents to keep control of their children and for family members to remain close one to the others and, in particular, older members to younger fellows. Lawrence Stone stresses the importance of this transformation, which is closely related to a change in the mentality. Indeed, before the eighteenth century, the individual was subordinated to the local community: his/her needs and desires could not overcome those of the community. During the seventeenth century, in contrast, the individual was supposed to behave according to the national ideals and to the Church institutions, causing a patriarchal strengthening in the father/daughter and husband/wife relationships. It was only in the late seventeenth century and during the eighteenth and nineteenth century that the "Affected Individualism" made its appearance in England, allowing a certain degree of personal autonomy to the different members of the family.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-22

<sup>78</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, New York, Harper & Row, 1977, pp. 4-8

Everything that was happening both in rural and urban centres was preparing the economy for the coming of capitalism. In the countryside, those members of families which did not leave for the city centres, started struggling to keep their landings, as they could not earn their needs only through agriculture anymore. In addition, new technologies such as the fencing of farms and lands, the irrigational system, and fertilisers needed financial support that smallholders were not able to provide. Consequently, most small landowners decided to sell their lands to men that owned the needed capital to improve their holdings.

Those families who decided not to leave for the city centre were re-organised as “proto-industrial families”, where each member worked for the benefit of the team, with men working the lands and women and children suing clothes and the like. Their profits, given to the landowner, were nationally sold to an increased and profitable price that allowed the subsistence of new and increasingly powerful social classes.<sup>79</sup>

The situation looked to be capitalistic both in towns and in the countryside, with the consequent birth and empowerment of the middle classes, as central to the social and economic transformation, as to contemporary novels. Since this new kind of economy was still volatile and unpredictable, many families experienced collapse – families financially depended upon one member who could be “personally liable for business debts” and could consequently ruin a whole family.

The restructuring of kinship from a consanguineal to a conjugal basis for family identity was part of the transformation of England in the eighteenth century from a status-based society to a class-based society and from a land-based agrarian economy to a cash-based market economy.<sup>80</sup>

Ruth Perry explains what will be furtherly analysed in the next section: the fictional and factual families in orphan-centred novels. During the eighteenth-century England, because of

---

<sup>79</sup> Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations*, cit., pp. 20-27

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

cultural and economic transformations, the nuclear family underwent a similar change: the family intended as consanguine members, namely a child supported and brought up by parents, surrounded by uncles and aunts, left space for a new kind of family. This kind of family was composed of non-biological members, that is two spouses creating a new unit without the biological family help. This kind of family, increasingly spreading during the eighteenth century, reflected the social changes and, once more, is perfectly embodied in the figure of the orphan, who, by lacking a consanguine family, is forced to create a different and non-biological unit.

Although the transformation began on social and economic levels, it was soon also reflected on the cultural level. Books focused on giving advice concerning the behaviour to keep in different kinds of situations began to spread and have huge success. Letter manuals made their appearance, containing information on how to properly write letters to correct bad attitudes on wilful sons, to kindly ask for money, to encourage or discourage a lover's courtship or marriage proposal. However, the literary genre that mostly reflected the social and economic volatile situation should be identified with the novel, and, in particular, with the novel of manners. The reading public was asking for advices on how to behave in a social context that, having so rapidly changed, was not able to keep pace with. Consequently, novels dealt with "mismanaged kin relations", trying to represent the problems eighteenth-century society was forced to face without any notions on how to react and properly behave.<sup>81</sup>

Novels represent a society that seems to proceed at a higher pace than its members, thus writing about daughters forced to marry men they do not love and that possibly abuse of them, brothers who squander the family inheritance in gambling, leaving younger children without financial support, children abandoned by their parents for financial reasons or fear of shame, and orphans struggling with their guardians and inappropriate institutions. Ultimately, the novel

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 29

subsumes all those disrupting elements that characterise eighteenth-century social and moral crisis, kinship transformation above all.<sup>82</sup>

## 2.3 Male and female orphans in fiction

The depiction of mobility and confinement is often gendered, with the male body being engaged in picaresque-like adventures that entail movement through various spaces of family, work, and nation, while the female body is confined to a domestic plot, trapped within the home and threatened with sexual manipulation or abuse.<sup>83</sup>

As Nixon outlines, male orphans and female orphans are given different degrees of opportunities and mobility. Taking poor orphans into account, males can have a wider variety of possibilities as far as apprenticeships are concerned, securing themselves different options if a master does not properly behave or the working field is inappropriate with regard to their abilities. Female orphans, on the other hand, are usually confined to one field, namely service – the huge majority of apprenticeships are indeed reserved to males, therefore condemning women to domesticity. Women have been always thought only suitable for domestic service, house service and child-care, and are consequently confined to male subordination and often to sexual abuses.

Among wealthy orphans, sexual discrimination remains a deeply-rooted and even more evident issue, with males securing richness through inheritance, and women obliged to marry into wealth to guarantee themselves a rosy future. Because of the structure of the English inheritance system, women must prove their ability to build a family in order to be considered worth, even though they are heiresses by birth. Conversely, men do not have this duty to fulfil in

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30

<sup>83</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 18

order to maintain their status. Ultimately, both male and female orphans struggle for their future and face the same problems of estrangement, familial loss, removal, and transplantation. The difference lies in the role played by gender in the definition of the solution to choose: male and female orphans must take advantage of different elements in order to realise their desires and achieve their goals. It is gender that determines the contrasting solutions to the common and identical problem of illegitimate birth.<sup>84</sup>

### 1. *Fictional male orphan*

The inheritance issue is put at the heart of the male orphan plot, as a consequence of the huge importance it has in English factual eighteenth-century society. In order to give verisimilitude to the story and secure a wealthy future to the main character, the bloodline of the principal family is usually retraced backwards. In addition to blood and final valuation of the orphan, however, there is the protagonist's certainty that his future and wealth lie inside himself. In doing this, the plot furtherly emphasises the orphan's self-determined personality and the centrality of the individualism in the eighteenth century, previously discussed.

Indeed, the orphan carries inside him the estate he is going to inherit before the end of the novel and it is by virtue of this inner possession and belief that the character can follow the adventurous plot structured by the novelist. By engaging in adventures, the orphan stresses his independence and individuality, reinforcing the eighteenth-century pattern. The adventurous journey conclusion coincides with the legitimation and consequent valuation of the orphan through the undeniable proof of his bloodline. Being a direct and therefore legitimate heir of the family, he secures his estate and future wealth.

Before the final valuation of the orphan, the plot structures the deconstruction of the traditional family. Nixon observes that “[i]n the male orphan plot, the attempt to both locate the

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-119

original family and create the ideal family becomes an adventure that ultimately empowers the orphan".<sup>85</sup> The orphan must indeed find within himself his own definition and determination, in order to build a surrogate family. As a matter of fact, the male orphan plot operates on two levels: firstly, it creates fictional families in order for the protagonist to build them and count upon them, but secondly, it inserts a deconstructing process of those previously built fictional families in favour of the need for the orphan to know his actual origins.

In so doing, the plot confers huge importance to bloodiness, calling attention to the familial truth and the inevitable phase in the life of an orphan when he asks about his origins, the identity of his parents and ancestry. On the other hand, this plot pattern emphasises also the non-biological definition of family, namely what defines a family in absence of blood relations. It is not only blood that matters in this kind of plot structure but also psychological demands, economic needs, political ideas and the more various desires which connect individuals out of kin relationships.

Family, in the male orphan plot, embodies both fact and fiction, biological and non-biological kinship. It is a mixture of bloodiness and mental affinities, demonstrating that, as far as the male orphan plot is concerned, the urge for a family involves the initial invention of a familial structure, and the following need for an original kinship. This narrative device allows the novel to uncover the connection of fact with fiction and the possibility of a coexistence between the two.<sup>86</sup> A novel without one of these two elements would definitely lack verisimilitude or readability, depending on the lacking element.

On the one hand, fact implies fiction to become interesting to the reading public, and on the other hand, fiction equally implies facts to have a background upon which to base invention. This may be considered the foundation of novels, that is their discovery of a device useful to

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 119

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 119

emphasise social, moral, economic or political problems and focus the readers' attention on contemporary issues without becoming boring and therefore distance readers from contemporary news. Fiction is vital to secure excitement and readability for actual facts and problems which might be tedious, repetitive or unoriginal after having been known for a long time, without the help of romance and fiction.

As a confirmation of the above-written theory, the literary tradition abounds in examples of stories based on actual events. Eighteenth-century tradition is filled with orphan stories that take hold on real legal facts and are later enriched with fictional elements, thus highlighting the male orphan figure. These legal facts are usually concerned with the search for the original family brought on by the male orphan, as a further confirmation of the need for foundlings to know and meet their actual parents even in those cases where orphans have already built a new non-biological family.

Among others, Cheryl Nixon takes into account the legal case of *Annesley v. Anglesey*, a well-known eighteenth-century fact that, being enhanced with invented elements, shows how fiction can shape actual facts into popular novels. Having the possibility to examine the original legal case, Nixon makes a comparison with narratives built upon it, giving evidence of the eighteenth-century emphasis on the concept of family. As far as novels are concerned, the eighteenth century seems interested in questioning the traditional idea of family and kinship, employing the male orphan as a means to achieve this goal. The Annesley legal case became well-known and popular during the eighteenth century in England, determining the consequent narrativisation of the fact. The protagonist orphan is a man, both in fact and fiction, underlining the eighteenth-century comprehension of the existing "connection between wealth and gender".<sup>87</sup>

As Lisa Zunshine equally points out without focusing on a particular case, but considering eighteenth-century literature as a whole, when there is an orphan-centred novel, the gender of the

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 120-121

orphan could work as an anticipation of the ending of the story. Indeed, male foundlings such as Tom Jones, can remain illegitimate even after the end of the novel, without being prejudiced for this reason. They are allowed to be born out of wedlock without any negative consequence, and can equally have the happy ending they hoped for. Consequently, as far as male orphans are concerned, the end of the story does not depend upon the recognition of their legitimacy as sons: wealth does not derive from their parents' marriage but from their kinship only with one wealthy parent.

Conversely, female orphans' fate almost exclusively depends on their legitimacy as daughters. Throughout the whole length of the story – any female-orphan story – they are threatened by the fear of being illegitimate but, in the majority of cases, before the closure of the novel they eventually gain the long hoped certainty that their parents were legally married when they had been conceived. If male bastardy was controversial and not generally accepted in novels – Fielding himself was largely disapproved for his decision not to reveal a secret marriage of Tom's parents – female illegitimacy could not even be thought as an issue because “it barely existed” in novels.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, male and female orphans in books are judged depending on their gender. For instance, if an eighteenth-century novel begins with an unmarried pregnant woman or a woman married to a man different from the father of the baby, the gender of the child is quite predictable from the beginning, and in almost every case, it appears to be a male. Eighteenth-century literature abounds in evidence of this theory, starting from Tom Jones himself, to Daniel Defoe's Colonel Jack, many Moll Flanders's children and so many other examples that would make this list almost endless. The number of bastard female characters is, in contrast, much shorter, highlighting the inclination to allow only male orphans to remain illegitimate, a practice which

---

<sup>88</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings*, cit., p. 8

seems to be rooted in a “larger tradition of conceptualizing bastardy as a fate reserved predominantly for male characters”.<sup>89</sup>

### *Annesley v. Anglesey*

The scandalous case of *Annesley* features a male orphan, James, abused by his mean uncle and guardian. The plot follows the main character’s attempts to prove his kinship to the English *Annesley* and his being the legitimate heir of the family’s Irish estate and gentry. His evil uncle Richard, who is earl of *Anglesey*, however, claims the same right for inheritance and consequently acts in order to get rid of his thorny nephew. James is kidnapped by his uncle and sent as a slave to the American colonies, where he is forced to live for 12 years. When he comes back to Dublin, uncle Richard has taken possession of the family estate and stopped the inheritance lineage.

Although in this particular case the protagonist is recognised as the legitimate heir, in contrast with the usual male illegitimacy in the majority of the eighteenth-century novels, this male orphan-centred plot perfectly embodies the factual/fictional family thesis previously discussed. The factual legal case already contains many fictional elements such as kidnapping, slavery, illegitimacy, abuse, and a usurper member of the family, soon gaining huge interest and success among the population. For this reason the factual case was serialised and rapidly published in newspapers, allowing writers to transform the factual trials into several fictional stories, both in the form of novels – memoirs above all – and journals.<sup>90</sup>

The *Annesley* case remains, essentially, unresolved, and thus inscribes an uncomfortable truth about the origins of the family: in the eighteenth century, familial truth cannot be determined precisely because it is dependent on narrative. In many ways, then, James is orphaned by his own

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9

<sup>90</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., pp. 121-124

narrative; his trial reveals and even reinscribes the lack of agreement concerning his family origins, making any claim about the Annesley family seem like fiction.<sup>91</sup>

As clarified by Nixon, legal discourse cannot determine James's legitimacy or illegitimacy with his family, setting a doubt that can be solved only through the novelistic escape. The three-volume *Memoirs of an Unfortunate Young Nobleman*<sup>92</sup> based on the Annesley story, solve the kinship issue by recounting James's legitimate birth through a narrative full of poignancy that reveals the emotional bond the mother feels for her son, thus deleting every doubt about James's right to the inheritance.<sup>93</sup>

To conclude, the Annesley case and its fictional transcriptions primarily focus on the familial problem for orphans, namely their need to reconstruct a family negated by their bastard condition. The *Memoirs* based on the legal case, in particular, emphasise the innate power of narrative to construct a family for displaced orphans. Furthermore, it underlines the importance of displacement to allow the right to claim the need for a family. In the male orphan plot, as this example suggests, the noble heir is downgraded to a slave, creating a very powerful image of displacement that authorises the now disinherited orphan to reclaim his family.<sup>94</sup> "The orphan allows the *Memoirs* to highlight the power of factual/fictional construction, revealing that this conflicted narrative status characterizes all families."<sup>95</sup>

This topic will be analysed more thoroughly in the fourth chapter, with the help of Henry Fielding's famous novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. Moreover, there will be a focus on the generally spread idea that a male orphan is allowed to infringe moral obligations without being punished, or being forgiven for his sins without a strict punishment, in contrast to female orphans' treatment.

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 131

<sup>92</sup> Anonymous, *Memoirs of an unfortunate young nobleman, return'd from a thirteen years slavery in America, where he had been sent by the wicked contrivances of his cruel uncle. ...*, Andover, Gale ECCO, 2010

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-132

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 137-138

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 116

## 2. Fictional female orphan

If in the previous section the fictional male orphans' legitimacy was taken into consideration, this part will focus on female orphans, starting from their legitimacy in novels. Indeed, in contrast to male orphans, female foundlings in eighteenth-century literature appear to be legitimate children in the majority of cases. As far as the tradition of female orphans' legitimacy is concerned, there can be traced correlations back until the Renaissance Drama, where, as Alison Findlay observes, the number of male bastards largely exceeds their female counterpart.<sup>96</sup>

The reason to explain such a discriminating phenomenon is identified by the author in the “dramatic potential”, that is to say, usually only males were affected by the possibility to inherit. Inheritance laws, as already mentioned, were favourable for men, women were usually cut off the inheritance process and therefore forced to depend on their husbands' patrimony. Consequently, since upon a male's legitimacy depended his future – the right to be part of the lineage succession and thus the possibility to inherit the familial patrimony and exercise authority – the male orphan centred narration acquired suspense and uncertainty, useful for the novel. As these elements could not be employed with a female illegitimate, it was considered almost useless to introduce a character born out of wedlock whose storyline did not attract readers or make the plot more interesting.<sup>97</sup>

Nonetheless, during the eighteenth century, the number of female protagonists increased if compared to Renaissance, as a likely consequence of the individualistic wave experienced during the Enlightenment. Consequently, if during the previous centuries the phenomenon of female necessary legitimacy was negligible, with the eighteenth century the problem inevitably

---

<sup>96</sup> Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama*, in Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings*, cit., p. 12

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

emerged, allowing literary critics to face the evidence of female orphans' compulsory legitimacy as a notable literary circumstance.<sup>98</sup>

As previously claimed, in contrast to the male situation, female wealth does not depend on inheritance but on marriage. Marrying into wealth for a woman signifies securing her future, in addition to resolving her orphan status, in case of bastardy. In order to be considered worth, a woman must prove her abilities and virtues in the household, being able to apply her qualities in the creation of "family alliances" that guarantee herself a wealthy future. In her pursuit of wealth, the heroine is always submitted to a male figure: it can either be her father or her husband, but she remains an "economic conduit between men". Furthermore, being forced to realise familial bonds, she is often described as a character confined to domesticity.<sup>99</sup>

Consequently, if the male orphan plot reveals that wealth is inevitably part of the male orphan, regardless of the adventures he experiences during the developing of the story, the female orphan is, in contrast, "else" from the "estate". Her future is never secure and the length of the whole story is permeated by a sense of uncertainty determined by her unstable blood situation – even in the circumstance of the woman's final recognition as a legitimate heir, her inheritance is not legally guaranteed. Ultimately, the female orphan plot, in contrast to the male story, emphasises the uncertain condition of women in the eighteenth century, regardless of their social position.<sup>100</sup>

The female orphan plot highlights an important difference with regard to the male plot, namely the need for a new family, to the detriment of the biological kinship, as a consequence of the English inheritance system. Therefore, during the eighteenth century, the female orphan becomes the ideal subject for a story based on a courtship or marriage, a kind of plot able to emphasise the hardness for women to obtain a favourable wedding. Indeed, the female orphan

---

<sup>98</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings*, cit., p. 12

<sup>99</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., pp. 117-118

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151

plot often sets elements of incest, bigamy, forced marriages, abuses, exploitation and so forth, hinged on a character that cannot excessively react because of her condition of dependency on men.

As a result, the economic concerns for a female orphan should become emotional concerns through narrative: women in fiction are presented as characters able to employ the narrative power – storytelling – to transform economic issues over which they are powerless, into emotional concerns they can control.<sup>101</sup> The female orphan should therefore be a balanced character, a figure that criticises social, moral and economic unfairness but is equally able to be part of the critical society.

Armstrong defines this particular female situation as the hardest form of individualism because, being embodied by sexual power, it prevents women from being fully integrated into the society. Female orphans are furtherly disadvantaged because, in addition to being women, they start their struggle as orphans, a condition intrinsically considered both limiting and marginal. This figure is forced to focus all her energies in the search of a new family and, like the majority of female heroines, she must maintain her virtue in order to secure a convenient marriage. However, being in an extreme position, without a family to protect her, her virtue is more in danger than that of a daughter with a family. Nevertheless, she must count even more on her virtue, because of her lack of dowry and familial privileges.<sup>102</sup>

Another defining quality belonging to the fictional female orphans can be found by reading eighteenth-century novels: the ability to use storytelling as a means of protection. Nixon analyses this characteristic by taking into account the fictional transcription of a legal case – *Palmer v. Palmer* – involving three sisters' attempts to prove their father's third wife's mean schemes enacted against them. By virtue of this example, Nixon gives evidence of how the female orphan

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154

<sup>102</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think*, in Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit. pp. 154-155

plot uses narrative to rewrite factual events in order to take control over them, therefore creating a “meaningful form of female individualism”.<sup>103</sup>

The kind of individualism identified by Nixon stands in contrast with its male counterpart. The female one is based on domesticity: the female orphans base their construction of a new family and a future not on adventurous journeys and situations set in the wide world, but on experiences within the household. By locating female orphan’s missions inside the familial structure, the plot is able to analyse and focus exactly on those problems that affected women in the eighteenth century, namely marriage and courtship, but without being alienated from them. As previously claimed, the female orphan becomes a means of criticism and social struggle, remaining, however, within those domestic structures.<sup>104</sup>

In addition to creating a powerful form of individualism, the use of storytelling by female orphans may be recognised as particularly useful in order to “supply missing facts”.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, even in the case of legal events like the previously mentioned *Palmer v. Palmer*, the narration proves to be essential for the female orphan protagonists, in order to fill those gaps left by missing facts. Regardless of the field where the story is set – which could be thought completely filled by factuality, like in legal cases – storytelling is extremely important for the realisation of the victimised female orphan.

Being a defining quality of the fictional female orphan, storytelling helps the character to carry on her battles and struggles, and is one of the few features she possesses to fight against the society and, more specifically, against the unfair domesticity she is forced to live in. For eighteenth-century authors, storytelling is the means of denouncing the social issues that affect

---

<sup>103</sup> Cheryl Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature*, cit., p. 149

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179

women and, in particular, orphaned women. “The reader must become a mediator of the factual/fictional status of the orphan plot”.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 179

## Chapter 3

### The Female Orphan in Context: Daniel Defoe's

#### *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*

As a feminine heroine, Moll Flanders is a very particular kind of character, uncommon and quite exceptional, especially for eighteenth-century literature. Nonetheless, as an abandoned daughter, she embodies all the main defining features of the fictional female orphan, together with exceptional characteristics that make the novel quite unique at least among the eighteenth-century novelistic cases. In this section the fictional female orphan will be taken into account through the emblematic character of Moll Flanders, starting from Defoe's employment of the female orphan plot as a means of focusing on eighteenth-century social issues.

The novel is written using the expedient of the autobiographical memoir, allowing Defoe to mask his actual own making of the book. The diary form was widely spread among writers during the novel's first years of life, and was required to protect authors from moral incriminations, allowing them to claim that they had only found the journals, amended and put them in order before their publishing. Consequently, authors could deal with the most various topics avoiding the risk of being accused of having written immoral novels or novels inciting the population to commit crimes. Simply by stating that these novels were someone else's works and that they had only given to those unknown individuals the possibility to spread and make people know their adventures, the authors were able to protect themselves and safeguard their works.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, this device allowed the writer to create a connection between the inner world of the novel and the outside world of the reader, emphasising the resemblance of reality thanks to the

---

<sup>107</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, cit., pp. 98-100

narration from the internal point of view of the protagonist. Defoe, in particular, if compared to his contemporary fellow writers, is able to use a kind of prose which powerfully reflects the working-class reality. The reality taken into account, in this case, is popular reality, but more than this, it concerns criminals and illiterates, allowing Defoe to be very trenchant in the employment of his style. As Ian Watt pointedly states, Defoe's prose in *Moll Flanders* cannot be described as "well-written", but is strikingly useful to make the reader feel closer to the novel's protagonist during her attempts to clearly narrate her memories.<sup>108</sup>

### 3.1 Plot

The storyline of this novel is introduced by the protagonist, who, already in the subtitle, is able to define the peculiarity of the character, namely herself, she is going to write about. The novel begins as follows:

The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous *Moll Flanders*, Ec. Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a *Whore*, five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a *Thief*, Eight Year a Transported *Felon* in *Virginia*, at last grew *Rich*, liv'd *Honest*, and dies a *Penitent*. Written from her own Memorandums.<sup>109</sup>

As both the above-quoted subtitle and the first lines of this novel powerfully suggest, this novel deals with a very particular female protagonist: Moll Flanders, whose real name is never revealed during the development of the story, as explained by the main character herself:

My True Name is so well known in the Records, or Registers at *Newgate*, and in the *Old-Baily*, and there are some things of such Consequence still depending there, relating to my particular

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-102

<sup>109</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, London, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 35, hereafter shorten cited in the text as *MF*

Conduct, that it is not be expected I should set my Name, or the Account of my Family to this Work; perhaps, after my Death, it may be better known; at present it would not be proper, no, not tho' a general Pardon should be issued, even without Exceptions and reserve of Persons or Crimes. (MF, p. 43)

After giving a brief and incomplete account of the legal reasons why she prefers not to mention her real name, she illustrates her first years of life, founding her report on other people's narrations. The reader is introduced, through the vivid prose and the stylistic form, into the protagonist's life but is allowed to know the recounted events only from a partial point of view: the main character's voice. The reader cannot have a global and impartial knowledge of the real facts because there is not an omniscient narrator's clarifying voice, all that is allowed to be known is given through Moll's memoirs.

Moll recounts the situation of her birth, basically important for the development of her life condition. The reader learns about Moll's mother, sent to jail because of thieving and, due to her pregnancy, not convicted until Moll's birth. When Moll comes to life her mother is sent to the American plantations, thus leaving her six-month-old daughter in "bad hands" (MF, p. 44). As can be understood from Moll's words, the English caring system for orphans or abandoned children was disorganised and not incisive, in contrast with other countries' systems, such as the French organisation taken as example by Moll. Consequently, during her first years, Moll is nursed out by an acquaintance of her mother, about whom we are not given further information. The first thing that Moll states is able to recollect concerns a group of gipsies with whom she wanders, and the day she decides to run away and hide in order not to follow them anymore.

According to the protagonist's account, although she is not a citizen of the parish where she is found by the police, the magistrates are moved by Moll's tender age – she is about three years old – and solitude. She is therefore taken as if she is a legitimate parishioner, and committed to a local nurse – namely a woman who takes care of some children, nourishing them and providing

all they need until their reaching of a suitable age for being sent to service or apprenticeship. As Moll's nurse once run a little school, she teaches the children she fosters a bit of education, in addition to needlework. Being a very pious woman who had been also used to wealth in her youth, she brings up the orphans in a highly religious and genteel manner, acquainting them to art and politeness.

At eight years old Moll is supposed to leave her nurse to provide for herself by being sent to service but, as Moll emphasises, she is not willing to leave and, especially, to leave to become a servant. She wants to do something else in her life, namely stay with the nurse to work and sue for her, and is so terrified by the idea of service to cry every day, managing to convince the nurse to keep Moll with her longer than expected. Moll wants to "be a gentlewoman" (*MF*, p. 48) without a complete understanding of her statement: she simply does not want to serve, and prefers working for her mistress to be able to earn enough money to support herself. In the parish she becomes quite famous and known as the "little gentlewoman" (*MF*, p. 51), gaining the support of some rich women who give her work to be done and even donate her clothes to dress up.

When she turns fourteen, her "good old nurse" (*MF*, p. 53) suddenly dies, leaving Moll and the other foundlings without protection. Unlike the other orphans who are taken away by the magistrates, Moll is left free to decide for her own future, but in a condition of extreme fright. One of the families who previously acted as benefactors to the "little gentlewoman" (*MF*, p. 51) decides to take care of Moll, guaranteeing her wealth and education. She has the possibility not only to be taught as a lady, but also to learn from the gentlewoman's daughters themselves, who are glad to share their knowledge and manners with Moll. At eighteen years old she is thus able to speak French, sing, dance, play the harpsichord and act like a real gentlewoman, in addition to her natural skills such as beauty.

At this point, Moll introduces other characters in her story: the two sons of the hosting lady. As Moll is growing beautiful and well-mannered, she starts attracting the attention of manhood in the town, and, in particular, of the two gentlewoman's sons. Soon after his openly claimed appreciation of Moll with his sisters, the elder brother professes himself in love with Moll, without, however, revealing his true intentions. He manages to seduce Moll and even pays her as a reward for her hidden sexual favours, convincing Moll that he will marry her. However, his intentions are not those hoped by the protagonist and the truth is revealed when the younger son, Robert, openly asks her to marry him, going against his family's desires.

Consequently, on the one hand, the two daughters and their mother begin to distance Moll and even talk about removing her from their family. On the other hand, Moll, completely in love with the elder brother, does not know how to act to protect herself and her true love. The elder brother, however, tries to convince Moll that marrying Robert will be ideal in order to safeguard their illicit relationship, eventually making Moll understand his true intentions. After a nervous breakdown which forces Moll in bed for five weeks, she agrees to marry the younger son, who, in the meantime has gained the approval of his mother. However, Moll, who is at the time known as Mrs Betty, continues to love the elder brother and at Robert's death, five years later, the two sons they had together are sent to Robert's parents.

As will be furtherly analysed in the next section, Moll's skills are extremely important for the developing of the plot, and it is at this point that Moll becomes acquainted with them and starts to understand their potentiality.

I had with all these the common Vanity of my Sex (*viz.*) That being really taken for very Handsome, or, if you please for a great Beauty, I very well knew it, and had as good an Opinion of myself as any body else could have of me; and particularly I lov'd to hear any body speak of it, which could not but happen to me sometimes, and was a great Satisfaction to me. [...] but I had the Character too of a very sober, modest, and virtuous young Woman, and such I had always been;

neither had I yet any occasion to think of any thing else, or to know what a Temptation to Wickedness meant. (*MF*, pp. 56-57)

As she states, she acknowledges her qualities, but she only later identifies the elder brother's seduction as the wickedness mentioned in the passage. With "temptation to wickedness" (*MF*, p. 57), however, she does not mean the sin she committed because of the lover's seduction, but her ingenuity and, thus, a lack of her personality. It is on this occasion that she understands she has to increase her shrewdness if she wants to protect herself, and, like the traditional fictional female orphan, achieve her goals.

After her first husband's death, Moll realises she is still young, beautiful and with quite a fortune (1200 pounds) for herself. Several men try to seduce her before she eventually decides to marry a draper: "I was not averse to a Tradesman, but then I would have a Tradesman forsooth, that was something of a Gentleman too" (*MF*, p. 104). Because of his insane squandering, however, they are soon obliged to poverty, even though Moll tries to save something for her. Her husband is eventually arrested, escapes from jail and moves to France, leaving Moll alone and in an awkward condition, as she admits: "I was a Widow bewitched; I had a Husband, and no Husband, and I could not pretend to Marry again, tho' I knew well enough my Husband would never see *England* any more, if he liv'd fifty Years" (*MF*, p. 108). She is thus "limited from Marriage" (*MF*, p. 108) unless she decides to illicitly act, as she resolves to do, dressing as a widow under the fictitious name of Mrs Flanders.

Moll finds herself among a company of wicked men, gaining the reputation of a mistress without, however, being such a kind of person. She reflects on her situation and finally decides to follow the advice of a woman she has made acquaintance with, and moves to the town she lives. For half a year, she stays with this "very sober good sort of a Woman" (*MF*, p. 110), before the woman marries a captain to her own advantage. At this point Moll starts thinking about her own condition and, more generally, about the condition of all women without fortune

and their inferior and more problematic situation if compared to men, raising an important issue for the aim of this thesis, that will be more thoroughly examined in the second part of the chapter.

After having helped another acquaintance, becoming thus an intimate friend with a captain's lady, Moll reveals to her the critical financial situation she is facing. Her friend helps her with presents and even donating her money, until she eventually proposes to spread the misleading information that Moll owns a fortune at least equal to 1500£. By virtue of this misinformation, a plantation owner starts courting Moll, who, however, does not want to marry a man not aware of her poverty, and she feels obliged to reveal him the truth. Consequently, during the courtship, she partially admits her poverty but in such a manner to make him state he would have married Moll without taking into account her fortune. It is only when they are already married that the plantation owner discovers Moll's actual poverty, understanding the seriousness of their situation and suggesting that it would be better for both to leave for his plantations in Virginia, where his mother and sister already live.

Moll and her husband leave for Virginia, experiencing a travel full of dangers but safely land to America. Moll's mother-in-law is "a mighty chearful good humour'd old Woman" (*MF*, p. 133) who loves entertaining Moll with stories about her youth, and they live all together for the lovers' first period in Virginia. Moll thinks she is the happiest woman in the world, until the day she understands an uncomfortable truth. Her mother-in-law is telling Moll her own story and how she was convicted to prison and moved to Virginia, when Moll realises she is talking to her own mother and has therefore married her own brother. This episode acquires an enormous importance with regard to the aim of this thesis, because it embodies the misery of illicit children and orphans who can never be sure of their origins and can therefore bump into marrying relatives without knowing it.

Moll is shocked by the news and does not know how to behave, she is only certain she cannot sleep with her brother/husband anymore. She eventually confides in her mother-in-law/mother who tries to convince Moll to “bury the whole Thing entirely” and wait until some other event possibly make the revelation “more convenient” (*MF*, p. 146), promising also to financially help Moll. However, Moll is absolutely resolved not to continue her marriage and wants to come back to England, often fighting for this reason with her husband/brother, who, not knowing the truth, does not understand the point for Moll to leave him. She finally reveals him the story, shocking him to the point that he allows her to leave for England. They both consider their marriage finished and, after eight years in America, Moll sails for her homeland, hoping for a new beginning in life.

During the crossing, Moll loses part of her fortune, finding herself a poor woman with very little marrying opportunities and, worst of all, without any friends. She thus decides to set in Bath, looking for a wealthy man to convince into marrying her but soon discovers that Bath is a town “where Men find a Mistress sometimes, but very rarely look for a Wife” (*MF*, p. 157). Nevertheless, she particularly enjoys the company of a gentleman, with whom she starts spending more and more time. The gentleman is soon discovered to be a wealthy man, married to a woman who has gone mad. As he spends time with Moll, he enquires about her financial situation and learning of her critical condition, he proposes to be her benefactor, financially assisting her. Moll initially refuses but, with the passing of time, she decides to accept his money as, like her landlady states, “some Gratification” (*MF*, p. 160) for the time Moll spends with him.

As the season reaches to an end, their platonic relationship becomes deeper and he invites Moll to move to London together. While Moll tries to make a decision, however, he falls ill and she takes care of him for five weeks. When he finally improves, they travel to London and Bristol for some journeys and, forced by the circumstances, sleep in the same room several times remaining, however, only friends, until that night when they had drunk more than usual and

eventually become lovers. As Moll explains: “Thus the Government of our Virtue was broken, and I exchange’d the Place of Friend for that unmusical harsh-sounding Title of Whore” (*MF*, p. 168). Out of this condition Moll gives birth to more than a child from her lover – although only one survives – supported by the gentleman. Being the situation weird and problematic, however, their relationship has to be discreet and prudent, forcing Moll to go out only in her lover’s company, and to save the more she can, being aware that her prosperous situation can change all of a sudden.

Her situation changes indeed, when the gentleman falls ill again and, being this time in the same house of his wife, cannot be nursed by Moll herself. After six years of support and company, Moll is left to provide for herself, without being able to hear from her lover for a long time. When he recovers, Moll’s letters become more pressing and she finally receives an answer from the gentleman, stating that during his “distemper” (*MF*, p. 175) he had been very near to death and had repented for the sins committed with Moll. He leaves a final amount of money for her and promises to take care of their child, whether she wishes to leave with or without him. She resolves to abandon her child, understanding she could not try to begin a new life with him, but only moving in the nearby to see her son growing up anyway. This is another meaningful episode, as it represents the troublesome condition of a female orphan obliged to abandon her child in order to guarantee to him and to herself a dignified life.

After having understood the entity of her own sins, Moll asks her gentleman to send her a final amount of money, to be able to provide for herself and go back to Virginia, before leaving him to his life without her. She has not any intention to leave for Virginia, but uses the topic to assure him she would never bother him again, and succeeds in her aim, receiving a final sum. She writes to her brother in Virginia, asking to be sent goods as a second replacement of the cargo lost during the crossing and, by virtue also of her mother’s intercession, she manages to receive what she wants. Moll resumes her situation:

I was now a single Person again, *as I may call my self*; I was loos'd from all the Obligations either of Wedlock or Mistressship in the World;[...] I knew what I aim'd at and what I wanted, but knew nothing how to pursue the End by direct means; I wanted to be plac'd in a settled State of Living. (*MF*, pp. 180-182)

Moll does not know how to reach her goal and marry a man that will support her for the rest of her life, she is stuck in a situation without friends, help and opportunities to marry at her own convenience. Therefore, she decides to create an opportunity, spreading the rumour that she owns a fortune. Again, she becomes acquainted with a woman who seems a gentlewoman and accepts her suggestion to move to the north where life is cheaper and plenty of potential husbands. Before moving, however, she needs to entrust someone to handle her finances in London. She thus meets a banker, who, in addition to taking care of her money, proposes to become her husband. Moll soon discovers he is already married to another woman, but because his wife has been cheating on him, he wants to marry again. Moll accepts to think about his proposal, on the condition that he manages to obtain a legal divorce. Until that day, however, she decides to leave for Lancashire and see if she is able to find a richer husband.

In Lancashire Moll is introduced to Jemmy, who presents himself as the gentlewoman's wealthy brother, claiming to own an estate in Ireland. During his courtship, he spends a huge amount of money in order to impress Moll, whom he thinks owns a great fortune. After a month of marriage, however, the truth is revealed and Jemmy is discovered to be penniless – he counted on Moll's richness to support him in life. Moll observes: "This has been a hellish Juggle, for we are married here upon the foot of a double Fraud; you are undone by the Disappointment it seems, and if I had had a Fortune I had been cheated too, for you say you have nothing" (*MF*, p. 204). After discussing some plans to solve their situation, Jemmy decides to leave for Ireland in search for luck, against Moll's demands to stay and find another solution. In any case he promises he would have written to her to let her know how to act.

Moll moves to London, always receiving letters from the banker who proposed to her. He is now doing the practices for legal divorce and is still intended to marry Moll. Moll, however, discovers she is pregnant and is forced to momentarily stop her claims over the banker. She is introduced by the landlady where she is hosted, to a “Midwife” (*MF*, p. 219) who arranges all the needed for Moll’s pregnancy, in order to conceal the event and free Moll. This “new Governess” (*MF*, p. 229) – later called “Mother” (*MF*, p. 234) by Moll – manages to hide the whole story and protect Moll, giving the child to the care of a cottager’s wife, promising Moll to let her visit her baby whenever she pleases without the fear to be discovered as his mother.

In the meantime, the banker has obtained the divorce and his wife is also dead, so he is willing to meet Moll and marry her. She decides to set the meeting outside London, to give the impression she is coming back from Lancashire. The banker insists so much on marrying her that same night that Moll finally agrees and the alliance is officiated at the inn where they lodge by an expressly called minister. The next morning, however, Moll sees her Lancashire husband from the window of her room – he is with two other men and she later discovers they are bandits. She is interrogated by the police, investigating to find out three bandits. She admits she knows one of the three accused men, assuring he is “a Gentleman of very good Estate, and an undoubted Character in *Lancashire*” (*MF*, p. 249).

Moll is finally able to leave with her new husband, settle in London in a nicely-furnished house, be happy and have financial stability. Their life together is comfortable and amiable, even though it is a solitary existence, without many friends. Moll’s bad luck, however, has not left her and after five years of happy marriage, Moll’s banker happens to lose a huge amount of money because of a financial risk that went wrong. He falls into depression, is not able to recover from his illness and eventually dies, leaving an impoverished “friendless and helpless” (*MF*, p. 252) wife.

Moll spends two years in a despairing state, increasing day after day her poverty, forced by her condition to sell more and more of her goods to support herself. One day she is wandering around Leadenhall Street when she sees an unattended “little Bundle wrapt in a white Cloth” (*MF*, p. 254) and immediately recognises it as the snare of the devil, describing the voice she hears in her head – “take the bundle; be quick; do it this Moment” (*MF*, p. 255) – like the devil speaking to her. She takes the bundle without being seen and is soon able to repress her horror and guilt, justifying her action with her extreme poverty. Her repentance, however, is authentic and she promises herself not to commit this sin anymore. Nonetheless, she is in need and her internal wicked voice speaks again, convincing her to go and look for other goods to take.

From this moment onwards, she becomes a regular thief, very capable indeed. She is also lucky enough to bump into an opportunity and steal a great quantity of precious goods such as silk fabrics, without being discovered. As she does not know how to resell the kind of goods she now owns, she asks for help to her “old Governess” (*MF*, p. 261), who is in the meantime experiencing financial hard times and has become a pawnbroker. Moll’s situation immediately improves and she hopes the governess can find her a sewing work or another job in order to be able to support herself without thieving. There are, however, not enough opportunities for Moll to abandon her thieving practices and she periodically goes out in search of goods to steal. She is introduced to a mistress that teaches her fruitful stealing practices and, in the meantime, Moll’s needle job increases, giving her a likely opportunity to honestly support herself.

However, it is clear that Moll is now enjoying thieving and continues this “wicked” trade even now that she has an honest job. She becomes more careful in her thieving, though, especially when some of her comrades start being arrested, her “teacher” (*MF*, p. 268) first of all. Moll is now so used to this practice to be famous among criminals and recognised as an expert thief, becoming known among robbers as Moll Flanders. As some of her fellows are arrested and even executed, she starts disguising and also leaves London for the countryside during the most

dangerous periods, managing to escape justice several times. She is finally caught by the police during an act of thieving and is transported to the Newgate prison.

Moll is terrified by jail, she describes the place as “an Emblem of Hell itself, and a kind of an Entrance into it” (*MF*, p. 349). She begins to repent her robberies and crimes, being tormented by guilt. The other prisoners make fun of her, forcing her to many sleepless nights, until she starts being used to the location and the fellow inmates. Moll is helped by her old governess to avoid the sentence to death and Moll realises her repentance is not real, she is only scared by the idea of dying. The real remorse touches her only when her husband Jemmy is brought to Newgate as well, and in seeing him she feels truly guilty.

Her governess, become herself a “great deal more truly Penitent” (*MF*, p. 360), sends a minister in order to help Moll’s repentance, and succeeds in her aim. Also by virtue of the old governess’s help, Moll’s sentence is reduced to transportation to America and Moll understands this can be an enormous opportunity for Jemmy and herself. She thus asks her husband to try and convince the police for receiving the same punishment. He manages to obtain the transportation and they cross the ocean on the same ship, being also able to receive the equipment and provisions needed to establish their own plantation in the colonies.

They land in Virginia, but Moll knows she cannot risk meeting her brother and mother, and is able to convince Jemmy to move by telling him only the indispensable information about her story with her brother, without compromising her situation. Before moving, however, Moll hears of her mother’s death and his brother’s folly and blindness. Moved by curiosity she finds her son, who now lives with his father and observes him without exposing herself. However, Moll is so touched by the sight of her son that she decides to leave the sooner she can for another country – Jemmy and Moll thus move to a farm in Maryland. Moll recalls her mother’s promise to take care of her daughter and tries to devise a plan in order to regain her inheritance.

Therefore, Moll writes a letter to her brother, asking for their mother's will, but the letter is delivered to her son Humphry. The letter touches Humphry to the point that he conceals the matter to his father and personally deals with his mother's inheritance, meeting her with great pleasure. He arranges the yearly payments for the income of the estate his grandmother settled for Moll, and Moll is eventually able to have a fresh start in Maryland based on a fairy beginning. When her brother dies, Humphry is invited to Moll and Jemmy's house and she lies about their marriage, claiming that they only recently married. Moll eventually reveals her husband the whole story of her brother and son, freeing herself from her last pretence. At the age of seventy, Moll and Jemmy decide to come back to their motherland to live their last years in contrition, in order to redeem themselves for their sinful lives.

### **3.2 Analysis of the female orphan**

#### *1. Moll's defining personality as a fictional female orphan*

Moll Flanders, although a peculiar character for the literary tradition, embodies the main characteristics of the female fictional orphan, defining herself as a means of representation of the eighteenth-century social issues. Moll's principal quality is precisely her adaptability, which allows the character a considerable mobility as far as social, physical and moral grounds are concerned. As such mobility was considered impossible or, in any case, undesirable to be achieved by a woman during the early eighteenth century, Defoe was forced to employ an odd character like Moll and transform her into a criminal to be able to narrate such a "picaresque

plot”.<sup>110</sup> Moll is able to represent Defoe’s concern about the position of women in 1700 by virtue of her defining personality.

Like Eva König underlines, Moll Flanders is a “shape-shifter” characterised by a range of diverse identities. She is able to escape a single identification by virtue of adaptability, that is, she can continuously and incessantly adapt both to the different conditions and to the various partners she lives with. Survival is her goal, and she is forced by her orphan condition to behave according to the life situations she faces. Moll’s place in society is always “precariously flexible”: she is endlessly fighting for survival, she needs to transgress rules and even dress up as a man, perpetually changing her identity and therefore preventing the readers from understanding her interiority. Indeed, although the novel is presented through a first-person narration, Moll’s inner self is never revealed during the whole length of the story – the reader is only allowed to gather scraps of Moll’s most intimate psyche.<sup>111</sup>

As far as Moll’s “fluid identity” is concerned, it may be interesting to analyse the mode in which Moll changes her behaviour according to her husbands, and, therefore, her own social status. For instance, her banker husband is a very quiet sort of man, he does not enjoy the company of many friends and loves leading a retired peaceful life. Consequently, Moll supports his desires and abandons her previous companies, living almost friendless and taking care only of her family, as her husband prefers. However, when she is left penniless and alone by her husband’s death, she is able to adapt to the situation and begin a new life as a criminal. She does not wallow in self-pity and is immediately ready to abandon her previous lifestyle in order to give herself the opportunity of a fresh start. At this point of the story she is forced by the circumstances to criminally act and become a thief.

---

<sup>110</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 25

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25

Moreover, as a thief, she furtherly needs to disguise herself, emphasising even more her quality of adaptability. She dresses herself up as a beggar several times, and more than once is forced to appear like a man, not to arouse suspicion. However, she lets us readers know she does not feel at ease in these disguises and, in particular, she considers the manly disguise even against nature. Nonetheless, she succeeds in pretending to be someone else, regardless the guise she chooses, as a further clue of her flexibility. Nobody discovers her real identity when she is in disguise because she fully impersonates each being she decides to embody.<sup>112</sup>

Gary Day is able to give a further explanation of this phenomenon, relating it with the theatrical universe and, more importantly, with the bourgeoisie. His theory claims that the bourgeoisie has no “real self” and is therefore perfectly suitable for acting. Moll, as a representation of this category, spends her life performing and pretending to be other than her real self, and the reader is never allowed to know her inner and most intimate self.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, Moll is also extremely proud of herself and of her achievements, especially as far as her education is concerned. When hosted by the Colchester gentlewoman, Moll is able to become an actual gentlewoman by education, by virtue of “Imitation and Enquiry” (*MF*, p. 55) and she lauds herself for this. In so doing, she becomes the emblem of the middle classes, carrying with her the contemporary optimistic thinking that social improvement could be achieved also by virtue of one’s personal merits.<sup>114</sup>

The main reason and origin of Moll’s “shape-shifting” nature should be identified in her orphan condition and her consequent first years of life. Moll, at the beginning of her memoirs, explicitly denounces the eighteenth-century English Poor Law system of care for orphans, stating that in a nearby country – possibly France – there is a different policy for abandoned children, and, especially, for children born from convicted mothers. In this nation, the babies are

---

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26

<sup>113</sup> Gary Day, *Class*, in Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 26

<sup>114</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., p. 32

“immediately taken into the Care of the Government” (*MF*, pp. 44-45) which provides for their survival and first years of life, until their reaching of a suitable age for independently support themselves through working. These children are put into hospitals called “House of Orphans” and are taught to live and behave in an “industrious” and “honest” manner.<sup>115</sup>

In describing such a nation, Moll states that she would have been a different kind of woman if raised through the Government care. Conversely, however, she was abandoned by the English administration and left to the care of one of her mother’s acquaintances Moll knows nothing about. She only remembers she later found herself among a group of gipsies she managed to escape from. Moll thus begins her existence without any help from the English government and blames it for the difficulties she experiences in her life, claiming that, having had such a hard beginning, she is not supposed to be able to become an industrious and morally upright citizen.

During her narration, Moll identifies also other reasons to justify her immoral behaviours, but the first cause of her unhappy origin “establishes the perimeters of her entire life”.<sup>116</sup> Given her beginning, it is rather surprising that she is able to become a gentlewoman by the end of the story. Nevertheless, this achievement is likely to be precisely due to Moll’s orphaning and her treatment during her first years of life: it is exactly her childhood without relational bonds that allows her mobility.

Moll’s orphan condition is therefore extremely important for her achievement of gentlewomanhood, and it is closely related to the fact that Moll’s real name is never revealed throughout the whole length of the narration. Moll, as an orphan, does not have a nuclear identity, or at least it is not revealed to the readers. Names acquire a huge importance in novels and, especially, in orphan-centred stories, as they set the connection with one’s family and therefore establish the social position. The decision not to reveal Moll’s real name is linked to

---

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

Moll's lack of a recognisable position in society and she justifies her choice stating that it would be exceedingly dangerous for her own safety to reveal her name together with the whole detailed description of the crimes she committed. Her surname is likely to be her mother's and since she was an imprisoned criminal when Moll was born, revealing her real name would have diminished "her chances of mobility and survival", linking Moll to a dangerous criminal and proving her illegitimacy without any possibility of concealing it.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, Moll's uneven identity is also related to her five marriages: in the eighteenth-century patriarchal system, a woman used to inherit her father's name at her birth and replace it with her husband's once married. Moll, in addition not to have a father's name, can furtherly conceal her identity because of her several marriages, more than one even simultaneous. Her husbands' names can therefore be used by Moll to her own advantage, like in the case of her Colchester husband. Since he is a gentleman and therefore owns a respectable name, Moll can count on it to hide her humble origins and spread the information that she is a gentlewoman. Nevertheless, her husbands' names can also be useless or even dangerous to Moll, like the name of the tradesman she marries. Since he is oppressed by creditors, his name is a curse for Moll too, who decides to abandon his name and conceal herself under a false name, after having escaped from the town they lived. It is at this point that Moll takes the invented name of Mrs Flanders, beginning a new chapter of her life under the false condition of widow.

Moll's invented name, in addition to providing another shade of identity to the protagonist, is also connected to terminology, showing a further meaning to Defoe's contemporaries. Her surname is, in effect, linked to lecherousness, as it was generally believed that the best prostitutes came from Flanders. Furthermore, Moll specialises in the thieving of clothes and precious fabrics during her career as a criminal – her assumed surname Flanders therefore

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 31

evokes the “Flemish cloth trade”, renowned for its high-quality and expensive goods.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, employing a name which stands for a group and not for a single individual, allows Defoe to furtherly protect both his character and himself. Moreover, like Moll claims in the novel, if caught by the police she can pretend to be someone else only by using a different name. In so doing, she would never be accused of her previous crimes and could therefore have more chances to leave prison.

It is thus clear that Moll’s main concern is to avoid jail and guarantee herself survival – she is ready to lie in order to be safe, and her different identities are suitable for this purpose. Eva König observes: “Moll does not need a name to create her identity; for her each name is only a cover for a new and provisional identity. The concern uppermost in her mind is safety and survival, and names are relevant only insofar as they allow her to achieve that.”<sup>119</sup> As a consequence, Moll is able to manage her different identities and names in a useful mode to provide herself more social mobility.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, if on the one hand Moll can reach a higher social status than expected by virtue of an inadequate orphan-care system, on the other hand Moll is forced to replace the lack of affection with “mother substitutes”.<sup>121</sup> It seems like Defoe tries to convey the idea of the usefulness of female connections in spite of male relationships, because manly bonds always diminish Moll’s patrimony in the novel, whereas women friendships usually help her both financially and emotionally. As an abandoned daughter, Moll needs female figures to supply her orphan condition. The first identified substitute is the Colchester nurse who takes care of Moll, together with other children, during her childhood. Moll eventually even calls her “mother” and, during their period together, Moll experiences an “Eden-like childhood”: her nurse is able to fulfil

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 32

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 32

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-32

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 28

Moll's desires, starting from her wish not to be sent to service. The nurse takes Moll with her over the established age for service and allows Moll to sue with and for her.

The second motherly figure is embodied by the gentlewoman who takes care of Moll when the mother/nurse dies. She enters Moll into gentility and gives her a proper education, in addition to accustoming her to a genteel behaviour. Moll eventually marries one of the gentlewoman's sons, definitely identifying her as a sort of mother and becoming a gentlewoman also by marriage. During the period spent at her house, Moll can also learn to use her qualities, improving her manipulative attitude and becoming aware of her physical allure. Later in the narration, it is always a woman who helps Moll seducing her third husband, namely her own brother. Moreover, also her actual mother, when Moll recognises her in Virginia, tries to help Moll in escaping her incestuous marriage and is also able to financially help her daughter.

The most important "mother-substitute" is, however, the mid-wife who helps Moll conceiving her pregnancy and arranging the needed for her baby to safely grow up. Moll calls her "governess" and also "mother", as a symptom of a deep bond between them. The mid-wife later helps Moll in mastering a profession and is even inclined to collaborate with Moll's thieving business. She is the female figure Moll is mostly affectionate to, she trusts her and loves her more than her actual mother, as Moll herself explicitly claims during the narration: "I was never so sorrowful at parting with my own Mother as I was at parting with her" (*MF*, p. 401). Consequently, although Moll is an orphan, she conveys the idea that, if helped and supported by the right figures, a female orphan can achieve her goals and even raise in social status, ending her life as a genteel and righteous woman.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 28

## 2. Orphans' ignorance of their origins and their resulting misery

As analysed in the previous section, Moll's orphan condition forces the protagonist to develop her quality of adaptability and to find "mother-substitutes"<sup>123</sup> in order to replace the lack of affection left by her mother and have trusted characters to help her. Nevertheless, Moll is an orphan only if considered as an abandoned child, since her mother is not dead, even though Moll does not know anything about her for many years. Consequently, Moll has a living family – we do not know about her father, he is unknown even to Moll, she is an illegitimate daughter – which will surprisingly be a further disadvantage for her. At her birth, she is identified as the daughter of an unknown father and an unmarried convicted thief, an orphan without the privileges of an orphan, an abandoned daughter scorned because of her parents, a child who will be forced to make her own future without familial help and fighting against the reputation inherited because of her parents.

Furthermore, Moll's mother disappears without leaving any possibility for Moll to find her: she is transported to Virginia, where, as it is later revealed, she begins a new life. Moll happens to meet her mother again in a moment of her existence when she is not at all in need of a parent. In addition not to be helpful for Moll, this meeting is even catastrophic because it carries with it the awareness for Moll to be married to her own half-brother. This event ruins Moll's happiness and serenity and she is again obliged to leave and try to have a fresh start in life. She cannot continue her incestuous marriage since she abhors it and considers sleeping with her brother totally against all natural laws.<sup>124</sup>

This episode emphasises the overly critic condition of orphans, and, especially, illegitimate orphans. Defoe, in devising an incestuous marriage for his heroine, emphasises the risk orphans undergo by not knowing or only partially knowing their origin. The same can be said for

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 30

illegitimate children, who may know their mother's identity but not their father's, and are therefore put in a harder position when looking for a possible man to marry. An even worse fate awaits illegitimate orphans, who, in addition to being left without parents, in the majority of the cases can neither have the privilege to know their identities. Moll Flanders finds herself in the worst possible position: she is an illegitimate daughter, forcedly abandoned by her mother, who willingly conceals her real name in order to have a wider range of chances to marry a gentleman.

Moll's hiding of her real name and identity is one of the few devices she is allowed to employ to raise her possibilities of marrying a wealthy husband, especially when she meets her third husband, the plantation owner and nothing less than her own brother. In that particular moment she pretends to be a widow even though her husband is alive and she has to dupe a man with a fortune in order to guarantee herself a bright thoughtless future. If she wants to succeed in her scope, she needs a man who does not enquire too much about her past and her identity, otherwise she would be in troubles. Keeping this attitude, however, she is the victim of her own pretending, because her husband does not worry at all about her past and they only discover their blood relation when they are married with two children. Eva König observes: "Two factors therefore contribute to her fall into incest: the conscious concealment of her identity is compounded by her orphaned state due to her separation from her mother after birth, as only a mother can vouch for the identity of her child."<sup>125</sup>

### 3. *Moll's tendency to lie in order to reach her goals and the female orphans' likely future as criminals*

Brian McCrea analyses the interesting theory that female orphan characters are obliged to pay too high a price "for their success".<sup>126</sup> In other words, he states that their lying and making of

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>126</sup> Brian McCrea, *Impotent Fathers, Patriarchy and Demographic Crisis in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1998, p. 80

fiction in order to gain success is in the end revealed to be a burden for the characters themselves. Moll's life, for instance, is filled with inventions she fabricates to "be a gentlewoman" (*MF*, p. 48). At the beginning, this ideal position she wants to reach – without fully understanding its meaning – gives her the opportunity to catch the mayor's attention and later escape from a life of servitude. This condition, however, becomes Moll's own prison as her story evolves: to be able to keep her gentlewoman status and maintain the aim she has previously reached, Moll is forced to continuously and incessantly lie.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, she not only lies about her social status, but also about her family. As revealed by the previous section's plot, Moll decides to spread the invented information that she owns a fortune in order to dupe a wealthy gentleman. After the first time when she marries the plantation owner – who will be later discovered to be her own brother – Moll decides to act the same a second time, revealing a recidivism in lying about money.

Furthermore, as far as fiction is concerned, Moll repeatedly lies about her relationships, creating, as Brian McCrea calls the phenomenon, a "fictive kinship" fundamental for the plot and more generally, central to Defoe's work. From the beginning of the novel, in effect, Defoe, through the figure of Moll, fictionalises kinship. The first step in this direction is taken by Moll when she refuses to accept a future into serving, showing her will to be different, her need to escape from the social status imposed by her orphan condition and therefore by her parents: Moll is here fictionalising kinship in an unusual and quite comic manner, if compared to the eighteenth-century tendency.

After becoming a gentlewoman by virtue of her first marriage, Moll is forced to lie again in order to keep her status. She thus does not reveal, firstly, her marriage to the draper, secondly, her marriage to her brother, and thirdly, even the marriage to the Lancashire husband. The protagonist conceals three marriages to guarantee herself the kind of life she dreams, but she also

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-80

hides numerous children, abandoning them. To give an example, even though she feels attached to the son she has with the married man of Bath, she does not hesitate to leave him when she faces the opportunity to have a new start in life. She confesses to being torn in abandoning him but she realises the future would be wealthier and safer for both of them, if parted.

The same happens with the son she has with her Lancashire husband: Moll leaves him to a nurse. However, she initially pays to be able to meet him again and be sure he is safe, but she nevertheless abandons him, lying on her pregnancy, in order to marry the banker. Furthermore, she had likewise previously abandoned the child she had from her brother/husband, hiding him to the world and therefore confirming her tendency to rely on fictional kinship.

Moll's incest with her brother, however, is one of the worst consequences of this fictionalisation of kinship and it stands like a warning into the plot. Defoe was an author particularly used to an irregular kind of lifestyle and the frequent financial failures he faced forced him to almost desperately rely "upon the resources of fiction, all other resources failing him". He was, however, like his characters, often misguided by his desire and ambitions: he lived for pursuing an aristocratic social status, he desperately wanted to grasp "an ancient title" and in his fight for reaching it, he even lost his wealth. *Moll Flanders* stands therefore as an emblem of the dangers awaiting those who dare to fictionalise kinship, pretending to be someone else as Moll does and, more generally, as fictional female orphans usually do.<sup>128</sup>

As far as morality is concerned, this novel offers a powerful insight into the condition of women in the eighteenth century, and, in particular, of poor women, obliged to criminally act to survive. *Moll Flanders*, moreover, is an abandoned figure, treated as an orphan for the majority of the fiction. In her condition of poor orphan, she immorally acts more than once and justifies her behaviour claiming that she is forced into crime by her miserable condition. Criminality, in

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-87

addition to being connected to the female orphan situation, in Defoe's novels is also closely related to morality.

In an emblematic passage of *Moll Flanders*, the protagonist narrates an episode in which she approaches a child going home from a dancing lesson, in order to rob her. Moll, however, after guiding the child to an isolated and dark area, realises she is thinking of killing the child; frightened by her own thought, she lets the girl go home and tries to justify her behaviour. Moll bases her defence on moral notions: she initially blames the child's parents because they should not let a little girl coming home alone, risking her life without any kind of protection. Thereafter, she states the child's mother has received a punishment for sending the child to dancing school wearing her jewellery, only to feed her vanity. Then, she blames a possible maid sent with the child, who, rather than taking care of the girl, was distracted by a friend.

Moll also speaks of the child in religious terms, using words referred to Christian symbolism: she associates the child to a "poor little Lamb" (*MF*, p. 258) and she becomes the "good shepherdess"<sup>129</sup> who gives a moral teaching to the parents, rather than the Devil's servant who wanted to harm an innocent child. Moll, moreover, repeatedly states she only commits criminal acts for her necessity, because it is the only possible escape to death, she has to be a criminal if she wants to survive: "[I] did nothing but what, as I may say, meer Necessity drove me to" (*MF*, p. 258).

According to her telling, it is therefore poverty who drives Moll to crime, and Defoe, through her orphan character's account, is able to explain how the criminal minds work, how criminals justify their behavior to themselves to avoid such a deep guilt that would kill them or, at least, force them to stop committing crimes. Their thinking thus follows several steps, "ranging from an almost schizophrenic claim of hearing voices, through a momentary acceptance of personal

---

<sup>129</sup> Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan, *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 59

responsibility, to a materially based sense of *societal* responsibility, to a psychological self-justification that turns the vice into a virtual virtue.”<sup>130</sup>

Another topic which emerges from the reflection upon morality is the employment of prostitutes into Defoe’s novel. Moll Flanders during her life is “twelve years a Whore” (*MF*, p. 35), but she becomes a prostitute because of her life condition, bringing to light Defoe’s use of such a shaped figure to reflect the spread social issue of prostitution during the eighteenth century. Moll is therefore the emblem of the problematic female orphan situation and also of the prostitution issue. At the same time, however, the figure of Moll/whore emphasises also another condition of women, namely the idea that women, especially during the eighteenth century, are often forced to act in certain manners by situations independent from their own will. “Defoe invites us to read, not only for the story, but for the involved reflections to which that story gives rise”.<sup>131</sup>

#### 4. *Moll’s reflection on women’s condition*

After the ending of her second marriage, Moll deeply reflects on the condition of women in her contemporary society, realising that a woman without money has very little opportunities to be attractive for a man. She recalls what one of the sisters of her Colchester husband told her once:

Beauty, Wit, Manners, Sence, good Humour, good Behaviour, Education, Virtue, Piety, or any other Qualification, whether of Body or Mind, had no power to recommend: That Money only made a Woman agreeable: That Men chose Mistresses indeed by the gust of their Affection, and it was requisite to a Whore to be Handsome [...] but the Money was always agreeable, whatever the Wife was. (*MF*, p. 113)

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-59

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-61

It is at this point in the story that Moll completely understands the unfortunate condition of women, and, especially, of poor women. A woman can be attractive and educated as Moll is indeed, but if she lacks a patrimony, men would always avoid marrying her. They consider a poor handsome woman a likeable mistress but are not generally willing to marry her and assume themselves with the burden of her support, in addition to the burden of possible bad reputation. Moll is able to think she needs to be astute and clever than the male universe if she wants to survive in such an unfair society. She understands she only has a possibility if she lies about her condition, and therefore spreads the news she is a wealthy woman to be able to find a wealthy man. Moll is here the perfect fictional female orphan because she is cunning enough to use her skills to her own advantage.

Since men are allowed to fulfil their desires without worrying about the condition of their female counterparts, Moll cannot have scruples in what she does to reach her goals. She fights from a very disadvantaged position and she cannot therefore leave space for compunction in her lying and in her bad behaviours, because they are the only resources she can employ if she wants to survive. Morality and the traditional vision of the woman as a men's propriety are seen as traps for naïve women and are therefore able to weaken women's life.

Moll internalises this notion very early in her life, namely when she is seduced by the Colchester gentlewoman's eldest son. She is weak and poor and tries to take advantage of her benefactress's generosity. However, as soon as the other members of the family understand the brothers' interest in Moll, she is the one accused of lying and trying to seduce the gentlemen. In this occasion she is the victim, but since she is in a weak condition as an impoverished female orphan, it is easier to blame her rather than more powerful men.

As a consequence, Moll needs to find a mode of behaving which empowers rather than weakens herself and she thus resolves to immorally act, without taking too much into consideration other people's feelings and vulnerability, as wealthy men generally do with regard

to weaker and poorer women. As a further reason to her immoral behaviours, it may be important to underline that Moll does not have anyone to report for her actions – technically, she is an orphan and nobody blames her if she manipulates facts or lies about her fortune or even commits crimes.

Therefore, even though Moll is a female foundling and starts her existence from a very disadvantaged position, her orphan condition is also helpful for her rise in social status, because it supplies her with an almost endless flexibility: she does not need to conform to strictly prescribed behaviours or be blamed by her mother or father for her crimes. She is, in this regard, totally free, because nobody corrects her education when she criminally acts. This circumstance can only be helpful for a woman in her condition, since it enables Moll, who stands for all impoverished weak women, to protect herself from men's patriarchy.<sup>132</sup>

### 5. *Female orphans' redemption through punishment*

In addition to the middle-classes empowerment which is rooted in the early eighteenth century, the role of Moll Flanders as a female orphan is also strictly linked to the birth of capitalism. The figure of the poor female foundling is again used as a trope for a much wider phenomenon, and, more than this, it is employed by Defoe to convey his worries about the role of women in the capitalistic society. In effect, it is by no means accidental that Defoe deals with a female character's mobility closely relating it to criminality.

Defoe's allegory is a "gender-biased representation of contemporary capitalism"<sup>133</sup>, performed through the employment of a female character whose empowerment is only achieved by virtue of criminal and dishonourable actions. To clarify this theory it could be useful to take into account one of Defoe's male-centred novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*. Although Robinson is another model of social mobility and, by the end of his story, he is the owner of an island

---

<sup>132</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., pp. 28-30

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33

together with its only human inhabitant, Defoe does not convey the idea that Robinson gains success through criminal actions.

The most accredited reason of this attitude is rooted in the problematic situation of women with regard to the contemporary economic system. Women were tried to be left out of the commercial process, as contemporary tradesmen wanted to avoid women to actively and publicly take part in the economic market. As far as criminal behaviour is concerned, however, it is worth noting that Defoe should have been aware of the connection between economy and crime, regardless the gender of the trader. Consequently, in *Moll Flanders* Defoe's "anxiety about the potentially 'criminal' nature of all commercial activity is projected onto women who participate in commerce".<sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, Moll is also representative of another aspect of "economy", namely women seen as a male property. Traditionally, "women's accepted role in the economy was as a means of property transfer" for men.<sup>135</sup> Since Moll is an impoverished orphan, however, she does not own any capital, with the exception of her own body. She is therefore obliged to use her physical qualities if she wants to take part to the matrimonial businesses. When she manages to marry, and every time she is legally tied to a man, however, she has the power to administrate neither hers, nor her husbands' finances. She becomes only part of the capital exchange among men and is several times also furtherly impoverished by her husbands' incompetence to properly manage their money.

Conversely, when Moll enters the prostitution trade and the thieving market, she becomes an independent woman who is in control of her finances and is not forced to depend upon men's decisions. She is not a man's property anymore and takes an active role in the economy, gaining financial independence. To summarise this concept, Moll is a woman who is able to achieve

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 34

success, gentle-womanhood, financial independence and an active economic role, renouncing to moral integrity. Immorality is the price Defoe obliges her to pay in order to become a “self-made woman”. Moll represents the anxiety of Defoe and his contemporaries about the possibility of a participation of women into the mercantile English economy, due to the growing and developing capitalistic system.<sup>136</sup>

Moll Flanders, at the end of the novel, becomes a penitent and redeems from her past crimes committed to gain financial independence, as a message Defoe might have wanted to convey: women who actively participate in the economic process, criminally act and should therefore be punished if they want to be forgiven for their sins. Consequently, the idea that seems to be left to the readers is that women, and, in this particular case, female orphans, have to be punished before being allowed forgiveness: punishment is a needed part of the redemption progress – without it women cannot gain mercy. Moll experiences various phases of criminality and, to expiate her guilt, she is imprisoned and redeems only after a long period of jail, only when she sees her Lancashire husband, imprisoned like her. She feels her guilt when she understands that, if her husband is imprisoned, it is partially because of her lies on her fortune. She comprehends she was the reason of another individual’s misery and this new awareness guides her through redemption.

Arguably, Moll represents the condition of eighteenth-century female orphans who are obliged to pay for all their mistakes and are not forgiven anything without punishment. They stand in contrast to male orphans, like in the case of *Tom Jones*, who are more compassionately treated. The entrance of women into the eighteenth-century economic market was generally seen as a threat to the commercial tradition and anxiety about it was widely spread among all social classes. Furthermore, Moll also represents the middle-classes and the social growth achieved through merit and hard work: another deep change into the traditional social system which

---

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-34

deeply scared upper classes and their privilege-based lives. Moreover, it has been argued that Moll's range of different identities stands for the increasing "volatility of bank notes and financial instruments", a further source of anxiety for the eighteenth-century English community.<sup>137</sup>

The figure of the fictional female orphan is therefore used by Defoe as a mirror of several eighteenth-century social problems which deeply scared the contemporaries, and it is the symptom of a sea change which was starting to take place during those troubled years.

---

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-38

## Chapter 4

### The Male Orphan in Context: Henry Fielding's

#### *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*

Henry Fielding wrote *Tom Jones* during the first half of the eighteenth century and the book was published in 1749. It was conceived as an open reaction to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, published as three sets of volumes from 1747 to 1748. As Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan underline, Fielding deals with the theme of virtue from a point of view opposed to Richardson's, emphasising the idea that virtue can be "mystified by hypocrites". Fielding is therefore concerned with the definition of virtue, of how much one's success can depend upon his or her virtue, how far it is allowed to judge the characters' existence.<sup>138</sup>

Nevertheless, *Tom Jones*'s plot narrates the story of an orphan who is eventually recognised as a legitimate heir of the Allworthy family. Notwithstanding Tom's goodness and elegance during the whole length of the plot, he is rewarded only when the truth about his origin is revealed, as a symptom that virtue is important only as far as it stands together with blood relation. Tom's elegance is several times emphasised in the plot, underlining the effect it provokes on different social class members. Despite their social level, everyone is convinced Tom is a gentleman, by virtue of his grace and handsomeness.

Furthermore, Tom's moral behaviour is also taken into consideration, as Tom more than once immorally acts and sleeps with different women in spite of his professed love towards Sophia, the heroine of the book. Tom's conduct and his final happy ending without punishment for his moral sins, stands in contrast to Moll's previously analysed penitence. Tom is easily forgiven his

---

<sup>138</sup> Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan, *Making the Novel*, cit., pp. 114-115

immorality, whereas Moll is forced to undergo a strict procedure before being considered deserving a reward and a peaceful future.

Structurally, the novel is composed of eighteenth books, each of them divided into chapters which vary in their number, from nine to fifteen. Each chapter is introduced by a brief description of the contents, whereas the first chapter of each book contains the author's reflections on what he is going to narrate, alongside addressing literary critics. The narration is set through a third-person omniscient narrator who often digresses during the proceeding of the story and frequently warns the reader, thus anticipating future events.

### 3.1 Plot

This novel narrates the story of an orphan whose name sets the title of the book itself: Tom Jones. The narration begins with the author's introduction to the Allworthy family, composed of a squire and his sister, Miss Bridget. Mr Allworthy is said to have been married in the past and had three children from his wife, all of them dead in their youth. Mrs Allworthy passed away some years before the story is set and Mr Allworthy is often away from home for business reasons. The squire is described as an "agreeable person, [with] a sound constitution, a sane understanding, and a benevolent heart" who inherited "one of the largest estates in the country"<sup>139</sup> where he lives, namely Somersetshire.

The first event narrated recounts Mr Allworthy who, coming home from one particularly long journey, finds a baby laying on his bed and immediately calls for his servant Mrs Deborah Wilkins, who starts an invective against the foundling and the nature of his unknown parents. Her statements will be more carefully analysed in the next section, as they express the general

---

<sup>139</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, London, Wordsworth, 1999, p. 9, hereafter shorten cited in the text as *TJ*

eighteenth-century opinion towards orphans. Notwithstanding his servant's position, Mr Allworthy decides to raise the child in his house, as the baby has already won the man's heart, and entrusts his sister Bridget with the care of the baby. Mrs Wilkins is in the meantime charged with the investigation of the identity of the baby's mother. She discovers the mother is likely to be a woman called Jenny Jones, accused by the women of the parish probably because of their envy towards an ugly but well-educated woman. Furthermore, this woman has recently spent some time nursing Miss Bridget during a particularly strong illness.

After the confession of her motherhood to Mrs Deborah, Jenny Jones is brought before Mr Allworthy who admonishes her for her behaviour and invites her to repent. After having fruitlessly asked the woman to reveal the father's identity, he professes his admiration for Jenny's decision to leave the baby at Mr Allworthy's house rather than abandoning him. Jenny is not sent to a House of Correction, but only banished from the parish by Mr Allworthy, causing therefore rumours about a possible fatherhood of Mr Allworthy himself. The narrator, however, assures Mr Allworthy's innocence.

In the meantime, the pious Miss Bridget is courted by the devout but money-interested Captain Blifil, whom she marries soon after. They have a child eight months later and despite Captain Blifil's objections, Mr Allworthy decides their child will be raised together with the foundling, whom he has definitively adopted and called Thomas. Mr Allworthy discards everybody's objections against his choice, stating that it is unfair for innocent children to pay for their parents' guilt – even though they are born out of wedlock, it is not their own fault and, therefore, should not be punished.

Mrs Deborah is still investigating to discover Tom's father and identifies him with a schoolmaster called Partridge. However, Mrs Deborah does not reveal her discovery to Mr Allworthy and decides to speak to Captain Blifil. He is the one who discloses Tom's supposed father's identity to Mr Allworthy, who decides to talk to the Partridge couple and hear their

version of the story. Mrs Partridge accuses her husband of several affairs with other women including Jenny Jones and, despite Mr Partridge's profession of innocence, he is revoked the annuity Allworthy used to pay him. Mrs Partridge falls ill and dies soon after, leaving her husband alone and in extreme poverty, forcing him to move from the county.

Captain Blifil's hope to diminish Mr Allworthy's affection towards Tom by telling him the identity of the child's father is proven to be totally useless, as the squire's fondness seems to increase in order to supply for his severity towards Tom's supposed father. Meanwhile, Mrs Bridget has understood she has a totally different religious point of view from her husband and their initial love soon turns into hatred. Nevertheless, they remain together and try to conceal the crisis to Mr Allworthy. Captain Blifil is impatient for Mr Allworthy to die and inherit his whole fortune but he is the first to die, during one of his solitary evening walks.

The narration steps many years forward and presents the different personalities of both Tom and Master Blifil. Tom is described with "a propensity to many vices" (*TJ*, p. 68), thieving, in particular, highlighted even more if compared to his companion's praised virtues, namely sobriety, discretion and piousness. Consequently, Master Blifil is appreciated and esteemed by the whole parish, whereas Tom is "universally disliked" (*TJ*, p. 69). Some episodes – such as Tom's donations to the poor Black George's family – are inserted in the narration to make the reader understand Tom's actual nature, that is his loyalty, generosity, kindness and innate elegance.

Mr Thwackum and Mr Square are introduced – the first is the strict Reverend in charge of Tom and Master Blifil's education, whereas the second is a friend of Mr Allworthy's, not intelligent by nature but well educated. We are informed that, although Mrs Bridget is not willing to remarry, she is courted by both Thwackum and Square because of her fortune. She starts preferring Tom's company in spite of her son's, because of the bad memories of her dead husband Master Blifil makes her recall. Consequently, Mr Allworthy starts defending Blifil, as

he always tends to protect the weaker. Tom is now nineteen years old and is becoming acquainted with a certain Squire Western, whose daughter, we are revealed by the narrator, is the heroine of the novel.

The heroine is Sophia Western, described almost as the incarnation of perfection, well-educated and equipped with “innocence”, “good sense” and “natural gentility” (*TJ*, p. 97). She is her father’s delight and knows Tom since they were children and used to play together with Blifil. During their childhood, Tom gave Sophia a little bird to whom he had taught to sing. Sophia is fond of the bird and called it “little Tommy” (*TJ*, p. 98). One day Blifil, asking her to let him play with the bird, quickly frees it, justifying his action by claiming he cannot stand imprisonment, whatever creature may be involved. To recapture the bird Tom climbs on a tree and unfortunately falls down, provoking tender feelings towards him in Sophia. Conversely, she starts hating Blifil and publicly despises him, while praising Tom. Sophia spends more and more time with Tom, who often visits Squire Western because of their shared passion for hunting. Tom is too naïve to recognise Sophia’s feelings, whereas her father is too busy thinking of his personal businesses to notice her infatuation for Tom.

However, Tom is attracted by another woman, namely Black George’s daughter Molly Seagrim. She is equally fond of Tom and does not worry for her chastity, trying to seduce Tom until she succeeds. Tom is, however, convinced it was him who seduced her and his loyalty prevents him from accepting and returning Sophia’s attentions. Nevertheless, Sophia is able to eventually conquer Tom by virtue of her beauty, elegance and distinguishing personality. Meanwhile, Molly Seagrim is found pregnant and Tom hears the news while he is having dinner at Western’s house. By suddenly leaving the house, Tom makes Squire Western think he is the father of Molly’s baby.

Tom, convinced of his fatherhood, confesses Allworthy his sins and takes the burden of his actions, wanting to protect Molly, rather than abandoning her. Allworthy disapproves his

unchaste behaviour but praises his honesty and sense of responsibility. Sophia and Tom, after having fallen apart because of Tom's fatherhood, are brought close again when Tom rescues Sophia, fallen from his horse, breaking his arm in the process. Mrs Honour, Sophia's maid, understands Sophia's feelings and interrogates her, gaining a confirmation of her fondness for Tom.

During Tom's recovery he stays at Squire Western's house, where Mrs Honour lets him know that Sophia will never replace the muff Tom has kissed. It was always Mrs Honour who previously revealed Sophia that Tom passionately kissed the muff, letting the lovers know each other's feelings. Tom is internally fighting his feelings for Sophia because he knows his union with her would never be approved by both Allworthy and Western. Furthermore, he feels obliged towards Molly until he finds Square on her bed and is also revealed by her sister that Molly had an affair with Will Barnes. Her baby could therefore be Barnes's son, allowing Tom to direct all of his attentions to Sophia. One day, during a walk together, Tom tells Sophia his feelings.

After two weeks without visiting Allworthy, Tom is called to visit his benefactor, because he fell very ill and is supposed to die soon. Tom rushes home and is desperate for Allworthy's illness, who in the meantime explains his last wills. He intends to leave Tom an annuity of 500 pounds in addition to other 1000; to Square and Thwackum he has set 1000 pounds respectively; his estate is to be left to Blifil. Thwackum and Square are not happy with their inheritance and feel jealous for Tom's annuity. Mrs Wilkins, moreover, is complaining because the squire is not leaving anything to the servants.

Mr Allworthy's health is, however, not as bad as it was described and he soon recovers. In the meantime, his sister Bridget dies from gout. Hearing of Allworthy's recovery, Tom drinks to celebrate and starts a fight with Thwackum. Rebuked by Blifil for his conduct when his mother has just died, Tom apologises. However, Blifil claims Tom cannot know his pain because he does not even know his parents' identity, causing Tom's violent reaction against him.

One day, while wandering, Tom meets Molly Seagrim and withdraws with her in the forest. He is seen by Thwackum and Blifil but Molly manages to escape and Tom refuses to reveal them the identity of the woman. They fight until Mr Western joins them, taking Tom's defence and fighting on his side. Meanwhile, Mrs Western and Sophia reach the group and Sophia, scared by the situation, faints. Tom assists her and she revives, provoking the squire's gratitude. Sophia is becoming more and more melancholic because she knows her love for Tom, although returned, would never be accepted by her family. Mrs Western, her aunt, suspects Sophia is in love but misunderstands her feelings and is convinced she is in love with Blifil, whom Sophia in fact hates.

Mr Western, informed by his sister that Sophia is in love with Blifil, speaks to Allworthy on the matter because he is worried Allworthy would not approve the marriage. Allworthy, on the contrary, praises Sophia for her supposed feelings but states he will approve the union only when he is sure of their reciprocal natural love. Proposing the union to Blifil, Allworthy does not receive the enthusiastic answer he hoped. Nevertheless, he arranges with Mr Western the courtship of their heirs. When Mrs Western reveals her father's plans and arrangement with the boy she loves, Sophia is totally surprised and overwhelmed with joy, believing her aunt is talking about Tom. From Sophia's words Mrs Western understands the truth: she is shocked and upset by the love of her niece for a bastard. She promises to keep the secret with Sophia's father on the condition that Sophia accepts Blifil's visits.

After Sophia's meeting with Blifil, Mr Western is extremely satisfied and full of happiness, until Sophia decides to ask him not to force her into a marriage with a man she disdains. Western is furious with her daughter and lets Tom talk to Sophia in order to try and convince her into a better choice. Tom claims his love to Sophia, who returns it, stating however that loving each other would mean her father's disdain and their consequent ruin. In the meantime, Mrs Western happens to know that Sophia and Tom are alone in Sophia's room and immediately thinks

Sophia betrayed her trust. Consequently, she reveals her brother Sophia's true feelings, causing Western's rage and forcing Tom to leave the house.

Squire Western rushes to Allworthy, accusing him of having raised "a bastard like a gentleman" (*TJ*, p. 206), therefore provoking her daughter's love for him. Allworthy is surprised and when he talks about the matter to Blifil, he assures he would continue his courtship and claims that Tom is an awful man. He tells Allworthy a completely revised version of Tom's reaction to Allworthy's illness, claiming that Tom was drunk every evening to celebrate his benefactor's sickness and beat Blifil every time he tried to reproach him. Thwackum, interrogated by Allworthy, confirms Blifil's narration. When Allworthy asks Tom about his drunkenness and his behaviour towards Blifil, he omits to mention the part of his illness. Tom therefore believes he is talking about the evening of Allworthy's recovery and admits his bad behaviour. Consequently, Allworthy forces Tom to leave his house only giving him 500 pounds to support himself until he finds a job.

Tom is desperate and throws away everything he has, including the five hundred pounds given by Allworthy. He does not know how to act, especially with Sophia, and eventually resolves to write her a letter explaining his resolution to leave and guarantee her a dignified life. He entrusts Black George, who has in the meantime found Tom's belongings and kept them for himself, to give the letter to Sophia. Sophia's reply comes quickly through Mrs Honour, together with all the money she has. Meanwhile, Sophia has been shut into her room by her father who eventually agrees to free her on the condition that his sister makes Sophia coming to her senses. Tom leaves for Bristol, while Blifil is allowed by Mr Western to marry Sophia the following morning. Sophia, informed of her father's plan by Mrs Honour, decides to leave for London. She arranges the needed for Mrs Honour to leave with her. By telling her father that she will marry Blifil, she manages to be given a money reward.

Meanwhile, Tom has lost his way to Bristol and spends the night at an inn where he meets some members of the army, including the sergeant. Tom decides to enlist in the army and pays the bill for the whole group, gaining mercy and respect. He also meets the lieutenant who praises Tom's natural elegance and presence. Tom is hurt during a brawl and is forced to rest in bed for some time. Tom hopes to be able to reach and join the troop when they arrive in Worcester. In the meantime, Tom meets a barber called Benjamin, who already knows part of Tom's history and thinks he is Allworthy's son. Tom recounts him his history, even mentioning Sophia as the name of his beloved. Benjamin reveals Tom he is indeed Partridge, Tom's supposed father. However, he swears he has not any relation to the deed but wants to apologise with Tom for the troubles his name caused him – he suggests that they share what they presently own, helping each other. They thus become friends and leave together for the army.

The following step in Tom's travel is Gloucester, where he is hosted at an inn called Bell. He is initially very kindly treated by the landlady, who is convinced by Tom's elegance that he must be a gentleman. However, she soon hears Tom's distorted history by one of her guests and believing him, accordingly changes her behaviour towards Tom. Tom leaves the sooner he can. Partridge is convinced Tom has voluntarily escaped from Allworthy and wants to convince Tom to come back home, thus regaining Allworthy's favour. Furthermore, he realises that Tom is joining the army on the King's side, whereas Partridge would fight with the Jacobite rebels. During their travel, they stop at the Man of the Hill's house, where Tom protects the master from a group of bandits. The man recounts them his own history and the reason why he does not trust humans and lives as a hermit.

Tom and the Man of the Hill hear someone screaming and discover a man abusing a woman. Tom saves the lady and very harshly beats the man, before realising he is Northerton, a soldier met at the Bell's inn. Tom takes the half-naked woman to an inn at Upton where he is not welcomed by the landlady who wants to keep the inn's reputation of a respectable place. The

fight is stopped only when a sergeant arrives at the inn and recognises the half-naked woman as Mrs Waters, Captain Waters's wife. We are told that Mrs Waters is not legally married to her husband and she left him for Northerton, with whom she had an affair. When Tom found her, Northerton was trying to rob her before leaving alone.

Mr Fitzpatrick arrives at the inn looking for his wife and is guided to Mrs Waters's room where he, in fact, finds Tom lying on the bed. Noticing women clothes all over the room, Mr Fitzpatrick accuses Tom and the fight is avoided only by virtue of an acquaintance of Mr Fitzpatrick who assures the woman is not Mrs Waters. Tom tries to save his reputation by saying he was helping Mrs Waters. Meanwhile, Sophia has arrived at the same inn with a so-called Mrs Abigail, who is actually Mrs Honour. While Sophia is resting in her room, Honour talks to Partridge who tells her about the people hosted at the inn. Honour thus comes to know Tom is sleeping with a woman and that he even spread the rumour that Sophia Wester is in love with him. A furious and heart-broken Sophia leaves her muff into Tom's room as a punishment for Tom's bad behaviours. She is resolved to part from Tom forever.

Squire Western, looking for his daughter, arrives at the inn and meets Mr Fitzpatrick who is looking for his wife, namely Western's niece. He sees Tom with Sophia's muff and, acknowledged that Sophia has left, leaves to search her, like Tom and Partridge. Meanwhile, on her way to London, Sophia meets her cousin Harriet, namely Mr Fitzpatrick's wife. She explains her husband mistreated and cheated on her, until she decided to escape. They arrive in London helped by a guide and Sophia turns to Lady Bellaston for being hosted. During her travel, Sophia lost her pocket-book with the money given to her by her father. The book is found by a beggar, later met by Tom, to whom he donates the book, in order to reward Tom for his charity. Tom is now intended to find Sophia and return her pocket-book, whereas Partridge wants to go back home. They proceed and meet Sophia's guide to London, who shows them the road taken by the young lady. Mr Western is in the meantime losing time by hunting along the way.

While travelling to London, Tom and Partridge got lost and bump into a group of gypsies. They safely surpass them but are later annoyed by a man who tries to rob them. Tom is able to defend their belongings and is even charitable with the thief when he admits he has no money to support his family. All the problems during their travel are caused by Partridge who tells everyone his fellow is a gentleman and Allworthy's heir. Furthermore, he uses also Sophia's name to increase curiosity towards them: conversely, he only causes troubles to the protagonist.

When Tom reaches London, he manages to talk to Mrs Fitzpatrick, who, at the beginning, thinks he is one of Mr Western's men in search of Sophia. She then believes he must be Blifil, and after her maid reveals what she knows by virtue of Mrs Honour's narration, she is persuaded she is speaking to Tom Jones. Mrs Fitzpatrick is secretly planning to return Sophia to her father, in order to regain his favour after past dissonance. Moreover, she appeals Lady Bellaston to dissuade Sophia from her will to marry Tom. Lady Bellaston is eager to meet the man and when she achieves her goal, she is attracted by Tom's elegance and beauty.

Tom acts again as a saviour for a young man – Nightingale – attacked by his footman, gaining his gratitude and proving once more to be a loyal character. Tom receives by post the needed for a masquerade ball where Tom goes with Nightingale. He is convinced Mrs Fitzpatrick must have sent the package because she is the only one who knows his address. However, at the ball he understands it was Lady Bellaston who sent the parcel; she promises to arrange a meeting for him with Sophia, on the condition that he gives up his claims on her. She gives Tom fifty pounds and he wants to donate them to Mrs Miller – the landlady where he is hosted – in order to help one of her cousins, who is giving birth to a baby in a cold house.

Tom is regularly meeting Lady Bellaston who rewards his company with money. They usually meet in Hanover, but one evening the owner of the house refuses to accept Lady Bellaston's meetings anymore. Lady Bellaston thus arranges the appointment at her house, sending Sophia to the theatre to be sure she will not meet Tom. However, she comes home after

the first act and, since Tom arrived earlier at the appointment, they meet in the drawing room. Tom apologises for his past behaviour and gives Sophia her pocket-book. Sophia accuses him of having misused her name, but he rejects the accusation, explaining it was Partridge to speak Sophia's name. Sophia is forgiving Tom when Lady Bellaston enters the room. Lady Bellaston understands Tom has not revealed he knows her and she keeps lying on this matter. Tom assures he is there only to give the pocket-book to Sophia. Lady Bellaston is convinced Tom and Sophia arranged the meeting but does not reveal her suspicions. She criticises Tom's clothing, stating he must not be a gentleman. Sophia suffers without revealing her feelings to anybody. Leaving the house, Tom gives his address to Mrs Honour, hoping for further meetings with his beloved.

Lady Bellaston comes to Tom's room, asking him if he arranged the meeting with Sophia. He denies but suddenly Partridge enters the room, announcing Mrs Honour. Lady Bellaston is hidden in the room and Mrs Honour gives Tom a letter from Sophia. Honour openly criticises Lady Bellaston's secret meetings with men. When Honour leaves, Lady Bellaston is furious but understands she will never be loved by Tom as he deeply loves Sophia. However, she does not want to lose his favours and she therefore arranges further encounters, using Sophia as a scapegoat. Meanwhile, Tom acts as a friend both to Mrs Miller and Nightingale, trying to convince the man to take his responsibilities and marry Mrs Miller's daughter Nancy, who is pregnant from him.

Partridge reveals Tom's history and identity to Mrs Miller, enraging Tom. Mrs Miller is pleased with the news and tells Tom her own history and how Allworthy helped her in the past and keeps financially helping her even at present time. In the meantime, Lord Fellamar has fallen in love with Sophia and makes visits to the woman. Lady Bellaston is convinced she can make Sophia marry the lord, thus assuring Tom for herself. She therefore tells Fellamar about Sophia's fortune and only at the end of their conversation she mentions Tom, talking of the only

impediment to their marriage. She states Sophia is in love with “a beggar, a bastard, a foundling, a fellow in meaner circumstances than one of [his] footmen.” (*TJ*, p. 560)

Lady Bellaston arranges an appointment between Sophia and Lord Fellamar, secretly planning that the lord rapes Sophia, to oblige her to marry him, if she wants to preserve her reputation and virtue. Lord Fellamar easily dismisses his guilt and meets Sophia in a room, away from everyone else. He claims his love and after Sophia’s sharp refusal, tries to rape her. Sophia’s cries cannot be heard by anyone, until her father bumps into the house. Sophia desperately calls him. When he enters the room, he tells Sophia to marry Blifil and Lord Fellamar thinks he is talking of him. He thus thanks squire Western, who, conversely, enrages and makes him flee. Western forces his daughter into his coach and threatens to lock her forever.

Mrs Honour is dismissed and tells Jones what happened. While they are talking, Lady Bellaston is announced and Tom hides Honour under his bed. The lady flirts with Tom, who does not know how to act. Nightingale comes in completely drunk – he has mistaken the room. While Tom is busy with him, Lady Bellaston tries to conceal herself under the bed, where she finds Mrs Honour. The lady furiously leaves and Tom has to work hard to gain Honour’s forgiveness. Nightingale recounts Tom of Lady Bellaston’s affairs with several other men and suggests that Tom proposes to her, in order to get rid of their affair forever: Lady Bellaston would never accept the proposal. Tom writes her a letter and she accuses him of being interested only in her fortune. She has, meanwhile, hired Mrs Honour.

Tom receives a convenient marriage proposal from an acquaintance of Mrs Miller’s, a widow made rich by her Turkish dead husband. Tom is tempted but refuses, in the name of his love for Sophia. Partridge announces Tom that Black George is a servant at squire Western’s apartments in London and he can therefore use his acquaintance to communicate with Sophia. Unfortunately, however, Partridge is not able to remember Western’s address and Tom cannot therefore write to Black George without doing some researches.

Western and Sophia have many arguments about her marriage to Blifil and Sophia is even ready not to marry at all rather than being forced with a man she despises. Mrs Western arrives at the house and convinces her brother to unlock Sophia. He leaves with Parson Supple. Black George has in the meantime hidden a letter from Tom into Sophia's meal. She replies to the letter saying that she is going to leave for her aunt's house but promised not to write to Tom again. Meanwhile, Tom goes to the theatre and meets Mrs Fitzpatrick by chance. We are informed she told squire Western where Sophia was hosted. She invites Tom to meet her the following day.

Blifil and Allworthy are coming to London and Tom is forced to leave his room. Indeed, Mrs Miller had made an agreement with Allworthy when he began to give her an annuity: she would have reserved the first floor of her inn for Allworthy to be hosted during his journeys to London. When Western comes to know Blifil is in town, he insists that they visit Sophia immediately. In the meantime, Mrs Western informed Lady Bellaston of her arrival in London. Lady Bellaston is planning Lord Fellamar to marry Sophia and she is therefore delighted to have an ally in town. She shows Mrs Western Tom's letter of proposal and suggests that Mrs Western gives it to Sophia. Blifil and Western enter the room where Mrs Western is precisely performing what she planned with Lady Bellaston. The meeting does not last long because Mrs Western soon expels the men. Mr Western blames his sister's character, whereas Blifil suspects something more behind Mrs Western's behaviour.

Tom meets Mrs Fitzpatrick who suggests that he flirts with Mrs Western in order to spend time with Sophia but Tom refuses. To calm Mrs Fitzpatrick, who enraged at Tom's refusal, he kindly acts, provoking Mrs Fitzpatrick's fondness. When Tom leaves she asks him to go and visit her again. Tom, however, only wants Sophia and does not feed Mrs Fitzpatrick's hopes. Leaving her house, Tom meets Mr Fitzpatrick who eventually found his wife's apartments. He attacks Tom, who replies wounding him with Fitzpatrick's own sword. Tom is imprisoned and

Partridge tells him Fitzpatrick is dead. Sophia sends him a letter stating that she knows of his proposal to Lady Bellaston and is intended not to hear from him anymore.

Mrs Miller defends Tom when Blifil and Western accuse and despise him. She assures Allworthy Tom must have been provoked to kill a man and she wants to tell him about Tom's kindness while he stayed at hers. Fitzpatrick is not yet dead and Partridge communicates the good news to Tom. Mrs Miller tells Tom she can try and talk to Sophia on behalf of Tom and she accepts to deliver her a letter. Nightingale says he will discover who was present when Fitzpatrick was wounded and whether his health is improving.

Sophia speaks to her aunt, saying that Lord Fellamar attempted to rape her and she shows her the evidence she still has on her body. Mrs Western is shocked and allows Sophia to distance Fellamar. Sophia receives Mrs Miller and after her speech on Tom's qualities and the narration of his behaviour towards her daughter and Nightingale, Sophia accepts the letter. Tom wrote he can explain the proposal to Lady Bellaston and that he was not intended at all to marry her. Encouraged by Lady Bellaston, Mrs Western tries to convince Sophia to meet Fellamar – she has not quit the idea of marrying Sophia to a lord. Sophia is unpleasant with Fellamar, thus causing Mrs Western's anger. Furthermore, she has been informed that Mrs Miller brought Sophia a letter from Tom: Sophia refuses to hand her aunt the letter, provoking Mrs Western's furiousness.

Mrs Waters visits Tom in jail and recounts him what happened since he left the inn at Upton. She began an affair with Fitzpatrick and they married on their way to Bath: she was not informed that he was already married to another woman. Moreover, Fitzpatrick has improved in health and is not in danger of death anymore, he has even talked about the duel, admitting he was the one who began the fight. Tom is relieved by the good news but cannot deflect his attention from the awareness that Sophia does not want him anymore. Black George comes to visit him and Partridge brings the news that Mrs Waters is actually Tom's mother. Black George refers that

Western and his sister are not intended to see each other again: they had an argument over Lord Fellamar, and Sophia supported her father.

Meanwhile, Square falls seriously ill and consumed with guilt, decides to write to Allworthy. He confesses Tom did not rejoice for Allworthy's illness, he was indeed the only person truly worried and sorry for Allworthy's bad health. Tom got drunk only when Allworthy's health improved and wanted to celebrate his life. Furthermore, Nightingale tells him that a friend of Blifil's was seen talking with the two men who swore they saw Tom beginning the duel with Fitzpatrick: they were commissioned by Lord Fellamar in order to trap Tom. When interrogated, Blifil assures he sent his friend to investigate and try to clear Tom's name. Allworthy believes him and praises his behaviour. The two go to pay a visit to Tom and Allworthy recognises Partridge, who explains he is not Tom's father as Allworthy was convinced. He recounts what happened to him since Allworthy ruined his name.

Mrs Waters comes to jail and speaks alone to Allworthy: she tells him Tom's true history. When Bridget Allworthy discovered her pregnancy from Mr Summer, a clergyman's son, she confided it to Jenny's mother and they resolved to send Mrs Deborah Wilkins away for a period, in order to better conceal Bridget's pregnancy. In the meantime, Allworthy left for one of his travels and spent a quarter of a year far from home. Mrs Waters helped Bridget during her pregnancy and delivered baby Tom on Allworthy's bed the day he found him. Tom is therefore discovered to be nothing less than Allworthy's own nephew. Moreover, Jenny Waters tells Allworthy that Dowling – a close friend of Blifil's – told her she would be given money rewards from a gentleman if she incited the accusations against Tom. Allworthy understands this gentleman must be his nephew Blifil.

Allworthy manages to make Blifil confess his guilt and comes to know that Blifil and Dowling knew Tom's real identity since Mrs Bridget wrote an explanatory letter to Blifil, asking him to tell her brother the whole story. After having cleared this point, Allworthy speaks to

Sophia, praising her decision to refuse Blifil. He proposes Tom to her, pointing out that he is his heir. When squire Western hears the news he immediately agrees to the marriage of Tom with his daughter. Sophia is upset with Tom because of his past behaviour but when they talk Tom is able to dismiss her accusations. Tom is finally restored as a gentleman and as a worthy individual, and can marry the woman he loves. Tom and Allworthy have the reconciliation Tom hoped for and Blifil is distanced by Allworthy, who does not want to relate to him anymore. Nevertheless, he gives Blifil an annuity, to which Tom adds a part.

Tom and Sophia decide to live in an estate close to Nightingale and Nancy, where they have a son and a daughter. Mrs Western and Sophia are reconciled and Partridge is given an annuity by Tom. He is therefore able to lead another school and eventually marries Molly Seagrim, Black George's daughter. Parson Supple manages to marry Mrs Waters, and Mrs Fitzpatrick is able to obtain a legal separation from her husband and continue to lead a satisfactory existence.

## **3.2 Analysis of the male orphan**

### *1. Gender and sexuality*

Gender plays an important role in *Tom Jones*, as it does in the previously analysed *Moll Flanders*. Fielding sets the story of a male orphan, raised by a wealthy gentleman and given a proper education. Nevertheless, this foundling immorally acts several times during the proceeding of the narration. He therefore becomes a sinner, according to religion and to the eighteenth-century mentality, a sinner like Moll Flanders who is considered a "whore" by the author himself.

Notwithstanding this similarity, Tom is eventually discharged from the accusation of being immoral, he is given a justification for his sleeping with many women. Women should be the ones to blame, because they incite Tom to immorally act. Moreover, not all women should be considered responsible for their male counterparts' sins – only the “unnatural, dominant women”<sup>140</sup> instigate sexual immorality. Sophia Western is indeed free from this inclination, she is not a masculine female character, she does not incite immorality in men.

When Tom surrenders to sexual instincts, he is always provoked by dominant female characters. For instance, Molly Seagrim, with whom Tom sleeps more than once, is said by the author to be the inciter over “Tom’s virtuous resolutions”.<sup>141</sup> Tom is therefore justified because he was initially resolved to maintain a moral behaviour; he only cedes after Molly’s continual temptations: Tom is described as virtuous and pure, in contrast to Molly’s immorality.

Furthermore, his virtue is reinforced by Tom’s will to protect Molly when she is found pregnant – he takes the responsibility for his supposed faults and wants to provide for the baby. He believes he is the guilty and wants to pay for his misbehaviour. The narrator, however, repeatedly reinforces, with his statements, the idea that Tom is innocent and it is Molly the one to blame for Tom’s sexual liaisons with her – she provoked and almost forced him to possess her. Tom is conversely described as a pure character who should not be blamed for Molly’s unnaturalness.<sup>142</sup>

Molly is attacked by the parishioners and publicly accused and filled with shame. She is only saved by Tom’s intervention and his kindness in taking on his responsibilities. With his behaviour, he not only saves an ashamed Molly, but is also praised for his actions. Squire Western, for instance, is not surprised by Tom’s illicit sex and he even frankly admits he did the same in his youth. Fornication among lower-class members is not considered a guilt for men, and

---

<sup>140</sup> Carol Stewart, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics*, cit., p. 63

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63

in Western's vision, Tom should not be ashamed, whereas Molly should. Stuart Sim summarises this concept, by stating that "society is always likely to turn a kinder eye on a male sexual adventurer than a female".<sup>143</sup>

Moreover, when Tom fornicates with Mrs Waters at the Upton's inn, he is again described as an innocent figure driven into sin by a dominant woman. Indeed, Tom is depicted while performing a natural action, namely eating, when he is seduced by Mrs Waters. Fielding refers to Mrs Waters, using "the whole artillery of love" (*TJ*, p.354), thus suggesting a military comparison. Tom is caught during an innocent activity, whereas Mrs Waters, the dominant woman, performs an unnatural and impure action, trying to seduce him. Even Lady Bellaston is described as a dominant woman trying to take advantage of a man apparently not inclined to have an affair with her. Nevertheless, he cedes to her provocation, or maybe to the money reward she gives him for his company. Tom only stops his submission to tempting masculine women when he decides to decline Mrs Hunt's marriage proposal, re-establishing the natural order of courtship.

In order not to blame Tom for his sexual behaviour, Fielding also provides a detailed past of the unnatural women who try and seduce Tom. Their histories show how these women are used to immoral behaviours, and, therefore, give a further justification for Tom's actions. Molly Seagrim, for instance, is found with Square and we are informed that she also had an affair with Will Barnes, who can therefore be the father of Molly's baby as well as Tom.

Mrs Waters, moreover, has a disreputable past which is thoroughly narrated in more than a chapter: she was Captain Waters' partner but they were not legally married. She had an affair with Northerton and she fled with him; when she meets Tom she wants to possess him,

---

<sup>143</sup> Stuart Sim, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and Contemporary Social Issues: An Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 68

regardless her bonds with other men. Lady Bellaston is suggested to have a “flaw”<sup>144</sup> which can possibly be identified with the loss of her virginity. Furthermore, she is the person to blame for Lord Fellamar’s attempted rape to Sophia.

Other two women are presented as guilty in the plot, namely Mrs Western and Mrs Bridget Allworthy. The former insinuates for the first time the idea of a marriage between Blifil and Sophia: she communicates her plan to her brother and therefore instils this will into Mr Western’s mind. Bridget Allworthy is responsible for bringing the seed of illegitimacy into the Allworthy family, and Mr Summer – the father of the child – is only mentioned into the plot. Furthermore, it is always a woman – namely Jenny Jones, that is Mrs Waters – who helps Bridget with the concealment of her pregnancy and she is the one who leaves baby Tom onto Mr Allworthy’s sheets.

Consequently, it quite evidently appears how Fielding contrives several devices in order to absolve Tom for his sexual appetites. Tom is always justified because he cedes to sex while performing generous and charitable actions. For example, he meets Molly Seagrim because he is used to helping her father Black George who is always in need and Tom does his best to ease his situation. Before sleeping with Mrs Waters, Tom saved her from Northerton. When he spends his time with Lady Bellaston, he is in the meantime trying to convince Nightingale into marrying Nancy: he is therefore performing generosity to redeem his soul.

Fielding reinforces Tom’s virtue also through Allworthy and Sophia’s favourable reactions to Tom’s illicit sex. Indeed, when Tom admits his immorality in order to protect the pregnant Molly and takes on his own responsibilities for the deed, Allworthy praises his behaviour. Nevertheless, he gives him a speech on morality, but is proud of Tom’s fairness in admitting his misbehaviour: this event improves Tom’s virtue in the eyes of Allworthy. Furthermore, Sophia forgives Tom for all the women he slept with, and, in an occasion, she is even presented as envious rather than

---

<sup>144</sup> Carol Stewart, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics*, cit., p. 63

angry. When she discovers Tom had sex with Mrs Waters, she leaves her muff on Tom's bed: the muff represents women's genitalia. Sophia is therefore not blaming Tom, but wishing she was Mrs Waters.<sup>145</sup>

Sexual wantonness is therefore more acceptable in men rather than women and even more in poor men. Indeed, when Tom marries Sophia, she is concerned with her husband's past and wants to fix his past mistakes in order to clear his reputation. Tom's recognition as a noble heir changes the degree of importance of Tom's possible illegitimate fatherhood, because Molly now belongs to a lower social class than his. This is probably the reason why Molly Seagrim is offered a marriage proposal from Partridge, who has in the meantime received an annuity of 50£ from Tom that allowed him to open a school. Molly's wills are not taken into consideration because she is seen as a past mistake to be fixed to redeem Tom and make him appear as an ideal figure worth imitation and respect.<sup>146</sup>

As a consequence, it appears that Fielding tries to depict Tom always as a virtuous character brought to misbehaviour and sexual incontinence by dominant and masculine female characters. On the other hand, however, we are presented a male hero who is highly "feminized"<sup>147</sup>: Tom is hardly ever depicted for his masculine traits, maybe only when the narrator emphasises Tom's love for hunting. When he fights with other men, he does it only to protect someone else or to defend a woman's honour. Moreover, every woman in the novel notices Tom's handsomeness, and he is always described praising his physical beauty, positioning him in the female heroine's tradition.

Almost every female character falls in love with Tom few minutes after meeting him: landladies and chambermaids feel attracted by Tom's beauty as soon as they see him. Furthermore, although Tom is a generous and kind character, he appears like a "passive"

---

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-65

<sup>146</sup> Stuart Sim, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and Contemporary Social Issues*, cit., pp. 68-69

<sup>147</sup> Carol Stewart, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics*, cit., p. 65

individual who, for the majority of the plot, seems driven by the events. He does not take the reins of his own life: events simply happen to him until he refuses Mrs Hunt's proposal. This may be identified as the turning point, the moment which sets Tom's taking control of his actions and fight for his beloved Sophia.<sup>148</sup>

## 2. Illegitimacy

By dealing with a male illegitimate protagonist, and by including also other illegitimate characters in the novel, Fielding highlights the issue of illegitimacy during his contemporary society. As previously analysed, eighteenth-century morality imposed shame on bastard children and also on their parents, forcing the mothers to conceal pregnancies, and often making the fathers lie on their affairs with the mothers. Fielding was indeed highly criticised by his contemporaries for his decision to deal with a bastard as the main character.

Modern critics link Fielding's use of illegitimacy in *Tom Jones* to the earlier illegitimacy of fiction. Indeed, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, the genre of the novel was still a new-born literary entity, and it was still uncertain whether it was "lawful to read romances". By the middle of 1700, however, novels and their fiction acquired more dignity and respect among critics, writers and readers, thus allowing novelists to use their works to deal with the more various issues.<sup>149</sup>

Fielding's narration in *Tom Jones* is indeed exemplary of this literary tendency. The narrator uses his capability of fictionalisation to deal with contemporary social issues, mixing his inventiveness with his own judgment. By virtue of his style, Fielding manages to focus the readers' attention onto the core of problems: in this case illegitimacy, the lacking government care of orphans and social elitism. Fielding himself reinforces this idea through his statements inserted in the novel. In addition to invention, he remarks, an author should have a wide

---

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-66

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 70

“knowledge of history and of previous literary achievements”, vitally important if the author is interested in writing “serious fiction”. He furthermore should be a traveller or at least have a vast “experience of the world”.<sup>150</sup>

Fielding’s novel appears as a book containing contrasting or at least challenging messages: on the one hand, bastardy is analysed as a danger to avoid in spite of prudence, while on the other hand, illegitimacy is presented as an intrinsic part of eighteenth-century society impossible to delete. Indeed, the married and grown-up Tom is helped by the virtuous Sophia in fixing his past illegitimate relationships, thus suggesting the high value of prudence. However, Tom, despite being the heir of a noble family, remains a bastard and his condition cannot be changed by the events. Nevertheless, his illegitimate condition does not prevent him from his ideal marriage to a wealthy woman, and likewise, his relationships out of wedlock do not harm anybody.<sup>151</sup>

By proving Tom’s blood bonds with the Allworthy family, Fielding unravels the novelistic issue: by virtue of Tom’s social position, squire Western approves Sophia and Tom’s marriage, allowing the happy ending of the book. Furthermore, it also solves a social question because wealthy family connections pledge respectability and inheritance: it is by virtue of Tom’s connection with Mrs Bridget Allworthy that he is recognised as a dignified wealthy gentleman.

The “birth mystery” in *Tom Jones* allows the author to emphasise the irony which stands inside the question of legitimacy. On one hand, from the beginning of the story Tom is seen as a gentleman, and is praised for his behaviour everywhere he goes, regardless his origins. On the other hand, he is eventually recognised as a legitimate but illegitimate heir of the Allworthys, because he is born out of wedlock. Notwithstanding this, Tom is the one who inherits the estate, not the wholly legitimate but unvirtuous heir Blifil.<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Brean Hammond, Shaun Regan, *Making the Novel*, cit., p. 120

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-121

<sup>152</sup> Brian McCrea, *Impotent Fathers*, cit., pp. 89-90

Furthermore, the only character punished by the end of the novel is indeed the hypocrite but legitimate Allworthy's heir Blifil, whom, in contrast with Tom, is not known for having illegitimate relationships. It seems that Fielding suggests a reward of virtue, where virtue is to be seen separated from sexual legitimacy. "Tom is not moral or virtuous by the exacting standards of his age", his sexual appetites should be taken as "*natural* instincts incapable of harming anyone".<sup>153</sup>

### 3. *Eighteenth-century attitude towards orphans and how Fielding engages with social problems*

*Tom Jones* emphasises the social position of orphans, taking them as figures to commiserate, rather than blame. Their situation is represented as independent from their own faults, and it is their parents who should be educated. Mr Allworthy's position is emblematic of Fielding's vision, because he hardly ever gives punishments to mothers who conceive out of wedlock: he prefers giving them lectures on the importance of prudence and marriage. Both with Jenny Jones and with Molly Seagrim, Allworthy does not send them to Bridewell – a sort of house of correction – but, conversely, tries to educate them and make them understand the importance of being married before conceiving.

Consequently, the orphans and their defining personality, discussed in the previous chapters, are presented as positive: foundlings are forced to fight and live from a troubled position and the care they have in pursuing their goals becomes a moral value in *Tom Jones*. Their sexual behaviour should therefore not be taken into high consideration by virtue of their qualities and of the hardships they have to overcome.

In this novel, Fielding discusses the traditional vision against orphans, through the attitudes of several characters – Mrs Deborah Wilkins, Thwackum and Blifil among the others. Mrs

---

<sup>153</sup> Brean Hammond, Shaun Regan, *Making the Novel*, cit., p. 122

Wilkins's initial speech when she is called by Mr Allworthy, who found baby Tom on his bed, is representative, and it may be worth reporting its most exemplifying parts:

Why should your worship provide for what the parish is obliged to maintain? [...] I would have it put in a basket, and sent out and laid at the churchwarden's door. It is a good night, only a little rainy and windy; and [...] it is two to one but it lives till it is found in the morning. But if it should not, we have discharged our duty in taking proper care of it; and it is, perhaps, better for such creatures to die in a state of innocence, than to grow up and imitate their mothers; for nothing better can be expected of them. (*TM*, p. 12)

Deborah's words highlight how women who conceive out of wedlock are generally considered among the eighteenth-century population: they are "whores" who need punishment and their children's fate is likely to be equal to their mothers'. Orphans are supposed to become criminals, in addition to illegitimate parents. Furthermore, they are a "burden" for the communities because parishes should provide for them if their mothers are too poor or too ashamed to raise the children themselves.

Jenny Jones embodies the figure of the poor mother who is not in the condition to raise her child or marry the father of the baby. Obviously, she is only supposed to be Tom's mother but she nevertheless is representative: her position shows how eighteenth-century laws tended to obstacle mothers in need. Allworthy's point of view is, in contrast, representative of Fielding's vision of the institutions: he appears to be far more sympathetic and helpful than the government itself. Indeed, Fielding deplored the Poor Law system and the Bridewell institution which meant corporal punishment and hard labour for single mothers. Fielding was a philanthropist committed to the orphans' cause and promoted a child-care organisation different from the already existing one. His novel is therefore also a means of gaining support and sympathy to those abandoned children, and possibly raise funds for their cause.<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, cit., pp. 42-43

If Jenny Jones represents the poor mother, Tom Jones stands for the orphan raised as a gentleman. His condition provokes Blifil's envy and his worries about Allworthy's patrimony: Tom is seen as a threat to his inheritance. However, the common interpretation of the law prevented illegitimate children from inheritance and, therefore, Allworthy's leaving him an annuity when he thought he had to die, should be considered as an unlawful action. Illegitimate children were considered "the sons of nobody"<sup>155</sup> and consequently, could not inherit at all. Nevertheless, Blifil knows Tom's origin and is therefore intended to keep the secret for himself, in order to be the only heir of Allworthy's estate. Tom is representative of the middle- and landowner-classes.

As in *Moll Flanders*, the theme of incest is present also in *Tom Jones*. The danger to commit incest or even to marry their mother is the foundlings' punishment: it is their price to pay for not knowing their origins. Tom experiences the threat of incest when he sleeps with Mrs Waters. Since he does not know her real name, namely Jenny Jones, he is not able to understand the possibility of being sleeping with his own mother. When Partridge later reveals Tom Mrs Waters's actual identity, Tom is dismayed and worried. Obviously, Jenny Jones is not his real mother and he is therefore relieved from the incest danger. However, the inclusion of such an episode in the plot is representative of the orphans' "threat to the social order", through which Fielding manages to deal with the common issues related to orphans and foundlings.<sup>156</sup>

One more manner of engaging with the orphans' problem in *Tom Jones* is achieved through the situation of Nancy Miller and Mr Nightingale. Nancy is pregnant from Nightingale, who had previously promised to marry her. However, when he discovers Nancy's pregnancy, he decides to leave her and submit to his father's will, thus marrying the woman he wishes. Tom struggles to make Nightingale change his mind and fulfil the proposal he made to Nancy. This episode

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 43

emphasises the eighteenth-century belief that women ought to be protected from men who seduced them with marriage proposals and later left them pregnant.

Furthermore, only some years after *Tom Jones* was written, the Hardwick Marriage Act was passed. Before this act, a couple was considered married even if by virtue of a marriage proposal. With the act, only couples legally married in church could be considered legitimate couples and thus, children born out of wedlock but within a marriage proposal could not be considered legitimate anymore. The act only emphasises the bad situation of women who had to provide for their babies, because even before it was passed, their position was equally dangerous.

Tom's efforts to make Nightingale marry Nancy, however, are the result of Tom's rural education, in contrast to Nightingale's urban vision. In a small rural country, the importance of a promise was still very highly considered, whereas in a big city like London, only legal actions tended to be taken into consideration. Tom is used to prejudices against orphans and, therefore, wants to prevent Nancy and Nightingale's baby from experiencing them as well. Fielding seems to be concerned with the importance of common sense among all social classes and countries: this is probably the reason why all the "fallen women" are saved before the end of the novel. All of them manage to marry and they do it before the birth of their children, therefore saving their reputation and making their children legitimate in front of the law.<sup>157</sup>

#### 4. *Tom's identity*

Tom Jones is an orphan raised as a gentleman at Allworthy's Paradise Hall. Nevertheless, his origins remain unknown almost until the end of the novel, both to him and to the majority of the other characters. Therefore, Tom grows up with the awareness that he is a foundling, he thinks his mother is Jenny Jones and his father's identity is unknown: this allows Tom more freedom of behaviour than a non-orphan character. Consequently, Tom is pictured as a mobile figure: when

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-46

he is not at Paradise Hall, he enjoys spending his time hunting with squire Western or with George Seagrim, the gamekeeper. His origin allows him not to be constrained to a unique role or identity, he can have a wide range of different-class companies. Indeed, Black George struggles to supply his family with the needed to survive, and he lives in very modest conditions.

Furthermore, when Mr Allworthy bans Tom from Paradise Hall, Tom feels initially lost and does not know how to act. However, he soon realises he is now empowered with even more freedom than before: he will not be associated with the Allworthys and he will not have a name's reputation to protect. Moreover, if he flees from Somersetshire, he will not be immediately identified as the unknown-origin orphan and with the gentleman sphere. He therefore decides to leave for the sea, but soon changes his mind: he meets some soldiers and resolves to join the army. However, his resolution is again soon left when he finds Sophia's pocketbook and wants to reach her in London.

Consequently, when Tom is forced to leave the Allworthys, he understands he can play with different identities. Nevertheless, his genteel education does not allow him the freedom he believed he could have. Tom has not been taught a trade or sent to apprenticeship and is therefore not able to provide for himself by working. Furthermore, he is used to generosity – being without income, however, he cannot help those in need and spends all the money he has, thus ruining himself without giving others the financial support he wishes. In order to raise money, he appeals to the only “job” he sees as possible: in London he becomes a “kept man”, that is a male prostitute. From Lady Bellaston's rooms, he is even more degraded, being accused of murder and obliged to a period in jail.<sup>158</sup>

Tom is given a happy ending by virtue of his past generosity that makes the friends he helped struggle in order to help him back. Nevertheless, Tom's degeneration without Allworthy's help gives a plausible picture of a foundling's typical life. During the eighteenth century, an

---

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 39

abandoned orphan was likely to have a life of struggles and end up in ruin rather than being financially helped and given a genteel education by a wealthy country squire.<sup>159</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40

## Conclusion

The orphan in English eighteenth-century novels is used as a means of focusing the citizens' attention on the problems that mostly affected the population's standard of living. The fictional orphan is a useful character to denounce the contemporary social problems like the poor government system of care for foundlings, and the changing situation in familial relationships mainly caused by the industrial revolution. Furthermore, in emphasising the different treatment towards male and female orphans, the foundling also becomes a clue of the misogynistic eighteenth-century society.

By virtue of the analysis of Defoe and Fielding's novels, the orphan appears as a troublesome character, forced to fight from a very uncomfortable position. However, his or her struggles are eventually rewarded, therefore suggesting a positive future for abandoned children – a message of hope for those miserable orphans. Their virtue is an intrinsic part of their nature because they need a strong goal-oriented personality to be able to survive in such a disturbing society. Indeed, it is only through the achievement of upper social bonds that fictional orphans are recognised as valued orphans.

Nevertheless, the orphans' success in the analysed novels is closely related to the importance of education. Indeed, both Moll and Tom achieve their happy ending by virtue of their education: it is their genteel training that allows them a final accomplishment. Although the eighteenth-century fictional orphan is not irreprehensible in his/her behaviour, he/she is eventually reconsidered by society because his/her virtue seems to be enormously superior to his/her faults and sins. Moll is forced to prison to be redeemed for her crimes and Tom must understand the seriousness of his sexual sins before they are allowed to gain a complete social approval and a reward for their virtue, achieved through legitimate upwards mobility.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

- Anonymous. *Memoirs of an unfortunate young nobleman, return'd from a thirteen years slavery in America, where he had been sent by the wicked contrivances of his cruel uncle.* ..., Andover, Gale ECCO, 2010.
- Defoe, Daniel. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, London, Penguin Books, 1989.
- Defoe, Daniel. *The Generous Protector, or a Friendly Proposal to Prevent Murder and other Enormous Abuses, by Erecting an Hospital for Foundlings and Bastard Children*, London, Printed for A. Dodd, 1731.
- Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Dickens, Charles. *Little Dorrit*, New York, Anboco, 2016, Kindle E-Book.
- Fielding, Henry. *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, London, Wordsworth, 1999.
- Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*, London, Penguin, 1985.
- Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

## Secondary Sources

- *BBC – History – British History in Depth: The Foundling Hospital*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/foundling\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/foundling_01.shtml), accessed on 14 November 2016.
- *Character Types*, <http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/character1.html>, accessed on 28 November 2016.
- *Coram and the Foundling Hospital*, <http://www.coram.org.uk/about-us/our-heritage-foundling-hospital>, accessed on 14 November 2016.
- Davis, J. Lennard. *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983.
- *Freytag's Pyramid*, <http://www.ohio.edu/people/hartleyg/ref/fiction/freytag.html>, accessed on 28 November 2016.
- Hammond, Brean and Regan, Shaun. *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Hunter, J. Paul. *Before Novels. The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1990.
- Jones, Mary Gwladys. *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Puritanism in Action*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1938.
- König, Eva. *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Vicissitudes of the Eighteenth-Century Subject*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Lane, Joan. *Apprenticeship in England, 1600-1914*, London, University College London Press, 1996.

- McCrea, Brian. *Impotent Fathers, Patriarchy and Demographic Crisis in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1998.
- McKeon, Michael. *Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985 .
- McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Mullan, John. *Orphans in Fiction – The British Library*, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/orphans-in-fiction>, accessed on 24 November 2016.
- Nixon, Cheryl. *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood and Body*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011.
- Perry, Ruth. *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Pugh, Gillian. *London's Forgotten Children. Thomas Coram and the Foundling Hospital*, Stroud, The History Press, 2012, Kindle E-Book.
- Richetti, John. *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Sim, Stuart. *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and Contemporary Social Issues: An Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Stewart, Carol. *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010.

- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, New York, Harper & Row, 1977.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1956.
- Zunshine, Lisa. *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England*, Columbus, The Ohio University Press, 2005.