

# The Legal World of *Moll Flanders*: Crime in The Eighteenth Century

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## Abstract

This research will be examining the causation of Moll Flanders' crime, and whether or not her deviance can be deemed "criminal." Moll's behavior needs to be determined whether or not it is deviant to eighteenth century English social norms, or to England's governing laws. Skyes and Matza's Theory of Neutralization, when applied to Moll Flanders, allows the reader to understand the implications of Moll's internal justifications of her behavior and that Moll's actions are not necessarily criminal. Applying Robert Merton's Anomie Theory allows us to appreciate the societal pressures placed upon Moll to conform to the norms of society. Applying these criminological theories to Moll's actions will prove that Moll's "deviant" behavior was a result of her anomie from the gentry in eighteen-century England. Furthermore, Moll's "neutralization" will demonstrate her incessant desire to remain apart of the gentry social class by attempting to eliminate the social stigma attached to her criminal activity.

## Background Information

### Social Structure Anomie Theory:

- Two elements of society have the propensity to produce anomic conditions: culturally defined goals and the socially approved methods of obtaining the goals.
- The theory argues that legitimate means to acquire the culturally defines goals (such as wealth) are stratified within society according to class. Individuals who are unable to achieve society because they are blocked from the socially approved methods soon find that they are unable to achieve society's standard goals.
- Merton's five adaptations:
  - Conformity
  - Innovation
  - Ritualism
  - Retreatism
  - Rebellion

### Neutralization Theory:

- Unlike other criminological theories this theory believes that delinquents feel guilt and/or shame for their actions. This theory believes that criminals:
  - Feel guilt and/or shame over their illegal acts
  - Respect law abiding citizens
  - Understand who they can and cannot victimize
  - Are not immune to society's demand for conformity
- Skyes and Matza put forth five neutralization techniques that criminals use in order to eliminate their guilt in order to commit their crimes:
  - Denial of responsibility
  - Denial of injury
  - Denial of victim
  - Condemnation of the condemners
  - Appeal to higher loyalties

Merton, Robert K. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3.5 (Oct., 1938): 672-682. Web. 16 Jan. 2014.

Sigel, Larry S. *Criminology: The Core* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011. Print.

Skyes, Gresham M. and David Matza. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review* 22.6 (Dec., 1957): 664-670. Web. 16 Feb. 2014.

## Evidence

- Moll is born in Newgate prison and soon orphaned.
- Moll aspires to be a "gentlewoman" but from an early age does not understand the true meaning of the title.
- Moll marries five different men throughout the course of the novel to remain a "gentlewoman."
- After Moll's last husband, the banker dies, she resorts to a life of crime in order to maintain her wealth.
- She rationalizes that crime is her only means of income and when she finds a more "suitable" career choice.
- Decides that she cannot steal from those who are "worse off" than she is.
- See's her behavior as a result of her condition.

## Conclusion

One of the consequences of Moll being born an orphan is that she is not entitled to the same type of social instruction that is offered to children of the middle station or the elite. This blockage has caused Moll to misunderstand the titles of the elite, making Moll believe the status of "gentlewoman" is accessible to her. However, soon after marrying her first husband Robin she realized that her position in the "elite class" is temporary without a husband. Moll's string of marriages can be seen as her attempt to conform to society and achieve the status of a gentlewoman in a socially acceptable manner. Nevertheless, because of Moll's anomie her attempt to conform to society only lasts so long and she is forced to achieve society's goal of status through the adaptation of innovation. Moll's switch into a life of crime is her way of maintaining her gentlewoman lifestyle within society. As a result of her age, she can no longer marry and turns to a life of crime to maintain her status. Moll neutralizes her actions by rationalizing that she commits crime as a result of her condition; she removes her responsibility by blaming outside forces that prevent her from achieving her wealth in a socially acceptable manner.

*"However, I did the child no harm; I did not so much as fright it, for I had a great many tender thoughts about me yet, and I did nothing but what, as I may say, mere necessity drove me to."* – Moll Flanders (Defoe 176)

*"...the busy devil that drew me in had too fast hold of me to let me go back; but as poverty brought me in, so avarice kept me in, till there was no going back...avarice stepped in and said, 'Go on; you have had very good luck, go on till you have gotten four or five hundred pounds, and then you shall leave off, and then you may live easy without working at all.'"*  
Moll Flanders (Defoe 186)



Defoe, Daniel. *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll's Flanders*. Ed. Michael Seidel. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005. Print.  
Hogarth, William. *The Four Times of Day Plate I, Mourning*. Etching and Engraving. The Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth University.