A Sin of a Different Order: Criminal Motives and Morality in *Roxana*

Daniel Defoe's novel *Roxana* explores the morality and motives behind crime and examines the intersections of crime, wealth, and class status. In the beginning of Roxana's life as a fortunate mistress, her crimes are depicted as a necessity in order for Roxana to survive poverty through any means possible, in this case, through prostitution. However, as Roxana reaches new heights of wealth through sexual relationships with high class men, even royalty, this depiction of crime as a sin of necessity unravels as Roxana keeps sinning out of vanity and greed. Through Roxana's internal moral progression, Defoe reveals a hidden message present in the novel: those with means to be moral, in terms of wealth, are the most immoral when they succumb to their vices, in that they commit crime not out of necessity, but simple moral weakness and hedonism.

Roxana's story as a fortunate mistress begins with her fall from a middle class existence into one of poverty and near starvation after her husband leaves her and their children. When her landlord proposes she begin a sexual relationship with him or face being kicked out of her home, Roxana is resistant but realizes how dire her situation is: "I told him that was impossible, for I must be beholden to him for it, for all the Friends I had in the World wou'd not, or cou'd not, do so much for me as that he spoke of…I was in the worst Sence that desolate Word cou'd be us'd in" (30). She struggles with the decision, going back and forth until eventually she gives in– only to feel remorse and explain herself profusely to whomever will read her tale. She is not characterized as a criminal here, but as a victim who is forced into immoral acts. This is further exemplified after she gives in to the landlord, Roxana's lament that "Poverty was my snare; dreadful Poverty!" (p. 76) demonstrates the way that she did not become a prostitute from immorality, but recognizes she did the things she did in order to survive poverty. The figure of a snare is significant here– Defoe describes poverty as a trap of sorts, something Roxana has fallen

into through no fault of her own. Roxana sees herself as morally confined by the trap of poverty, forced into immoral action due to ill circumstances.

However, when Roxana describes her later crimes, the language changes drastically. She begins to blame her own vices and weaknesses, and admits to them freely, compared to her earlier self who named the snare of poverty as her downfall. As she achieves wealth, she begins to act out of vice rather than necessity: "Thus blinded by my own Vanity, I threw away the only Opportunity I then had, to have effectually settl'd my Fortunes, and secur'd them for this World" (161). Here she names vanity as the cause of her sin to have a child out of wedlock with the merchant and refuse him in marriage. The contrast between describing poverty as a snare versus vanity as a motivator marks a shift in Roxana's character. Despite her vanity and greed in refusing the merchant, she begs him to stay on account of her pregnancy: "I told him, 'twas hard, that, to have him stay, I shou'd be forced to do as Criminals do to avoid the Gallows, plead my Belly, and that I thought I had given him Testimonies enough of an Affection equal to that of a Wife" (155). Earlier sympathetic depictions of Roxana as a victim of her circumstances are in complete contrast to this description, where she for the first time begins to compare herself to a criminal. As she achieves high class and enough wealth to be independent, the word criminal begins to come up frequently in Roxana's descriptions of herself and her own actions– rather than making herself out to be a victim to circumstance as she did earlier in the novel. At the same time, Roxana begins to describe herself as Queen-like, and starts to aspire to be a mistress of the king: "I might have liv'd like a Queen, nay, far more happy than a Queen; and which was above all, I had now an Opportunity to have quitted a Life of Crime and Debauchery…But my Measure of Wickedness was not yet full" (159). This segment of the novel where Roxana returns to England and she lives as a single woman, there is a shift in Roxana. During this time, she begins

to compare herself to a queen and dreams of interaction with royalty, which she has never done before this point. Never has she mentioned wanting to achieve royal status before this time when she achieves excess wealth. The juxtaposition of being queen-like and committing "crime and debauchery" solidifies the commentary that equates high class crime with immorality. Roxana refuses a second chance at an honest life with a merchant because she wants to continue being loved and admired by many, which she is achieving through hosting parties for her high class neighbors. Her parties are when she begins to revel in her own beauty: "I was rich, beautiful, and agreeable, and not yet old; I had known something of the Influence I had had upon the Fancies of Men, even of the highest Rank; I had never forgot that the Prince de — had said with an Extasie, that I was the finest Woman in France…I thought of nothing less than of being Mistress to the King himself" (161). Her sin of vanity is deeply tied to descriptions of royalty, and her immorality and her desire for royalty are equated. During this period she even begins to use nobility as a metric of wealth, stating "[I was] as rich as any-body below the Nobility" (165), showing the way her vanity and her perceptions of nobility are inextricable from one another. The nobility serves as the final stage of Roxana's climb, and as her proximity to nobility increases, so does her vanity. This depiction of sin and nobility as being enmeshed with one another is evidence of this claim that immorality exists most strongly in those who have the means to avoid it– the wealthiest of all, the nobility. It's an ironic depiction turning the idolization of the ultra-wealthy nobility on its head– depicting the high class as the true criminals and hedonists within society, rather than the struggling and starving lower class that many critics of the realist novel claim to be the bane of a good society.

To solidify this argument, in order to argue against low class criminality as being immoral and present the wealthy as the real criminals, it is important to examine the criticisms of

the novel's depiction of low class criminals and its ties to criminal literature. In "Factual Fictions" Lennard Davis examines criminality and how its depiction in literature contributed to the rise of the realist novel. The depiction of the individual, specifically the individual who engages in morally corrupt acts, is a recurring trope in many of the works constituting the category of early realist novels. In Davis' words, "Novels tend to depict 'low-life' activities-robberies, sexual encounters, and so on" (123). This idea of criminality was a contentious subject matter for many, especially wealthy, higher class readers who feared these novels normalized and romanticized criminal acts. The wealthy were concerned with middle class readership of novels about criminality such as "fabulous adventures and memories of pirates, whores and pickpockets" (James Arbuckle, *Dublin Journal*, 1725). Defoe was certainly subject to these criticisms. Arbuckle specifically names Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in his condemnation of the realist novel, which is cited by Davis in *Factual Fictions*: "Your Robinson Crusoes…have afforded notable instances how easy is it to gratify our curiosity, and how indulgent we are to the biographers…who have been as greedily read by people of the better sort as the compilers of last speeches and dying words by the rabble" (Davis 123). However, these criticisms of the early realist novel reflect a greater ignorance among the wealthy about the core causes of crime being poverty, and fail to address the existence of criminal members of the high class. Defoe turns this criticism on its head by representing the "better sort" (higher class men) as complicit in crimes such as prostitution. Further, Roxana differs from other protagonists of "criminal literature" in that she falls into poverty rather than belonging to the lower class from the beginning. She also experiences a high class, wealthy lifestyle as the mistress of rich men. Her class identity is constantly in flux, and she experiences many facets of society, which allows Defoe to examine criminality and immorality at all levels of society, and compare the motives through their relation

to necessity and wealth. As, Roxana holds many places within the social hierarchy, from a middle-class beginning, then falling into poverty, and eventually ending up as a high class mistress of a French prince, her characterization reveals Defoe's thought that crime, specifically prostitution, isn't dependent on wealth or class status, but rather exists within all parts of society, even (and especially) within the wealthiest of all, the nobility.

One question potentially raised by this argument is why Defoe portrays Roxana as a criminal, but doesn't villainize the men who are complicit in her crimes. Roxana's financial and class identity being in flux diverts the criticism that there is one class responsible for criminality in society– and his use of a female protagonist takes this a step further. By moralizing a female protagonist, who tempts wealthy men through her irresistible beauty, Defoe avoids completely alienating or criticizing the main component of his readers, middle class and wealthy men (referring here to the availability of education in England made this the "educated" who would be reading this kind of novel at that time). Additionally, by centering the novel on a chameleon-like female protagonist, there is no biting criticism or moralization of one kind of person or class, but rather a gentle guidance towards the motives behind crime– the novel is illuminating rather than critical, it is complicated, sympathetic and ambiguous. Some men are portrayed as completely immoral, such as the king with his various mistresses, whereas others are portrayed kind-hearted but engaging in immoral actions, like the merchant. This is what creates moral ambiguity and complexity, and allows us to explore motives of crimes such as prostitution without harsh judgment or moralizing. It makes for more of a psychological novel than a spiritual one, especially when compared to the spiritual themes of Defoe's earlier works.

Speaking of Defoe's earlier works, it is significant that this was his final novel. Like Roxana, he transitioned from an average middle class existence into one of fame and excitement:

he achieved extreme levels of fame for his writing, participated in the rebellion against the Duke of Monmouth and fought against the monarchy, yet conversely, later worked for the monarchy of William III as a spy (Mutter, *Britannica*). Like Roxana, Defoe struggled with debt and poverty at the end of his life. Aspects of his life are present in the novel: not only are there insights into the life of the highly wealthy such as royalty, but there are comparisons of the merchant wealthy to the royal. He was a merchant himself, and his utilization of the noble wealthy as critique of greed and vanity rather than the merchant class is reflected in this. The depiction of the merchant as an honest, moral, yet fallible man is perhaps representative of what is at the center of this novel– a sympathetic, yet brutally honest depiction of human life and sin.

Through Roxana's climb to wealth, many facts of 17th century society are examined, from the impoverished to the nobility. Through the ever-changing protagonist, *Roxana* is able to examine motives and morals of both the rich and the poor. Defoe's depictions of Roxana's motivations for her crimes as a poor woman heavily contrast those of her as a wealthy woman, leading to the argument within the novel that those with the means to be moral are the most immoral when the commit their crimes– encouraging a more sympathetic and complex view of the motives behind crime.

Works cited

Defoe, Daniel. *Roxana.* Oxford World Classics

Davis, Lennard. "Factual Fictions"

Mutter, Reginald. "Daniel Defoe" Encyclopedia Britannica