

Victorian Concerns and Comic Perspectives in William Makepeace Thackeray's "Vanity Fair"

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The aim of the present research is to examine major social and satirical issues in the novel "Vanity Fair" written by the Victorian writer William Makepeace Thackeray, as well as analyse various writing techniques the author uses for creating comic effect.

The story is set in the time of the Napoleonic wars. The author's intention, though, was not to portray any battles or military leaders but his contemporary society and people with their problems and hopes. It mixes ambition, dishonest behaviour, rudeness, wealth and poverty, which is related by the writer to early/mid-Victorian England.

The Thackeray's novel is deeply ingrained in the tradition of British satirical writings. The works of Daniel Defoe ("Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders"), Lawrence Sterne ("The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman"), Jonathan Swift ("Gulliver's Travels"), Henry Fielding ("The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling"), Charles Dickens ("The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club"), which depicted the society by means of metaphor or exaggeration, were inspiration for him.

It should also be pointed out that Thackeray had quite an extensive experience of writing serialised stories as well as satirical illustrations for the magazine "Punch". He had been a long time contributor to that publication since 1841 and many satirical elements of the illustrations he wrote as well as some of the techniques he used in the works for the magazine were later incorporated in creating "Vanity Fair".

In fact, Thackeray planned his literary work as a satirical sketch and only gradually it became a novel that combined detailed characterisation and social satirical sketches. Diniejko notes that the novel had become more a literary work

than the purely satirical one. In that aspect the novel marks a change in the career of Thackeray as a satirical writer.¹

Satire is often strictly defined as a literary genre or form; although, in practice, it is also found in the graphic and performing arts. Elliott defines “satire” as a rhetorical device in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, ideally with an intent to bring about improvement. The researcher notes that although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humour in itself so much as an attack on something of which the author strongly disapproves, using the weapon of wit²

The use of humour and irony allows Thackeray to show the real picture of the society and criticise it at the same time:

“...one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cap and bells or a shovel-hat; and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking.”³

In this extract Thackeray states that everything in the book is true, since he needs tell the truth. Thackeray also explains what kind of story he intends to tell:

“...I am going to tell the story of harrowing villainy and complicated, but, as I trust, intensely interesting-crime. My rascals are no milk-and-water rascals, I promise you...”⁴

The main theme of the novel is the history of a social climber, Rebecca Sharp. While writing the novel, however, Thackeray widened the scope of the work and the book became in addition a portrait of his contemporary society. The novel describes not only the life of Becky Sharp but also reproduces characters of other people and shows their weaknesses such as greed, laziness, snobbery, hypocrisy and fraud.

“Vanity Fair” is subtitled ‘A Novel without a Hero’, which suggests that this story is not about one character, but about a number of characters, none of them is allowed to dominate the society they inhabit. This subtitle also implies the absence of heroism, i.e. all the characters are flawed, even the most sympathetic

¹ Diniejko, *Introduction to the Study of Literature in English*, 51.

² Elliott, *Satire*, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Satire>

³ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 99.

⁴ Ibid., 99.

have weak points. On the other hand, none of the characters are wholly evil or exceptionally kind, the final judgment is always left for the reader. Tucker stresses that “the main concern of the novel is the dark side of human nature”⁵. It should be noted that the people are not depicted as exceptional individuals; they are shown as typical representatives of Victorian society.

Thackeray describes in great detail, and with much accuracy, various institutions of England of those times: boarding school, church, debtors’ prison, stock exchange, army and parliament. From the very beginning of the novel there is a distinctive use of irony in descriptions of the revered English institutions. In the first chapter, while describing the departure of the two main heroines, Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley, from boarding school, the author makes note of the imperfections of human nature:

“Have you completed all the necessary preparations incident to Miss Sedley's departure, Miss Jemima?” asked Miss Pinkerton herself, that majestic lady, the Semiramis of Hammersmith, the friend of Doctor Johnson, the correspondent of Mrs. Chapone herself. “The girls were up at four this morning, packing her trunks, sister,” replied Miss Jemima; “we have made her a bow-pot.” “Say a bouquet, sister Jemima, 'tis more genteel.”⁶

This extract from the novel concerns human nature and class differences. People aspiring to higher social position try to emulate higher social groups. Those attempts are risible and the author, in this short passage, describes all manners of social prejudices and misapprehensions as well as aspirations that are shown by the short dialogue about the use of words. The allusions in the above passage to acquaintances, of which the reader has not heard and who are treated as well known and important, represent a satirical device often used by Thackeray in the novel. In that way the author indicates the pretentious behaviour of the characters. The same meaning is conveyed in ponderous titles he gives to Miss Pinkerton, such as comparisons to Semiramis or calling her a majestic lady.

The society as a whole, its motivations, preoccupations and interests are at the centre of the author’s attention. Interpreting the title of his own novel W. Thackeray draws reader’s attention to the object of his satire:

⁵ Tucker, *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, 412.

⁶ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 3.

“My kind reader, will you please remember that this history has Vanity Fair for a title, and that Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions.”⁷

The matters of inequality and plight of common folk are featured in Thackeray’s book, but what is prominent is the portrait of the society which values are distorted. The social standing of the characters in the book has little to do with their virtues. The values that are appreciated by the society are not those which are considered worthy. Most of the characters in the novel behave in the way that from the moral point of view is deeply wrong.

Sanders notes that Thackeray's convictions and world view are Victorian in fact. He deplores all that is false and superficial about the society. However, he is concerned about the way society looks at people and judges them. The Victorians in fact promoted the same virtues as Thackeray did. Hard work and virtuous mind were to be applauded.⁸

A similar opinion is expressed by Doncaster, who states that in the novel Thackeray identifies and vilifies social attitudes pervading in the society of England, and in fact in most societies of the author's time. The incessant pursuit of wealth and splendour, the vanity and duplicity of the higher classes were characteristic features of the Victorian higher society⁹.

Another researcher of the Victorian times Macleod notes the fact that puritanical values continued to shape the moral scenery of England in the times of Queen Victoria. To maintain their dominant position the higher classes had to resort to many devices. Their main aim was to control the principle means of communication in society. Due to their wealth they had significant influence on church and clergy, newspapers and literature. That allowed them to project a set of values and moral rules that were convenient for them.¹⁰

This goal was easy to achieve because they conformed to some of the dogmas of the protestant church: wealth was commonly considered to be the fruit of hard work and God's blessing. Poor people were wicked victims of their own laziness and lack of God's favour; their plight was not an effect of the society's but

⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁸ Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, 11.

⁹ Doncaster, *Changing Society in Victorian England*, 28.

¹⁰ Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class*, 253.

their own fault. Thus, the whole of society was under constant pressure to accept the idea that all wealthy people were good while the poor were sinful. During that time, however, a culture of excessive drinking and gambling was prevalent in most of England. Therefore the moral values of England in 1800's were distorted; this created a false picture of the aforementioned society and was later called Victorian morality. Those values were in constant conflict with the values of the rest of the society. Poor people were unable to afford to comply with the rules and were in fact indifferent to them. The codes of acceptable social behaviour were set by the higher levels of society and ruled their lives to a significant extent. Wealth and social standing in the society were in fact entwined much more closely than most of the people were ready to admit.

This is depicted by the writer of "Vanity Fair" in the plot line connected with the pursuit of the inheritance of old Miss Crawley. That person has a large amount of money and is courted by all members of her family who hope to receive the inheritance. The old lady herself is aware of that fact and even takes advantage of the situation; she mocks her family members and calls them her toadies.

A large part of the novel is devoted to money matters and people's reactions to money as well as the ways they obtain it. Everyone desperately searches for money, makes every effort to get it or is destroyed lacking or losing it, as in the case of Amelia's father who loses his fortune and with it all of his friends and dignity.

The person who is most driven by the desire for money and social position is Rebecca Sharp. All of her actions have only one aim: to achieve a high position in the society and wealth. Reflecting about money she states:

"It can buy social acceptability, the loss of it can rupture friendship and lead, as discovers, to cruel ostracism and the slow poisoning of a once happy home I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year."¹¹

The most important thing is the fact that she is not an outcast; not different from the rest of the society which is portrayed in the novel. All the characters of the novel are driven by the same motivation and try to achieve the same goal. The only difference is Rebecca's low birth and therefore she is facing a bigger

¹¹ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 575.

challenge in her endeavours in comparison to other characters of the book.

In another passage the author concentrates on the issue of money and its importance in relations between people. Miss Pinkerton sends a personal letter to Amelia's father, because she is a valued pupil in financial terms. In the paragraph reproduced below the author mocks Miss Pinkerton's self-delusion. She is shown as a pretentious person of low social status, who lives under her illusion of grandeur:

"In Miss Jemima's eyes an autograph letter of her sister, Miss Pinkerton, was an object of as deep veneration as would have been a letter from a sovereign. Only when her pupils quitted the establishment, or when they were about to be married, and once, when poor Miss Birch died of the scarlet fever, was Miss Pinkerton known to write personally to the parents of her pupils; and it was Jemima's opinion that if anything could console Mrs. Birch for her daughter's loss, it would be that pious and eloquent composition in which Miss Pinkerton announced the event."¹²

Matters of social status and class divisions in English Victorian society were prevalent and ruled, in fact, every aspect of life during that period. While criticising most of his novel's characters for being superficial and self-deluded money chasers, Thackeray presents the Victorian approach to social status. Rebecca Sharp is a daughter of an opera dancer and painter and her low origin is emphasised as the main cause of the flaws of her character.

At the very beginning of the novel Rebecca Sharp's character is revealed in her attitude to Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: a book given to all affluent graduates by Miss Pinkerton at the boarding school for girls. Rebecca was poor and considered not worthy of being given such a special present. Nevertheless, Miss Jemima, the principal's sister, gave it to her believing that the girl would feel upset if the book was not given to her as to the other, more prosperous, students. Rebecca, however, did not appreciate the gift and threw it away in the sight of Miss Jemima¹³

This event vividly showed the manipulating and self-interested character of Becky Sharp. She is kind and sweet towards people who are important or could be of some use, but the very moment she does not need them she discards, mocks

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid., 5-7.

and criticises them. That happens when Amelia Sedley's father loses his fortune and she becomes poor. Rebecca, who has been her best friend, immediately changes her attitude to her, treating her with disdain and contempt.

The author also points out this negative quality of Rebecca's character in her treatment of Miss Pinkerton at Chiswick School. Rebecca's deceitfulness is revealed in her ability to make a favourable impression on her:

“The fact is, the old lady believed Rebecca to be the meekest creature in the world, [...] used Rebecca to perform the part of the ingénue; and only a year before the arrangement by which Rebecca had been admitted into her house, and when Rebecca was sixteen years old, Miss Pinkerton majestically, and with a little speech, made her a present of a doll, which was, by the way, the confiscated property of Miss Swindle, discovered surreptitiously nursing it in school hours. How the father and daughter laughed as they trudged home together after the evening party (it was on the occasion of the speeches, when all the professors were invited) and how Miss Pinkerton would have raged had she seen the caricature of herself which the little mimic, Rebecca, managed to make out of her doll. Becky used to go through dialogues with it; it formed the delight of Newman Street, Gerrard Street, and the Artists' quarter: and the young painters, [...] used regularly to ask Rebecca if Miss Pinkerton was at home: she was as well known to them, poor soul!”¹⁴

This paragraph allows the reader to see Rebecca's views of the world and what she thinks of other people. She is shown as utterly cynical in treating people only as the means to reach her goal. Here the author mentions the gift, a doll, which has been confiscated from another pupil and given to Rebecca by Miss Pinkerton. Thackeray humorously makes allusion to the charity of people, who often take gifts from one person to look better, more important and make some favourable impression on the other. This episode reveals the writer's criticism of double standards in the society, where it is thought charitable to offer somebody something taken from another person. Such gifts, coming at low cost, though they may look generous, are in fact the opposite of true sacrifice and charity.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

The writer's critical attitude towards society is revealed by the fact that Rebecca was merely required to master a certain way of speaking and carrying conversation that guaranteed the acceptance of high society. In his criticism of people, Thackeray displays a great amount of disdain for the upper social classes. The author stresses that position in society has nothing to do with real virtue and is a product of deception and clever manipulation. The intelligence and wit of Rebecca are never underestimated:

“It is a fact that in a fortnight, and after three dinners in general society, that young woman had got up the jargon so well that a native could not speak it better, and it was only from her French being so good that you could know she was not a born woman of fashion.”¹⁵

In the above lines the writer emphasises that only a society whose values and morals are skewed can accept so easily, naively and without hesitation the deceptive and cunning Rebecca Sharp: a person so completely devoid of positive traits. In the short sentence “Only her perfect French betrayed that Rebecca was not part of the high society”¹⁶, the writer humorously takes a swipe not only at Rebecca Sharp but also at the society in general.

The art of lying is perfected by Rebecca and used to her advantage. The following passage illustrates the insincerity and egocentricity of this character.

“...Becky always made the point of being conspicuously polite to the professional ladies and gentleman that attended at these aristocratic parties by following them into the corners where they sat in silence, and shaking hands with them in the view of all persons. She was an artist herself as she said very truly; there was frankness and humility in the manner in which she acknowledged her origin, which provoked, or disarmed, or amused lookers-on, as the case might be.”¹⁷

In order to appear humble Rebecca does not hesitate to show her false appreciation to the artists performing during the parties. She is far from being humble but as long as it is expected of her to be such she boasts of her low origin to get acknowledgment from the fashionable society.

¹⁵ Ibid., 71.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷ Ibid., 478.

That shows also how shrewd Rebecca really is, since she is able to turn everything favourably for her, even the fact of her low origin, and use it to advance her status in high society. Thackeray also mocks the art of false pretence and cynicism describing the ways in which members of that group reacted to Rebecca's display of modesty and her sincerity about her humble roots. The people who find her behaviour normal are shown as idiots; others, who noticed her game but did not despise her, are treated ironically: their acceptance of such behaviour reveals their own cynicism.

The downfall of such a shrewd and sophisticated woman was due to her duplicity and the fact that she grew complacent. She treated her husband as an element in her ascendancy to the top echelons of society and ignored him from the moment it became clear that the inheritance she counted on when marrying Rawdon was lost to them.

The moment that Rawdon leaves the debtors' prison and finds his wife in the company of Lord Steyne is a turning point in her ascendancy. The whole of the construction unravels on Rebecca and, however clever and manipulating she is, her sins and weaknesses of character are to prove fatal for her plans.

This part of the novel, depicting the downfall of the protagonist, is typically Victorian. The writer exemplifies that even the most sophisticated and artful fraudsters will meet their end due to the flaws in their characters.

In the scene where Rawdon finds Lord Steyne with his wife there is also a sense of unravelling the corruption of the whole society. Lord Steyne thinks that the whole situation was a plan made by Rebecca to trap him and blackmail him. In anger he reveals to Rawdon the truth about his wife.

In the end, the book takes a very Victorian turn, becoming an affirmation of the values of nineteenth-century English society. In the end all the wicked are cast down and true virtue prevails. The proud and ambitious, although low born and poor, Becky Sharp has to be cast down while true virtue, in the form of Amelia Sedley coming from a wealthy family with traditions, is to become victorious and rewarded handsomely. That, as Crossick notes, makes "Vanity Fair" a book of conservative and traditional approach to the faith and beliefs of the ruling classes

of England, but its success was due to the fact that it well suited Victorian society's beliefs and traditions¹⁸.

The very fact of Becky's ascent and downfall was the best proof of the validity of the writer's and all of society's values. At the end of the novel true virtue wins and the wicked and manipulative people are cast down. That fate awaits Rebecca Sharp. In spite of her grace and her wits she does not manage to gain access to the highest levels of society. Her wickedness and insincerity are the reasons for her downfall.

Thackeray emphasises that success in that society can be achieved irrespective of someone's talents or moral standard. In fact he criticises the society in which such amoral and remorseless people as Rebecca Sharp can thrive and gain enormous power and social standing. The writer criticises the rules of this society and demystifies them at the same time, through the character of Becky, the ruthless social climber. But she is not the only one who deserves criticism. The whole of society is accused in the novel. The characters of the Rawdons, their preoccupations and plans are as much an accusation of the society as the history of Becky is.

Thackeray aims at showing that Victorian values are skewed. The people who enjoy the most reverence here are in that position for no particular discernible reason. The whole story of Rebecca Sharp's ascent to the glory and splendour serves as a reminder that high society does not in fact contain the best and most worthy representatives of England.

An instance of irony in the writings of Thackeray and his sense of human vanity as well as a critique of social rules and games is to be found in another passage from the novel:

"However much he might be disposed to hate all parvenus (Mr. Wenham was a staunch old True Blue Tory, and his father a small coal-merchant in the north of England)"¹⁹

In this paragraph the writer takes notice of human nature and the fact that people that are the farthest from virtue often claim it with the most zeal. This is

¹⁸ Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society*, 38.

¹⁹ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 490.

often the case with those people of apparently low class who are the purveyors of extreme right wing, reactionary convictions.

Thackeray expresses the idea that all levels of society are plagued by sin. From the lowest to the highest strata of society, all people are the same: starting with the Crawley family, who will go to any lengths to receive the inheritance from their rich parent, and ending with Rebecca's maid, who after the fall of her mistress steals some belongings to her and leaves for France without concerning herself with the fate of her employer.

The author makes the situation even more vicious and perverted when he ironically narrates how in Paris the maid opens a shop with the money she saved and stole from her employer and received from Lord Steyne. The irony sounds like sarcasm when the departure of the maid is described:

"The game, in her opinion, was over in that little domestic establishment. [...] she secured not only her own property, but some of her mistress's (if indeed that lady could be said to have any property at all). [...] The plated ware Mademoiselle left behind was too cumbrous, probably for which reason, no doubt, she also left behind the fire irons, the chimney-glasses, and the rosewood cottage piano."²⁰

Thackeray's sense of humour is evident in the final words of the above paragraph: "she also left behind the fire irons, the chimney-glasses, and the rosewood cottage piano", which demonstrate how the lower classes treat their obligations.

The behaviour of Rebecca's other domestic servants also demonstrates the double standards of the society. They were reverend and polite while Rebecca had money, but the very moment she was known to have lost her money as well as her protectors, the servants became disobedient and full of derision.

"...though the door was open and Becky was screaming a half-dozen of times a few feet off, not one of her attendants had obeyed her call."²¹

The portrait of this social group in "Vanity Fair" is full of irony and very critical. But the most damning element of it is the character of Rebecca herself and the ease with which she was able to find a place in that group and thrive there. The Victorian perspective in seeing the events is displayed very much by the way she

²⁰ Ibid., 526.

²¹ Ibid., 527.

was cast down and excluded from that fashionable society. Rebecca Sharp's own flaws of character were in fact at the roots of her calamity. That she was clever and educated as well as ruthless was undoubtedly true. But the qualities of her character that were certainly the cause of her defeat were her pride and falseness. She was ready to flatter people that served her aims or were more powerful than she, but as soon as they lost their power or became useless to her she started to treat them with contempt and condescension.

The whole of the story of Rebecca's downfall has at its core the Victorian assumption that bad deeds will be punished. The Victorian perspective is also seen in the way the woman was cast down and excluded from that fashionable society.

Another Victorian element of the story is the importance of social opinion. The relationship between Rebecca and Lord Steyne is not important unless it is officially acknowledged in society. Despite the fact that many people were aware of the ties that united them, nobody made any allusion to that until the moment of the scandal.

The novel represents the writer's disapproval of the conceited ideals in the fashionable society. His opinion is vividly expressed by Lady Jane's words about Rebecca:

"...She has deceived her husband as she has deceived everybody; her soul is black with vanity, worldliness and all sorts of crime."²²

The comprehensive analysis of the novel shows that in order to portray the society and its faults Thackeray uses humour, and the funniest passages tend to be those which contain the most vivid criticism of his contemporary society. The novel exhibits numerous sins and wrongdoings of the people.

In his portrayal of the Victorian people the writer examines its upper strata, the ruling classes and gentry, as well as the lower classes. He portrays them with humour, finding a comical side in all their endeavours. They are shown as vain and greedy.

The research demonstrated that the novel is a satire of the society as a whole, which is characterised by hypocrisy and opportunism on the one hand and

²² Ibid., 533.

human weakness connected with greed, laziness, and snobbery on the other. The novel is the portrait of the society whose values are distorted.

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