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SOCIAL SATIRE AND CRITICISM OF THE VICTORIAN ENGLAND IN THACKERAY'S *VANITY FAIR*

Abstract

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811, 1863) was one of the most important novelists of the Victorian era. Like his contemporaries, Thackeray also addressed the social problems of the British society in the Victorian era in his works. This period called the Victorian era in which Thackeray lived was a period in England where plenty of showiness existed and people attached importance to wealth and money. *Vanity Fair*, his work that earned him the greatest reputation as a writer, also addressed these social problems. What distinguished the Thackeray from his contemporaries was that he dealt with these disruptions through satire and with the unique setting of the work rather than a realist criticism. The present article aims to analyze the plot and the unique setting of *Vanity Fair* and find out the ways in which the plot and setting contribute to satire.

Keywords: W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Satire, Social Criticism, Victorian Era

1. Introduction

When William Makepeace Thackeray began to write *Vanity Fair*¹, he first wrote it in series in *Punch* magazine with the title “Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society,” which also explicitly set Thackeray’s goal of satirizing the Victorian society’s shortcomings (Jones&Knowles 5). Although the readers initially had difficulty understanding the work, *Vanity Fair* attracted the readers’ attention and became a success afterwards (Jones&Knowles 5). Thackeray’s work was lauded by influential writers of the time including Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot (Lilia, “Contemporary Response to *Vanity Fair*”) but there were also some critical receptions. Robert Bell, for example, was highly critical of the work. He stated:

The people who fill up the motley scenes of *Vanity Fair*, with two or three exceptions, are as vicious and odious as a clever condensation of the vilest qualities can make them. The women are especially detestable. Cunning, low pride, selfishness, envy, malice, and all uncharitableness are scattered amongst them with impartial liberality. It does not enter into the design of *Vanity Fair* to qualify these bitter ingredients with a little sweetness now and then; to shew the close neighbourhood of the vices and the virtues as it lies on the map of the human heart, that mixture of good and evil, of weakness and strength, which in infinitely varied proportions, constitutes the compound individual. (Bell Qt. in Lilia, “Contemporary Response to *Vanity Fair*”)

Bell’s comment on the work is too far from comprehending the unique style of Thackeray. Given that Thackeray used such a style for the first time, it is understandable that Bell misunderstood the work. This study argues that Thackeray made a social criticism in his work and, to achieve his goal, he needed to keep his readers within a critical distance from the characters. That is why he refrained from creating characters with whom the reader would probably sympathize.

As for giving a brief overview of *Vanity Fair*, one might say the plot illustrates Becky’s determined social mobility and how she achieves her goal in a clever way. Amelia and Rebecca (shortly Becky) make good friends at the academy of Miss Pinkerton, where they are about to graduate. Becky meets Jos, brother of Amelia, who is a plump gentleman and not attractive. Though Becky does not like him, she plans to get married to him because she feels she can achieve social mobility, which does not happen. Rebecca leaves the house of the Sedley family and becomes a governess to the daughters of Sir Pitt Crawley, and secretly marries Rawdon Crawley, the son of Pitt Crawley. Meanwhile, unaware that her son has already secretly married her, Pitt Crawley proposes marriage to Becky, which she unwillingly rejects. As a result of the marriage, Rawdon Crawley is disinherited by his rich aunt. Becky loses her chance in Crawleys’ house to rise in social status. Besides that, George and Amelia get married. George has to challenge his father for marriage, and also gets disinherited. George later dies in the Battle of Waterloo. William Dobbin supports Amelia without revealing his identity. Becky and Amelia both have sons. Becky and Lord Steyne have a closer relationship than friendship, which is also valid for Rawdon and Lady Jane, his brother's wife. Having learned their affair, Rawdon leaves for Coventry Island in order not to see Becky again. He dies on Coventry Island. Rebecca travels in Europe and meets Joseph Sedley. She takes money from Joseph and Joseph dies after some time passes. Meanwhile, William Dobbin, the admirer of Amelia wins her heart and they marry.

Rebecca's son little Pitt Rawdon, whom Rebecca did not show any affection, inherits the Crawley estate.

2. The Narrative Technique of *Vanity Fair* and its Contribution to Social Criticism

For the narrative technique of Thackeray, Kent suggests that “the Preface to *Vanity Fair*, which famously identifies the narrator as the manager of a theatrical performance, provides a helpful context for understanding Thackeray's difference from Victorian novelists who locate their genre within the domestic interior” (134). In that sense, as Kent suggests, Thackeray's style distinguishes him from his contemporaries. His style is different from his contemporaries because he does not limit the genre within the domestic space and develops a broader sense of criticism. Instead of criticizing the individual characters, Thackeray criticizes the society. The narrative distance Thackeray creates is achieved via his unique setting. This narrative distance makes Thackeray achieve his goal of criticizing Victorian society in a mocking manner.

Thackeray's style is different and innovative. He leads his reader to think the way he wants them to do. He gives clear and subjective details about the characters and reveals their inner feelings, which allows his reader to fully understand the characters' psyches. He avoids misconceptions by revealing the characters' intentions and creates his satire. Lubbock states that “Thackeray often foreshadows a narrative development with a ‘panaroma’ of related impressions, making us see the situation ‘with his eyes’, before letting us see with our own” (Qt. in Bruce 85). In fact, the style is very important in that sense because an unwanted empathy with a character could result in a misunderstanding of the work. According to Kent, “Thackeray is a satirist of English culture in general and of the marriage market” and “satire might be used to explain his difference from Victorian writers who view sentiment as a form that can control economic desires” (128). According to Lester, “(Thackeray) looks with an Olympian view on his characters and events, and sees the course of his story laid out as it were in panorama before him. Over this panorama he can look before and after, moving backwards and forwards freely in time, selecting detailed scenes here or there as he chooses” (393). Thackeray's narrative is an omniscient one and it is highly subjective as it leads the reader to think in the way which Thackeray aims. The satirical style necessitates the distancing of the readers from the characters. Thackeray apparently aims to set a distance in order to avoid a sympathy for the characters. Also, about the descriptions of the feelings of the characters, he uses a technique similar to stream of consciousness as he depicts them from the point of view of the character. He does not, for example, make his characters his narrator; it is apparent that he aims at keeping his reader at a critical distance and avoids the readers' identification with the characters.

According to Parrinder, Thackeray's way of describing female characters is highly successful and it is apparent that he has great knowledge of women's likes and women's fashion (233). His characters reflect the fascination of the Victorian society with extravagant products. Parrinder states that “the spoils of the empire are most evident in the lavish and gaudy furnishings, the costumes, jewellery, and head wear of *Vanity Fair*, since of all male novelists Thackeray is the most alive to women's fashions” (233). He also states that “the most showily dressed of all Thackeray's character's is...Miss Swartz” (233). Parrinder also argues that the novel has a racist point of view. According to Parrinder, “nobody sees anything wrong in the fact that Miss Swartz has to pay double fees to attend Miss Pinkerton's school” (233). When his father and his sisters plan to make a match between Miss Swartz and George, they undoubtedly see Miss

¹ The italicized version refers to the title and the unitalicized version refers to the setting of the novel.

Swarzt as a saviour and they want the match for Miss Swarzt's money. Their way of looking at Miss Swarzt is very wrong in that regard, as they want to exploit her wealth. On the other hand, the way George looks at Miss Swarzt is similarly incorrect, and racist as well. George's father asks his son George to marry Miss Swarzt and receives an unexpected answer: "Marry that mulatto woman? George said, pulling up his shirt-collars. I don't like the colour, sir. Ask the black that sweeps opposite Fleet Market, sir. I'm not going to marry a Hottentot Venus" (Thackeray 193). He also dislikes her because of her ethnic origin. He tells Miss Swarzt that he loves Amelia but he cannot confess this to his father. Perhaps, such an answer would not be seen as acceptable at that time as marriage was rather an economic institution, rather than a love affair. Nancy Armstrong argues, for example, "that a discourse of marital love underwrites the role of middle-class power in both the political and economic spheres" (Qt. in Kent 127). Kent states that "The early chapter entitled 'Family Portraits' tells the story of Sir Pitt Crawley's second marriage to a 'low-life' and portrays that marriage as a union made of furniture rather than of feeling" (135). Kent's argument supports the argument that marriage was seen as an economic institution in Victorian times. The main reason why George is ostracized is that he resisted the law of patriarchy.

The attitude of Old Osborne towards marriage is not different from that of Becky. In terms of having worldly ambitions, he shares the same characteristic as Becky. He has capitalist ambitions; he wants money, respect, reputability and, through the possessions of others, he strives to achieve his aims. To him, getting his son to marry Miss Swarzt is a means to achieve social mobility.

Old Osborne thought she would be a great match, too, for his son. He should leave the army; he should go into Parliament; he should cut a figure in the fashion and in the state. His blood boiled with honest British exultation, as he saw the name of Osborne ennobled in the person of his son, and thought that he might be the progenitor of a glorious line of baronets. (Thackeray 187)

Old Osborne's ideas reflect the way the characters see wealth and power in *Vanity Fair*. They do not merely want to be wealthy; they also strive to be powerful and respected folks. To achieve their aim, ordinary people want to stand close to noble people. They also want to be close to wealthy people. "People in *Vanity Fair* fasten on to rich folks quite naturally" (Thackeray 186), which shows the flattery of people towards the rich in Victorian times. "The major part of the Osborne family...had not...been able to get up a hearty regard for Amelia Sedley" (Thackeray 186). Because, by losing wealth, the Sedley family also lose their respectability. This situation shows the Victorian society's hypocrisy because they respect people for their wealth and when people lose their wealth, they simultaneously lose their respectable status within society. That's why George Osborne, the father, does not want his son to marry Amelia, whom he had once encouraged his son to marry. Therefore, one can conclude that the society was divided into sects by wealth, gender and ethnicity; as one can understand from the fact that "some respectable people ... (did not) consider themselves at liberty to indulge in friendship for any individual who has not a certain competency, or place in society" (186). This is a certain proof that people were evaluated according to their rank, wealth and social status. Thus, *Vanity Fair* represents the societal ills and shortcomings of the Victorian society.

Thackeray makes it very clear and eases the curiosity of the reader about what exactly *Vanity Fair* is in the preface to his work entitled "Before the Curtain". He states that *Vanity Fair* is a

place with greedy consumption, as one can easily think of as befitting the new life style of Victorian times after the advent of crude capitalism. “There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling” (Thackeray 21). One can understand that *Vanity Fair* is a place of consumerism and everything is done in extreme and excessive amounts, which points out its capitalistic structure. Thackeray describes the fair as “not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy” and criticizes its soullessness and points out that consumption does not lead to happiness in *Vanity Fair* (21). It is apparent that *Vanity Fair* is not a moral place. However, it is very significant that Thackeray defines it as not “a merry one” either (21). Thackeray also shows, by saying this, that consumerism does not bring joy. Although Thackeray directly pronounced that *Vanity Fair* is not a happy place to be, there is ironically a lot of entertainment in *Vanity Fair*. This contradiction reveals the fact that people are not happy in *Vanity Fair* despite the plenitude of entertainment, the fact which Thackeray reveals through his satire. Thackeray states that he has no other moral than merely showing the human situation in depicting the story of *Vanity Fair* as it is nothing but the picture of the society. All kinds of performances, that is to say, in symbolic terms, sketches of all sorts of lives are present in the fair (Thackeray 21). Thackeray introduces himself to his reader as the “manager of the performance” and his characters as puppets and dolls (Thackeray 22). He calls Rebecca the little Becky puppet, which figuratively means that she is controlled by the strings of desire; and he calls Amelia a doll, which shows her gentility and beauty. The choice of the name “*Vanity Fair*”, which is a place in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, is deliberate and meaningful. In Bunyan’s work, two allegorically named pilgrims “Christian and Faithful are diverted on their journey towards salvation in the Celestial City by the sights and sounds of *Vanity Fair*” (Jones&Knowles 6). Therefore, “*Vanity Fair*” is a place which diverts people from celestial issues to worldly affairs by means of attracting and distracting them. Bunyan’s fictional town “bears the name *Vanity Fair* ... because all that is sold there, as well as those who come to buy, is vanity” (110) and this explains the resemblance of the two fictional places and why Thackeray calls the town *Vanity Fair*. “*Vanity Fair*” is an attractive place and makes people forget spirituality and indulge in mundane affairs. It is undoubtedly a place of consumption and show. In doing so, Thackeray unfolds the faults of human beings.

Becky Sharp is an ambitious lady, who is clever and even cunning, with a perfect command in French. She quite dislikes Miss Pinkerton, who is the owner of the academy. She is the daughter of an artist, whom she most probably took after as “(her father) was a clever man, a pleasant companion, (and) a careless student” (Thackeray 11). She also lacked a good family life as her father was a drunkard; he beat his wife and daughter, he owed lots of money to lots of people in Soho (Thackeray 11). This might be the reason for Becky’s determination to possess money and respectability at any cost. The point of view of this essay is that Becky is not to blame for her urges, neither is she the one who is bitterly criticized in the work; though some of her deeds are wrong in social standards, it is the circumstances that are criticized. As mentioned before, *Vanity Fair* is a social satire and unfolds the faults of the Victorian society. Therefore, Becky is neither innocent, nor guilty; she is the one who has found the way to rise in the society in the way which the society taught her. She was such an attractive lady, particularly her eyes attracted people, that the Reverend Mr.Crisp and Mr. Flowerdew fell in love with her (Thackeray 11-12). This situation also indicates another peculiarity of the society as clergymen are not supposed to, even are not allowed to deal with love as they are supposed to devote their

lives to the love of God. For Becky, national values did not matter, either. When she made fun of Miss Pinkerton as she could not speak French but she was “too proud to confess it,” she uttered the words “Vive La France! Vive l’Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!,” and Amelia was sensitive in national terms, she warned her that at such a time when England was in war with France, saying “Long Live Bonaparte” was as bad as saying “Long Live Lucifer” (10). France and Napoleon were seen as an enemy and a threat; thus, historic reality also found its voice in *Vanity Fair*. This proves that Thackeray aimed at writing a satire of the contemporary period, though the situations were fictive, they were not unreal. He mirrored the real world in a comical manner. In that respect, Thackeray’s work is a very serious work as well as being comical.

As Jones suggested, “Thackeray’s novel chronicles Becky’s path to wealth and prestige, demonstrating that though gracefully gliding over the glossy surfaces of life can earn one material possessions, it does not guarantee fulfillment or happiness” (“Rebecca Sharp: The Champion Skater of *Vanity Fair*”). This is true for Rebecca. Rebecca Sharp continually tries to reach a wealthy position in life and her aim is not happiness; it is being rich. However, she spends all her time and effort in pursuit of material possession and material pursuits do not bring her happiness throughout the novel. One can understand that she neglects her emotions and does not listen to her inner voice from the fact that she seriously neglects her son and does not seem to love him with a motherly devotion. It is understandable that this mainly derives from her lack of a good, supportive family as a child. This was probably the foundation of her determination to attain a superior place in society and this stems from her need of self-realization and proving herself. She is never an evil person; she is very clever and knows the way in which the society progresses. She knows how the society is ruled. She is a pragmatist and an opportunist. She becomes successful; though not very happy. In fact, she cannot be happy because “*Vanity Fair*,” which is the symbolic representation of the society of the time, was not a place which makes people happy. As Baker suggests, “*Vanity Fair* may be read as the philosophical generalization and the concrete illustration of the vanity of worldly desires” (Baker Qt. in Dooley 703). There is no room for emotions in *Vanity Fair*. It is a place of buying and selling and show. Thus, it is a place of consumption and pretentiousness. As Baker puts it, “at this fair are all such merchandise sold as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights, of all sorts” and anything is acceptable as long as it carries someone to the purpose, including cheating and betraying; “at this fair there are at all times to be seen jugglings, cheats, games, plays” (Baker Qt. in Dooley 702). Baker’s argument proves that *Vanity Fair* is a place of capitalism and consumerism, and that is the reason why one should not criticize Rebecca for her greedy ambitions as it is the imposition of the society on the people. Social mobility is made possible only by capitalistic means. She is successful as she was able to manifestly challenge patriarchy and male dominance and refuses to be a possession of men; on the contrary, she is the one who possesses. At a very early age, her determination for rising socially began, and she pursued the ways in which she could make herself respected by the society. All her endeavor was to draw attention in positive terms; her choice of learning French eminently was no coincidence as it was considered a very good achievement at that time. “She took advantage therefore of the means of study the place offered her: and as she was already a musician and a good linguist, she speedily went through the little course of study which was considered necessary for ladies in those days”(Thackeray 14). That is to say, the necessity and the pragmatic value of the deed motivated her; she did music and French courses in order to be a neat lady. But she did not yield to social rules by accepting them without questioning, on the

contrary, she used the necessities of the society as a means to reach her aims in life. That is why she became a serious threat for Miss Pinkerton as she was a non-conformist. “Attempting once to scold her in public, Rebecca hit upon the before-mentioned plan of answering her in French, which quite routed the old woman. In order to maintain authority in her school, it became necessary to remove this rebel, this monster, this serpent” (Thackeray 14). It shows that authority expels the opposing views. In that sense, the novel gains a socio-political aspect in revealing social and political reality. Hence, Rebecca is able to resist the oppressive authority of Miss Pinkerton with knowledge, which is worthy of appreciation. She is, in a way, exiled to Sir Pitt Crawley's house as a governess. Even when she is seemingly in exile, she managed to benefit from the period she spends there by marrying Rawdon Crawley.

Rebecca Sharp acted in a cunning way when she planned to marry Jos Sedley. When she met Joseph for the first time, she pretended to be a shy girl. She gave herself tactics in order to attract Joseph Sedley. “Rebecca very modest, and holding her green eyes downwards. She was dressed in white, with bare shoulders as white as snow — the picture of gentle unprotected innocence, and humble virgin simplicity. ‘I must be very quiet,’ thought Rebecca, ‘and very much interested about India’” (Thackeray 21). She pretended to be interested in Sedley's conversation about India as this would make him feel good. Joseph, on the other hand, is described as a fat, shy and effeminate person. He puts on make up and is very interested in cosmetics. “He was vain as a girl; and perhaps his shyness was one of the results of his extreme vanity” (Thackeray 21). Modesty is seen as disguised vanity in *Vanity Fair*. In fact, the seeming modesty of Jos was a “dandified modesty” (Thackeray 27). He was a glutton, too. He “managed a couple of plates full of strawberries and cream, and twenty-four little rout cakes.” (Thackeray 23). He drank so heavily that he made a fool of himself. Excessive consumption is another important issue which is criticized in the work.

Vanity Fair carries historical aspects as well, such as the Napoleonic wars. The novel is also known as *A Novel Without a Hero*. It can be conferred that the novel is one without a hero but with a heroine but the strongest emphasis here, as Jones and Knowles mentioned, was that Thackeray was “the sceptical observer of the heroic” (8). He was not in favor of individual or military heroism and the Battle of Waterloo is not represented as a heroic act in *Vanity Fair*. It is merely a historic reality and wars also stem from people's greed. Unlike his contemporaries, Thackeray did not praise war or victory (Jones&Knowles 9). The work displays scepticism towards the concept of heroism and war.

According to Frazee, the character Joseph Sedley has similarities with George IV, “it cannot be wholly accidental that this amusing description of Jos would serve in its every detail to describe the Prince of Whales, who, like Jos, was vain, indolent and fat” (124). Frazee argues that Thackeray's aim in using such a method was not to satirize George IV; however, his aim was to combine fictionality and reality in order to portray “human truth” universally (128).

3. Conclusion

Thackeray satirizes the Victorian life throughout the novel. To criticize the social problems of his time, he uses irony, satire and his unique technique, which is the use of puppets. In addition, the fact that Thackeray reveals that his characters were puppets, strengthens the idea of an illusion. It can be concluded that Thackeray's use of puppets reveals the illusions of his society. Thackeray, as the manager of the performance, or the puppeteer, ends the novel with a moral. He shows his reader the illusion in which they leave and, in a certain sense, he takes his puppets

off his hands and puts them back in their boxes. The puppet stage becomes the microcosm of the characters. Thackeray shows that people indulge in trivial pursuits, mundane affairs, material satisfaction and become puppets controlled by the strings of desire. Thackeray makes the finale of his work with his famous words “Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? --come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out” (657). Vanitas Vanitatum², meaning vanity of vanities, shows that desires are endless and people are unable to satisfy them; quite paradoxically, a satisfied desire will no longer be a desire, therefore, people will always have other new desires waiting to be fulfilled.

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²Note 739 (p 657) in *Vanity Fair*