Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

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To present a proper analysis of Thackeray's novel without a careful reading of the novel itself is my task. However, to see deriving into the author's purpose of writing and into the construction of the novel, one must first work out its fundamental fortunes and concepts. Much, much more, in the first volume of "Vanity Fair," the author's purpose of fictionalizing in the story underlies a plot violently unexplained. Elizabeth, Morose has not been in the novel, and Read, a clear and noteworthy definition of the novel.

The novel may be defined as a comic form that recreates life in time or space, or both the two. Almost every other comic work is a mere caricature; it must teach and entertain a sufficient number of people to give a sense of validity to the narrative. And it need at the same time be independent of life—creating a world of its own, which is consistent to an inner and consistent within itself.

Thackeray's "Vanity Fair"

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To present a thorough analysis of Thackeray's famed "novel without a hero"—Vanity Fair, is my task. However, before delving into the author's purpose of writing, and into the construction of the novel, one must first seek out its fundamental duties and concepts. One must realize that the purpose of fiction lies in its very nature—whether violent or subdued. Elizabeth Monroe has set down in The Novel and Society a clear and noteworthy definition of the novel.

The novel may be defined as a prose form which recreates life in time or space, or in the two elements together. Its primary means are action and character. It should be long enough to give the illusion of the passing of time and the development, or at least—the unfolding—of character. The novel must accomplish two ends at one and the same time; it must touch life at a sufficient number of points to give a sense of reality to the narrative; and, it must at the same time be independent of life—creating a world of its own, which is sensitive to an inner logic and consistent within itself.

Thackeray's novel thus fulfills its definition and objectives.

Thus, in common with the other fine arts, the novel imitates life; but, its manner of imitation immediately sets it apart from the other arts and constitutes its claim to greatness. It may also be said that the novel—The Novel and Society—Monroe, Elizabeth—Chapter I page 23
partakes of the nature of creation through the novelist. It is his duty to create his own material—for life is material—and then to fashion his work from it. The greatest difficulty encountered by the modern novel is that if it is to be great, it must recreate human experience in its totality—for nothing is too infinitesimal, too remote, or too lofty to find a place in the story of man. It is here that the modern novel has failed. Man has disappeared; and half-truths or mere inventions have taken the place of the eternally human. One notes that the novel differs from the drama in that description is used as well as dialogue, giving it a marked advantage in the completeness of its imitation; also, making it possible for the novelist to describe not only characters and scenes in great detail—but—a whole era in terms that truly rival the effects of history. That the novel can do this without losing its identity, is evident from the works of novelists like Thackeray and Sigrid Undset.

**Vanity Fair** is a description of life during the Waterloo period; but, even more than that, it is an illustration of human nature dedicating its very vitality and soul to the pleasures of the Victorian world, and living—as it were—without God in sight. This then was Thackeray's purpose in writing **Vanity Fair**—to show that "All is vanity and the world is but a fair." William Thackeray had become famous, to a limited extent, by the exquisite nature of his contributions to the periodicals of his day; but he desired to do some—
thing greater—something, perhaps less ephemeral, for it was thus that he regarded Barry Lyndon and other of his works. It was in this spirit that he went to work and produced his "novel without a hero" conveying the rather cynical tone of—"Alas, alas! The meanness of human desires; the futility of human results."

Thence the question arises of what a novel should be and again, what faults are actually contained within it. But this special fault must certainly have been found in Vanity Fair. Heroines, according to the standards of the Victorian readers, should not only be beautiful but, should also be endowed with a quasi-celestial grace—-grace of dignity, propriety and reticence. A heroine should scarcely want to married, the arrangement being almost mundane. Thackeray's Amelia does not at all come up to the description here given. She is proud of having a lover—constantly declaring to herself and others that he is the greatest and best of men; whereas, the young gentleman is—in truth—a very little man. She is not at all indifferent to her finery—as she should have been—, nor as we see her incidentally enjoying her suppers at Vauxhall. She is anxious to be married, and as soon as possible. A hero, too, should be dignified and of noble presence; a man who, though he may be as poor as Dickens' Nicholas Nickleby, should nevertheless be handsome on all occasions and never deficient in readiness, address, or self-assertion. Vanity Fair is specially declared by its author to be a
"novel without a hero" and one therefore scarcely has any right to complain of the deficiency of heroic conduct in any of the male characters. But Captain Dobbin does become the hero and he is deficient! Why was he called Dobbin, except to make him seem ridiculous? Why is he so shamefully ugly, so shy, so very-very awkward? Why is he but the son of a humble grocer? Thackeray, in so depicting him, was determined to run counter to the recognized tastes of the Victorian readers of the novel. And then again, there was the feeling of another great fault—the greatest of them all.

The code of the Victorians decreed that, in the novel—Let there be the virtuous and the vicious, the dignified and the undignified, the sublime and the ridiculous; only, let the virtuous, the dignified, and the sublime be in the ascendant. But here, in this novel, the vicious and the absurd have been made to be of more importance than the good and the noble. Becky Sharp and Rawdon Crawley are the real hero and heroine of the story. It is with them that the reader is called upon to interest himself. It is of them that one thinks when he is reading the book. It is by them that he will judge the book when he has read it. There was, no doubt, a feeling with the public that, though satire may be very well in its place, it should not have been made the very backbone of a work as long and as important as _Vanity Fair_ undeniably is. Men and women prefer to be painted as Titian would paint them, or as Raffelle; not as Rembrandt.
Whether the ideal or the real is the best form of a novel may be questioned; but there can be no doubt that there are novelists who cannot descend from the glorious heaven of imagination to walk with their feet upon the earth; so also are there others to whom it is not given to soar among the clouds but must, instead, content themselves with the empty realities of this world. The reader must please himself and make his selection—if he cannot enjoy both. There are many who are carried into a veritable heaven of pathos by the constancy of a Master of Ravenswood, who fail altogether to be touched by the enduring constancy of a Dobbin. With Thackeray it was essential that the representations made by him should be, at least to his own mind, lifelike. A Dobbin seemed to him to be such a one as he might meet in the world; whereas, a Ravenswood was simply a creature of the imagination. He would have said of such, as one would say of female faces of Raffelle’s brush—that women would desire to be like them, but are not--; men might desire to be like Ravenswood, and women may dream of men so formed and constituted, but such men do not exist. Dobbins do!

Therefore, Thackeray chose to write of a Dobbin.

So also of the preference given to Becky Sharp and Rawdon Crawley. Thackeray believed that more could be done by exposing the vices—than by extolling the virtues—of mankind. The Dobbins he did encounter—seldom; the Rawdon Crawleys—often. It became natural to him to
insist upon the thing that he hated with unceasing assiduity; only to break out, now and again, in a rapture of love for true nobility of mind and soul—as he did with the character of Captain Dobbin. It must be added to all this that, before Thackeray has finished with his little snob, or his knave, he will generally weave in some small trait of humanity through which the sinner shall be relieved from the absolute darkness of utter iniquity. Rawdon Crawley loved his wicked wife dearly; and, there are moments—even with Becky—in which some redeeming trait almost reconciles her to the reader.

Such were the faults which were found in *Vanity Fair*; but, though the faults were found freely, the book was read by all. Though the story is rather vague and wandering—clearly commenced without any idea of an ending—yet there is something in the telling of it which makes every portion of it perfect in itself. There are absurdities in it; but Thackeray has managed to make even his absurdities delightful. I doubt if any school girl would have thrown back her gift-book, as Rebecca did the "dictionary" as she was being driven away from school. But who does not like that scene with which the novel commences? Again, how could such a girl as Amelia Osborne have got herself into such society as that in which we see her mingling at Vauxhall? But one forgives it all because of the telling. And, of course, there is the crowning absurdity of Sir Pitt Crawley and
his establishment—a stretch of audacity that I find myself unable to understand. Nevertheless, it has been accepted; and from the noteworthy introduction of Sir Pitt have grown the wonderful characters of the Crawley family—old Miss Crawley, the worldly, wicked, pleasure-loving aunt—the Rev. Eustice Crawley and his wife, who are quite as worldly—the sanctimonious elder son, who is, in truth, no less so, and—Rawdon Crawley, the bad hero of the book—as Dobbin is the good hero.

There is a double story running through the novel, the parts of which are but lightly woven together; the former tells us of the life and adventures of that singular young woman, Becky Sharp; the other—of the troubles and ultimate successes of our noble hero—Dobbin. While it may be true that readers prefer the romantic to the common in their novels and complain of pages which are defiled with that which is low, yet, one finds that the absurd, the lucidious, and even the evil, leave a far deeper impression behind them than do the grand, the beautiful, or even the good. It must certainly be admitted by all that, in spite of her critics, Becky Sharp became the first attraction of Vanity Fair; when one speaks of the satire, it is always to Becky that our thoughts recur. She has made a position for herself in the world of fiction and is—today—one of our established literary personages. The story of Amelia and her two lovers, George Osborne and Captain—
--or as he became later--Major and Colonel Dobbin, is less
interesting simply because goodness and eulogy are always
less exciting than wickedness and censure. Amelia is a
true, honest-hearted young woman who loves her love be-
cause he is grand to her eyes, and-loving him--loves him
with all her heart. Of Amelia, Anthony Trollope has
written:

Readers have said that she is
silly-only because she is not
heroic. Readers complain of
Amelia because she is absol-
utely true to nature. She is
feminine all over and British-
loving, true, thoroughly un-
selfish, yet with a taste for
having things comfortable---
forgiving, quite capable of
jealousy, but prone to be
appeased at the first kiss;
quite convinced that her
lover, her husband, and her
child are the only people in
all the world to whom the
greatest consideration is due.2

Such a person is sure to be the dupe of a Becky Sharp,
should a Becky Sharp come her way-- as is the case with
the few sweet Amelias that one has known. But in the
matter of love she is sound and sensible enough; she is
as true and as enduring as steel. Though she eventually
did marry "dear old Dobbin", her sentimental inner
heart never really belonged to him. I know of no trait
in Amelia that a man would be ashamed to find in his own
daughter.

That one may really comprehend Thackeray's work,

2. Thackeray --Trollope, Anthony--Chapter III-page 103
one must consider his own nature—an interesting and important factor. He was, above all else, a lover of the truth. The love of truth was with him—indeed—less a sentiment than a passion, asorbing his mind and inspiring its activity. The exposure of shame enlisted all his artistic ability, for he pursued it with the most searching subtlety ever devoted to an artistic aim—for it was a definite aim. Whatever he chose to do was always perfectly done. There is a genuine Thackeray flavor in everything that he wrote. He detected, with unfailing skill, the good or the vile wherever it existed—in the lofty towers of the so-called respectable Victorians, or, as it may be, in the very slime of the gutters. He had, indeed, an awful, terrifying insight plus a wealth of solemn sympathy and simplicity in his composition. Those who read him should try to appreciate the tenderer phrases of his genius, as well as the satirical ones. One admits that he remorseless in *Vanity Fair*; but, it was intended as a satire, and it has accomplished its purpose.

All concede that two of the greatest of the Victorian writers were Charles Dickens and William Thackeray. Their basic attitudes towards, and treatments of,—life—have been discussed innumerable times; but, to no avail, for those who are sentimentalists will naturally turn towards the dewey-eyed
Dickens—as will the others, the unfortunate realists, turn to the probing and revealing words of Thackeray. However, by ill luck—or by good fortune, through infirmity of character—or uncertainty of purpose, Thackeray’s youthful contacts with life were, in one sense, more restricted and—in another—more varied than those of Dickens. He saw the upper middle class in several European quarters; but, at close quarters, he saw little else. He had no primary or pressing reason to exert himself and therefore, took things as a matter of fact, and—one might say—rather easily. Dickens was the younger man, but he was already a celebrated author and had been earning his own living for some years while Thackeray was still hesitating between the drawing pencil and the pen; in fact, Thackeray applied to Dickens for permission to illustrate one of his earlier novels—an offer which Dickens did not accept. It was ten years after the latter had established his position by the Pickwick Papers that Thackeray made his first real hit with Vanity Fair. In the year eighteen hundred and forty-eight. In their attitude towards their work, the two men differed very widely. To Dickens, the creations of his brain were real people whose sorrows he wept over, and whose foibles he laughed at in the very act of creation; to Thackeray, even his best characters were only puppets. In
the preface to *Vanity Fair*, when it was first published in book form, he wrote:

The famous little Becky puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints and lively on the wire; the Amelia doll, though it has had a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest of care by the artist; the Dobbin figure, though apparently clumsy, yet dances in very amusing and natural manner; the Little Boy's Dance has been liked by some; and please to remark the richly dressed figure of the wicked nobleman, on whom no expense has been spared, and which old Nick will fetch away at the end of this singular performance.

And, at the end of the book he has written, commenting on the disappointment of his hero and heroine in each other after they were married.

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.

It is because of Thackeray's continual sense of himself as the showman that he claims the right to, in the course of the performance, step out now and then from behind the scenes, and to comment on the characters; if they are good and kindly, to shake them...
by the hand; if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve; if they are wicked or heartless, to abuse them in the strongest terms that politeness admits of.

His conception of life is also different from that of Dickens. The ideal of Thackeray seems to be a class ideal—that of gentlemanliness—"Be each, pray God, a gentleman!". Dickens was never, neither in the world of imagination or in the actual world, entirely at ease in gentlemanly society. Thackeray was never at his ease anywhere else. This lies at the basis of the accusation that, although he is continually satirizing Victorian snobbery, he, himself, was a snob. His emphasis is on manners; that of Dickens—on morals. Thackeray was further hampered by his inability to portray his gentlemen as they really were, on account of the Victorian taboo against frankness in the matters of sex. When Dickens relates the betrayal of little Emily by the dashing Steerforth, he sentimentalizes the whole episode; but, he does so sincerely, for he accepted the Victorian attitude as to seduction. Thackeray, in his preface to Pendennis, admits that he could not tell the truth about the gentlemen of his own era, as did the eighteenth century writers.

We must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our art. Many ladies
have remonstrated, and subscribers left me, because in the course of the story, I described a young man resisting and affected by temptation. My object was to say that he had the passions to feel, and the manliness and generosity to overcome them.

In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray has not revealed man in his natural, almost animal-like, sensual state; but, he has—instead—rather evaded the issue with the greatest of subtlety and success.

The reader, as he closes the book, has in his mind a strong conviction that among men, George is as weak, and Dobbin as noble and self-sacrificing—as any that he has met in literature; that among women—Amelia is as true, and Becky as clever and vile—as any that she has ever encountered. Of so much he will necessarily be conscious. In addition to this, he will unconsciously have discovered that every page that he has read—has been of interest to him, and every bit will have had its weight with him. And he will find after finishing the book, if he will think of it—though readers, I fear, seldom think much of this in books they have read—that the lesson taught in every page has been a good one. There may be details of evil painted so as to disgust, but none painted so as to allure.
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