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The Morality of Vanity Fair: It's All About You

By [Rohan Maitzen](#)

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“There is a man in our own days,” Charlotte Brontë wrote in a preface to *Jane Eyre*,

whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital—a mien as dauntless and as daring.

That man was William Makepeace Thackeray, whose *Vanity Fair* was then appearing in monthly installments. “I regard him,” Brontë declared, “as the first social regenerator of the day”; she went on to dedicate her own daring novel to him.

Vanity Fair might not immediately strike the modern reader dauntless enough to dare its nearly nine-hundred pages as quite so morally invigorating. A classic example of what Henry James was

to characterize as a “loose baggy monster,” *Vanity Fair* is a joyfully digressive and acidly satirical romp across all levels of English society. It is a novel rich in characters but also, as its subtitle tells us, “a novel without a hero.” It does, however, “lay claim to a heroine,” Becky Sharp, who signals her determination to live by her own rules early on, hurling Johnson’s Dictionary from the coach on her departure from Miss Pinkerton’s Academy for Young Ladies.

A penniless orphan when the novel begins, Becky claws her way up the social ladder, earning her status as a heroine not by representing any ideal of virtue, but by exemplifying the corrupt principles of the world she lives in. She lies, cheats, and steals; she panders to the rich and powerful and abuses the weak and defenceless; she seduces her enemies and betrays her friends. She is, in short, thoroughly despicable. Yet like Shakespeare’s Richard III, she so engages us with her energy, charisma, and persistence that it is hard not to root for her, to hope that the other feeble players—insipid Amelia Sedley and her boorish brother Jos, vile Sir Pitt Crawley and his ineffectual sons, even steadfast Major Dobbin—will go down in defeat and leave the world for Becky to bustle in.

But how can a novel be a driving force for moral renewal when its avowed heroine declares quite frankly, and without apology, “I’m no angel”? Mostly because our relationship with Becky is heavily mediated by the novel’s acerbic narrator. “Rebecca is a droll, funny creature, to be sure,” he remarks early on, but he distances himself from her amoral antics with a steady patter of wry commentary. “Otherwise,” as he notes,

you might fancy it was I who was sneering at the practice of devotion, which Miss Sharp finds so ridiculous; that it was I who laughed good-humouredly at the reeling old Silenus of a baronet—whereas the laughter comes from one who has no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything beyond success. Such people there are living and flourishing in the world—Faithless, Hopeless, Charityless: let us have at them, dear friends, with might and main. Some there are, and very successful too, mere quacks and fools: and it was to combat and expose such as those, no doubt, that Laughter was made.

Laughter is, indeed, an important weapon in his assault on “quacks and fools.” From Jos Sedley serenading Becky as his “diddle-diddle-darling,” drunk as a skunk from the inopportunistimed bowl of rack punch that ruins her campaign to land him as a husband, to the little shirt for her son that comes out of Becky’s work-box whenever she hopes to appear “particularly humble and virtuous” (“it had got to be too small for Rawdon long before it was finished”), the vain, foolish, and pretentious are skewered by the narrator’s pitiless wit.

And yet, as he himself remarks, “the general impression is one more melancholy than mirthful.” Why? Perhaps because such people or incidents wouldn’t be so funny in reality, and the narrator’s frame-breaking intrusions incessantly trouble the distinction between the fictional world and ours. The novel is presented as a tour of *Vanity Fair*, a chaotic place full of “some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business.” As we jostle through the “flare and the noise and the gaiety,” the narrator acts as our guide and companion, at once displaying and decrying the goods and shows that surround us. He’s an entertaining escort, energetic and ironic, but our amusement at the spectacle is compromised by his fits of

exasperation at the moral shoddiness of the place: “Oh, Vanity Fair—Vanity Fair! This might have been, but for you, a cheery lass; . . . but a title and a coach and four are toys more precious than happiness in Vanity Fair.” At best, ours is revealed as a prurient pleasure.

No wonder, then, that though the narrator enjoys, even flaunts, the privileges of omniscience—moving easily between scenes and in and out of different points of view—he often thwarts our own desire to see all and know all. “Have we a right to repeat or to overhear her prayers?” he asks as poor Amelia sits weeping in disillusionment after her long-anticipated marriage. “These, brother, are secrets, and out of the domain of Vanity Fair.” There are some things, it turns out, that even he will not expose to public mockery.

Sometimes, however, the narrator’s reticence serves not to protect, but to expose, and it’s from those moments of withholding that we learn the most about the novel’s moral message and tactics. Perhaps no scene in the novel better illustrates this than the climactic chapter “A Rescue and a Catastrophe.”

For those who haven’t had the pleasure, I’ll briefly set the scene. Our girl Becky, having spent about seven hundred pages in pursuit of fame and fortune, has been stringing along a lecherous nobleman, Lord Steyne, who has devised to get her alone for an evening by (among other clever means) getting her complacent husband Rawdon locked up for outstanding debts. But Rawdon gets sprung unexpectedly by his sister-in-law, the not-so-sheepish Lady Jane Sheepshanks, and comes home to find Becky and Lord Steyne alone:

A little table with a dinner was laid out—and wine and plate. Steyne was hanging over the sofa on which Becky sat. The wretched woman was in a brilliant full toilette, her arms and all her fingers sparkling with bracelets and rings; and the brilliants on her breast which Steyne had given her. He had her hand in his, and was bowing over it to kiss it, when Becky started up with a faint scream as she caught sight of Rawdon’s white face. At the next instant she tried a smile, a horrid smile, as if to welcome her husband: and Steyne rose up, grinding his teeth, pale, and with fury in his looks.

Rawdon throws the man out, rips off Becky’s diamonds, forces her to cough up the rest of her horde of money, and leaves “without another word.” It’s all very exciting. But it’s the next bit that displays Thackeray’s particular genius:

What were her thoughts when he left her? She remained for hours after he was gone, the sunshine pouring into the room, and Rebecca sitting alone on the bed’s edge. The drawers were all opened and their contents scattered about—dresses and feathers, scarfs and trinkets, a heap of tumbled vanities lying in a wreck. Her hair was falling over her shoulders; her gown was torn where Rawdon had wrenched the brilliants out of it. She heard him go downstairs a few minutes after he left her, and the door slamming and closing on him. She knew he would never come back. He was gone forever. Would he kill himself?—she thought—not until after he had met Lord Steyne. She thought of her long past life, and all the dismal incidents of it. Ah, how dreary it seemed, how miserable, lonely and profitless! Should she take laudanum, and end it, to have done with all hopes, schemes, debts, and triumphs? The French maid found her in this position—sitting in the midst of her miserable ruins with clasped hands and dry eyes.

The woman was her accomplice and in Steyne's pay. "*Mon Dieu*, madame, what has happened?" she asked.

What *had* happened? Was she guilty or not? She said not, but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips, or if that corrupt heart was in this case pure?

The scene painting is marvelous, for starters. It's rare that we see Becky off-stage in this way, but now, with every telling detail in this wretched tableau, we see the cost of the ebullient theatricality that has made her progress through the novel so corruptly captivating. For once, she seems weak and vulnerable—though, like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, she will rise to strike again.

But why not tell us if she's guilty? Surely our omniscient narrator knows the truth, after all.

There are lots of ways to answer this question, not least of them pragmatic: it was best, perhaps, for Thackeray to leave the worst unspecified, lest he should press too far against the strict code of Victorian public morality—it's bad enough that his heroine is a liar and a hypocrite, without his coming right out and admitting she's an adulteress. Sheer hypocrisy, in his turn? Perhaps, but the narrator makes the most of it:

In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep



down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous, and has any the most squeamish immoralist in Vanity Fair a right to cry fie?

Only his sly illustrations hint at the most diabolical truths, as with Becky's "second appearance in

the character of Clytemnestra” and the price it suggests poor Jos finally pays for first scorning and then succumbing to our heroine.

There are thematic reasons, too, for the narrator’s reticence: actual guilt doesn’t matter in this world—just the appearance of guilt, or the façade of innocence. Appearances are certainly against Becky here, and that’s enough to condemn her: “We all know how charitable the world is,” the narrator observes, “and how the verdict of Vanity Fair goes when there is a doubt.”

But the most important reason for the narrator not to answer his own question is that its urgency is an illusion—a prurient fixation irrelevant to the novel’s central purpose. Thackeray’s evasion here forces us to remember that Becky’s individual story, compelling as it is, is the *occasion* rather than the purpose of the novel. In fact, the narrator has been clear from the beginning that *Vanity Fair* is about, not her, but *you*—well, not just you, but us.

“The world is a looking glass and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face,” our friend tells us at the outset of our journey together through Vanity Fair. As the novel unfolds, he never misses a chance to show us ourselves reflected in the unflattering mirror of his novel and to invite us to reflect, in our turn, on our own passage through Vanity Fair. Death, in particular, is a great occasion for such reflections, as we see in the chapter “In Which Two Lights are Put Out”:

The doctor will come up to us too for the last time there, my friend in motley. The nurse will look in at the curtains, and you take no notice—and then she will fling open the windows for a little, and let in the air. Then they will pull down all the front blinds of the house and live in the back rooms—then they will send for the lawyer and other men in black, &c. Your comedy and mine will have been played then, and we shall be removed, oh, how far, from the trumpets, and the shouting, and the posture-making.

In the end, we may even realize ourselves that it has all been vanity. “The success or the pleasure of yesterday become of very small account,” as the narrator points out, “when a certain (albeit uncertain) morrow is in view, about which all of us must some day or other be speculating”:

That must be a strange feeling, when a day of our life comes and we say, “*To-morrow*, success or failure won’t matter much, and the sun will rise, and all the myriads of mankind go to their work or their pleasure as usual, but I shall be out of the turmoil.”

Sadly, such deathbed realizations can have little effect, as they come precisely when it is too late for us to reform. But can we really only see the triviality of earthly striving when we are about to give it up? Not if we have been reading this novel, which tells us from the beginning that we live together in “Vanity Fair” and which closes with Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” *Vanity Fair* anticipates that deathbed revelation for its readers, at once challenging them to look in the unflattering mirror of its pages and face the moral reality of their lives, and urging them to smarten up before they die wretched and unlamented, like so many of their fictional companions.

Why not specify Becky’s guilt or innocence, then? Because if we knew exactly what Becky had done or not done, we would think that *our* work was done. Judging her, we would set ourselves apart from her and forget that guilt is pervasive in her world and ours, that we are all of us striving (as Lord Steyne points out) after what is not worth the having. Was she guilty or not? It doesn’t

matter. The real question is, what have we done lately that we might regret on our deathbeds? The more uneasy we are made by such reflections, the more completely the novel achieves its purpose.

Many contemporary readers protested against the lash of what Brontë called Thackeray's 'Greek fire of sarcasm.' His critics often compared Thackeray unfavourably to Dickens, who allowed hope, love, and sentiment to flourish where Thackeray blotted out the sun with his snobs, bullies, and opportunists. "More light and air would have rendered [*Vanity Fair*] more agreeable and healthy," Robert Bell wrote, reviewing the novel in 1848. But the desired softening would hardly have had the desired moral effect, as Thackeray was quick to reply:

If I had put in more fresh air as you call it my object would have been defeated—It is to indicate, in cheerful terms, that we are for the most part an abominably foolish and selfish people 'desperately wicked' and all eager after vanities. Everybody is you see in that book. . . . I wanted to leave everybody dissatisfied and unhappy at the end of the story—we ought all to be with our own and all other stories.

His narrator makes much the same point to us:

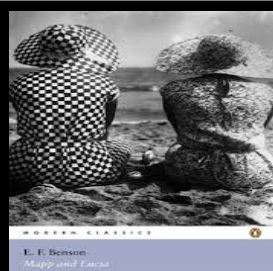
This, dear friends and companions, is my amiable object—to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private.

"Ah! *Vanitas Vanitatum!*" the novel concludes; "which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" There is enormous satisfaction in finishing a reading of *Vanity Fair*. But if we finish it satisfied with our world or with ourselves, we betray our own vanity, which is no less epic, perhaps, than Becky's.

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