“Some are Made to Scheme, and Some to Love”

William Makepeace Thackeray’s Presentation of Women in his Novel Vanity Fair

B.A. Essay

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Abstract
The subject of women’s rights and how women have been presented through time is an extremely popular subject in media and literature alike. For centuries, women were not expected to amount to the same things as men and as women writers began to emerge in the eighteenth century, they were shunned and even belittled by their male rivals. Men have long been afraid of women’s intelligence and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the notion of women fitting into prescribed feminine roles was very prominent. This essay explores the way William Makepeace Thackeray presents his two female protagonists, Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp, in his novel Vanity Fair. Published consecutively in the years 1847-1848, the story is set in the early nineteenth century and follows the lives of the two women as well as that of their friends and families. The role women were expected to fulfill at the time the novel was written was that of the loving housewife, often referred to as “the angel in the house”. Women who did not successfully represent this womanly ideal were often referred to as fallen women. This essay explores the way Thackeray used the women in his life as inspirations for his two female protagonists and sheds light on how their lives, personalities and looks are reflected in the characters of Becky and Amelia. At first glance the two women seem to serve solely as opposites of each other. However, upon deeper exploration of the story, it becomes clear that Thackeray’s presentation of the women is more complex. Moreover, Thackeray’s growth as a writer is evident and his views on women seem to shift as the story progresses due to personal issues he was faced with concerning his wife’s mental illness.
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Introduction

For a long time, most societies considered women as being of lesser value than men. Women all over the world have had to fight for centuries in order to be considered worthy of the same things as men. Many women in the past were forced to make difficult decisions in order to survive in a cruel misogynistic world where they were often seen as objects rather than individuals. Furthermore, marriage was often women’s only way out of bad situations and in less developed societies women and children are still being forced into marriage. However, in western societies, women’s movements have come a long way in the fight for women’s rights and gender equality has almost been reached. Despite society being progressively civilized in nineteenth century Britain, women were still considered second-class citizens. However, the ways in which men controlled women were mostly hidden behind the established stereotypical views of how women were supposed to be.

*Vanity Fair* is a renowned novel by William Makepeace Thackeray written in the mid-nineteenth century. The story is set in the early nineteenth century and features two well-known female leads, Rebecca “Becky” Sharp, and Amelia Sedley. During the early nineteenth century when the story takes place, women were generally not considered as important as men. The idea of the perfect housewife, or “the angel in the house”, was very prominent. The opposing stereotype was that of the smart but dishonest, scheming, sexual woman, often referred to as “the fallen woman” (Pietka 239). The two female protagonists of *Vanity Fair* are apparently supposed to represent these stereotypical opposites. In his biography of Thackeray, *The Buried Life*, Gordon Ray claims that “Thackeray’s aim was to portray life directly, without distortion or idealization” (9). Thackeray’s ironic approach in *Vanity Fair* has often been criticized, especially in relation to the way he presents women. In order to unveil whether Thackeray succeeds in portraying early nineteenth century life and society in a way that is without distortion or idealization, the inspirations behind his two main characters must be closely explored. Thackeray’s presentation and general treatment of Becky and Amelia in *Vanity Fair* must be examined in relation to the standards of early nineteenth-century society, and most importantly, in relation to the women in his life.
1. William Makepeace Thackeray: his life and background

William Makepeace Thackeray was born on 18 July 1811 in Calcutta, India. His father, Richmond Thackeray, worked as secretary to the Board of Revenue in the British East India Company. Thackeray’s mother, Anne Becher, was a loving, caring woman who wanted all the best in the world for her son. In fact, she treated her son as a prince in his early years as he was growing up near the Ganges. In 1815, when Thackeray was only four years old, his father passed away. Times were hard for women and the death of Thackeray’s father forced his mother to send the little boy alone to England in order to be educated and taken care of. She adored her son and undoubtedly would have wanted to go with him if she could have. Little Thackeray then spent four months on a boat on his journey to Britain. Upon arrival in England the little boy felt that the world and people were hostile towards him as he was used to the loving care and excessive adoration of his mother. Once settled with relatives in England, Thackeray was sent to a private school. Unfortunately, the children in the school were not treated nicely and the environment was not good for them (Ray 12-13). However, the relatives Thackeray was staying with in England were good people despite being very preoccupied with various things other than raising him. Before long, Thackeray was moved to a better school where his existence was much more tolerable and he received the education of a gentleman. Thackeray’s mother managed to return to England in 1820, when he was nine years old. The boy had missed his mother immensely and was ecstatic to have her back. Later in life, when Thackeray revisited one of his childhood homes, he noted in his diary that it was “dark and sad and painful with my dear good mother as a gentle angel interposing between me and misery” (Ray 14). This shows that Thackeray viewed his mother as the epitome of what a woman should be like; in his eyes she was perfect, an angel. This apperception of the perfect woman would later become sort of a fixation for Thackeray. As Ray notes, his childhood memories of his mother caused him to be in permanent need of a woman like her later in his life (14).

As a child, Thackeray always had a special talent in drawing and writing and spent a lot of time doing so (Ray 15). In 1829, Thackeray enrolled in Trinity College in Cambridge. However, he was soon caught up with the wrong crowd and started gambling. He was scammed by professional gamblers and promptly owed a great deal of money to several people. This forced him to give up on his university studies after five terms in order to work. Subsequently, Thackeray tried his luck in various
professions, but to no avail. Ultimately he decided to become a painter as he had always wanted, and where his talents had always lain. However, being a painter was not a profession of high social status, which is likely what caused his delay in deciding to dedicate his life to art. Thackeray’s mother was strongly against this decision of his, having given her son the best education that she could. In 1833, Thackeray settled in Paris and managed to pay off his gambling debts with the inheritance from his father. However, he was not in luck for long as he lost the rest of his inheritance due to a failure of a Calcutta agency house (Ray 15-16). Thackeray became severely depressed as a result, and by 1835, he mentioned that he had become “so disgusted with myself and art and everything belonging to it” (Ray 17) that he decided to hang himself if he would not produce a painting of his liking in the next six months. However, Thackeray changed his mind upon meeting the woman who would become the love of his life and a source of inspiration for his most famous work, *Vanity Fair* (Ray 17).
2. *Vanity Fair*: literary criticism, outline and possible inspirations

*Vanity Fair* is Thackeray’s best-known novel and the one that helped establish his writing career. As Ellis mentions: “*Vanity Fair* set all educated England talking” (76) while Thackeray’s other novels are and were not widely read (Ray 2). *Vanity Fair* was originally called *Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society* and initially appeared as a series in a newspaper (Ray 30). The original title shows Thackeray’s intentions to describe society in short sketches. However, he changed the title to *Vanity Fair* when the story started taking a concrete form and gaining greater attention. The story begins by the narrator introducing the characters as puppets in a fair. Thackeray mentioned that the novel was meant 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” (Williams 60). In order to understand whether Thackeray succeeded in his intentions of portraying real life and real people, the two main characters in his novel must be closely observed. Thackeray used the women in his own life as models for his characters of Amelia and Becky and numerous situations presented within the novel are mirrored in Thackeray’s life.

In 1838, Thackeray married nineteen-year-old Isabella Shawe. Together they had three children, all girls, one of which died when only eight months old. Isabella Shawe was a warm-hearted and kind girl. However, she was rather simple and lacked education. She did not share Thackeray’s interests in the arts, for she could not understand them. Her husband grew tired of her lack of understanding in his profession and interests and progressively sought companionship with other people. Thackeray did not give Isabella the attention she needed and deserved and left her alone most of the time taking care of the house and their children by herself. Furthermore, Isabella grew increasingly depressed after the birth of their third child and the death of their second and she soon spiraled into a state of insanity. Isabella attempted suicide on several occasions and stopped being able to take care of her and Thackeray’s children. Eventually she slipped fully into a childlike state of madness and remained almost completely detached from reality until her death, half a century later (Ray 17-26). Isabella would become very influential in Thackeray’s writing and together with Thackeray’s mother and a close friend of his, Jane Brookfield, their personal features and aspects would make up a substantial basis for his character of Amelia in *Vanity Fair*. Subsequent to Isabella’s mental deterioration, Thackeray wrote to his friend Jane Brookfield: “I can’t live without the tenderness of some
woman” (Elwin 97). Moreover, Thackeray realized that his actions might have contributed to his wife becoming severely mentally ill, as he had neglected her for most of their marriage. As Ray mentions, by describing George’s neglect towards Amelia in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray can be seen as recognizing his failures as a husband, which eventually led to the termination of his marriage and his wife’s detached mental state (33).

Another woman who was extremely important to Thackeray was, as might be expected, his doting mother. From early childhood, Thackeray loved and adored his mother as she did him. It is clear that he viewed her as the perfect woman and he was in constant search for someone to replace her as he grew up. Thackeray’s mother was graceful and gentle and wanted all the best in the world for her son. As Elwin mentions about Thackeray’s mother: “… she created in the heart of an impressionable child an ideal of womanhood which was never supplanted” (24-25). Thackeray’s ideal of womanhood and his ideas of the perfect woman can clearly be seen in *Vanity Fair*. It is obvious that he favors certain feminine traits and has a set conception of how he thinks women should be. These ideas remind of the ways he described his mother, his wife Isabella Shawe before her mental illness, and his close friend, Jane Brookfield.

When Thackeray was writing *Vanity Fair*, Europe was in a time of turmoil. Victorian women were beginning to rise up against the passive helplessness that defined the ideals of femininity. However, Thackeray’s novel is set years earlier than when it is written, in the early nineteenth century (Jadwin 667). *Vanity Fair* is a complex story involving a multitude of characters and even historic events. The novel is not solely focused on the contrast between the two main characters, Becky and Amelia. However, their contrast provides a ground for the flow of the story, since a large part of it revolves around events concerning their lives, families and friends. At first glance it may seem that Thackeray created a simple contrast between the two women with one being completely good and the other being completely bad. However, it turns out that the characters are not exactly black and white. Williams agrees with this and notes: “The difference between Amelia and Becky is not that between a good woman and a bad but that between a selfishly good one and a selfishly bad” (61). This coincides with what Thackeray himself said about humans being entirely selfish and foolish. Thackeray has frequently been criticized for being cynical and even inconsistent, much like his narrator in *Vanity Fair*. Due to this, Thackeray’s satirical and ironic approach in the novel has repeatedly been overlooked. The narrator in
Vanity Fair is very inconsistent, which for writers is considered a major flaw. However, Thackeray himself and the narrator in the novel are not to be confused as they are two different beings.

E.D.H. Johnson argues that the inconsistency within the narration stems from Thackeray’s difficulty with combining the moral message he wishes to portray in the novel, and his satirical approach towards the characters (108). Harold Bloom argues that the narrator is actually one of the great strengths of the novel. He thinks that the narrator’s inconsistency aligns with the theme within the novel of the readers determining for themselves what is true and what is untrue. Bloom argues that determining this truth can often prove to be problematic. Furthermore, he argues that the narrator challenges the reader not to judge the characters too harshly since everyone is part of the puppet show and vain in one way or another (3). Juliet McMaster agrees with this approach and argues that the narrator challenges the readers and helps them react individually to the events and characters. This, she argues, gives the characters more life within the story (42-43). Thackeray himself mentioned that he did not always know where his writings came from. Sometimes he felt surprised when reading something he had written and did not recall writing it. He simply seemed to be able to write from a perspective that reached further than his conscious memory (Greig 108).
3. Presentation of women in *Vanity Fair*

Thackeray sets *Vanity Fair* up as a puppet show and the narrator presents the characters as his puppets. This may allude to Thackeray’s intention that story and its characters should not to be taken too seriously. On the contrary, the story involves real historical events and many of the characters are based on real people that were present in Thackeray’s life. The novel is not a comedy, so the characters must be looked at as fairly serious ones. While *Vanity Fair* is subtitled *A Novel Without a Hero* it is certainly not without a heroine (Merivale and Marzials 144). Amelia was generally considered the heroine of the story in the nineteenth century. The simple and obedient Amelia was obviously supposed to represent the perfect nineteenth-century woman. However, Thackeray’s narrator repeatedly makes fun of her lack of wit and her naïveté. This was perhaps Thackeray’s subtle way of opposing the general view that women were lesser than men. It could also be simply an example of the misogyny that prevailed in the nineteenth century, the general opinion that women could not possibly be considered intelligent, let alone more intelligent than men.

*Vanity Fair* was first published consecutively in the years 1847-1848. However, the story is set to happen in the early nineteenth century and at the time that the novel is set, the ideology of the perfect housewife was at its peak. In typical middle class families women’s roles were simply to keep the house and take care of the children while their husbands provided the money. The woman was generally supposed to be silent and obedient, yet warm and affectionate. These perfect women also had the important job of retaining the family’s social status and keeping the servants, or the lower classes, under control (Langland 292-295). A good example of the typical middle class family can be seen when looking at the Sedley family in *Vanity Fair*. After their bankruptcy they still retain one of their maids who helps Mrs. Sedley with the housekeeping. This was seen as a sign of status and sort of keeps them in the lower middle-class despite them having next to no money or respect left. Mrs. Sedley suffers greatly and seems to no longer have a place in society, nor within the home. She becomes the fallen angel of the house; incapable of making it the safe haven she was supposed to and to protect their social status. Generally, women’s only hope of gaining a reputable future in the early nineteenth century was marrying a rich man who could provide for them. Therefore, women strived to be this ideal woman that men longed for. Moreover, if one were not born into a family of status and money, even great looks and a sweet smile would not guarantee a well-off husband. This
aspect of fitting into society was highly important as can be seen in *Vanity Fair*, where everything revolves around fitting into a harsh, judgmental society.

3.1 “The angel in the house” vs. “the fallen woman”
An important study of women in literature of and around the Victorian era is *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. They claim that women at the time were usually very restricted and categorized as the “angel” or the “monster” (20-24). This notion of women only being capable of being one of two things suggested a reality where everything was black and white. Women were either virgins or whores, and either pure and honest, or dishonest and dirty. Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar note that the angelic housewife generally does not have her own story. Her story is usually told in relation to the story of her husband and her role is simply to listen, smile, sympathize with and please her man (22-23). At first glance, Amelia and Becky seem like the perfect examples of these outdated views on women. Amelia represents “the angel in the house”. She is the pure, gentle and sweet virgin who has been bred from childhood to marry a particular man and her future has no other possible outcome (Dee 400). This term of “the angel in the house” originates in a book of poems of the same name by Coventry Patmore. The book was first published in 1854 and reissued in 1862. In the popular poem, Patmore describes his wife as the model woman and holds her on a pedestal for other women to look up to. He describes her as quiet, pure and obedient with unconditional love for him, her husband. His wife stays true to him even after his death as he mentions in these lines: “Through passionate duty love springs higher, / As grass grows taller round a stone” (Patmore 75). This was the general consensus of how women were expected to treat their husbands and can clearly be seen in *Vanity Fair*.

Amelia becomes inconsolable when her husband George dies in the battle of Waterloo and almost becomes insane. Furthermore, she stays true to him beyond his death and thinks of no one other than him. She does not allow herself to be happy and rather stays miserable and in mourning until Becky manages to help her out of this way of thinking. Becky, “the fallen woman,” represents the exact opposite of Amelia. A woman is considered fallen if she has sinned, that is, had sex outside of marriage or committed adultery. There are also more aspects to her being the fallen woman, such as deceit and even her intelligence. As reflected in *Vanity Fair*, Becky tries everything to gain a better place in society because with a higher social status come better parties
where she would be acquainted with people who had money. Becky even goes so far as to risk her reputation when she has private meetings with Lord Steyne without her husband’s knowledge. While Thackeray never confirms that she had sex with him for money and social favors, he strongly suggests that it was the case. This implied infidelity and sexual behavior from a woman, along with Becky’s questionably dishonest characteristics, clearly makes her the fallen woman of the story. The opposing images of Amelia and Becky seem to be simplified at first glance. However, looking closer at their characters it becomes clear that they are not simple opposites. Furthermore, they do not fit these prescribed feminine roles perfectly. Pietka agrees with this in her article on *Vanity Fair* (239-240).
4. Amelia Sedley and possible inspirations for her

The description of Amelia’s character undeniably resembles Thackeray’s wife, Isabella, to a great extent. Both women are described as being sweet, timid and beautiful girls yet quite simple in their ways. They could even both be referred to as a little stupid. Not only is Amelia similar to Isabella when it comes to looks and intellect, but many of Amelia’s choices and actions in Vanity Fair mirror Isabella’s in real life (Ray 31). An example of this is the fact that Thackeray’s wife Isabella succumbed to mental illness and never managed to get better (Ray 23-24). Amelia is seen suffering the same fate of mental illness after her husband George dies in the battle of Waterloo. However, her mental state gets better towards the end of the novel, which is exactly what Thackeray always hoped for his wife. With Becky’s help, Dobbin manages to save Amelia from succumbing to insanity. Moreover, Thackeray never managed to help Isabella gain her sanity back despite desperately trying and seeking the best medical care for her (Ray 24). It is possible that Thackeray based the character of Dobbin on himself, and by Dobbin’s saving of Amelia in the story he is presenting his hopes of saving his wife Isabella. Moreover, Dobbin always shows unconditional love for Amelia, which she may not have deserved. This is similar to how Thackeray always stayed by his wife’s side and tried to get her the best treatment available, even when doctors had told him that her mental illness was past the point of no return and nothing could be done to help her (Ray 24). In a way, Dobbin can be viewed as the hero of this novel without a hero, and perhaps even as the man Thackeray wished and aimed to be in real life.

Another inspiration behind the character of Amelia was Thackeray’s good friend, Jane Brookfield. She was the wife of Thackeray’s friend, who eventually got jealous of their friendship and forbade it. Thackeray admired Jane and was perhaps even jealous of his friend for having the wife that he wished he had. Amelia certainly bears resemblance to Jane when it comes to looks. However, Mrs. Brookfield said that she wished Thackeray had endowed Amelia with a bit more brains as she noticed the likeness between them (Ellis 66-67). Thackeray’s mother was also a huge inspiration for Amelia’s character, being his ideal perfect woman from childhood. Thackeray kept searching for a woman like his mother all his life and their relationship was much like Amelia and her son George’s relationship in *Vanity Fair*. It is clear that the inspiration behind their close relationship and the way George is brought up was inspired by Thackeray’s own childhood.
As a character in a story, Amelia is much less interesting than Becky. Amelia does not have as many layers as Becky does, she is very simple, plain and naïve. These are the very traits that were held in high regard in women’s behavior in the early nineteenth century. Women knew that their lives would be defined by their marriage, the amount of money they had, and their social status. Amelia is no different, she is raised to believe that women are inferior to men which is clearly demonstrated in her relationship with her brother Jos in *Vanity Fair* where she distinctly views herself as less important than him. Amelia is raised to believe that she needs a man in order to define her as a person. Furthermore, her marriage to George was decided early on in her childhood. It is mentioned in the novel that Amelia: “was bred from her childhood to think of nobody but him” (Thackeray 284). She was not allowed to choose her own destiny or even choose for herself which man to love. Amelia’s behavior in *Vanity Fair* is extremely self-abnegating and she seems to constantly seek approval from men (Jadwin 664). However, her weaknesses and her submissiveness are her main charms and what attracts men to her. Amelia is quiet, sweet and traditional. Therefore, she is the perfect housewife for any man. Dee mentions that every man she meets seems to sympathize with her and wants to protect her (395). This further portrays Amelia’s likeness to Thackeray’s wife Isabella. Much like Amelia, she was very young and childlike when they first met and Thackeray felt the intense need to protect her (Ray 17). Moreover, Amelia still develops some interesting characteristics. As the story unfolds, the reader sees that Amelia is not solely the angel she was originally made out to be. She often acts selfishly towards other people and her mental illness certainly adds layers to her character.

One of the few good men in the novel, Dobbin, longs for Amelia’s love and hand in marriage for fifteen years. Once he has her as his wife, he realizes that she is not the perfect person he had made her out to be in his mind and she even seems to bore him. Dobbin was simply obsessed with the idea of this perfect, angelic woman as his wife. However, once he has her, he realizes that she was not worth it and that he could have done better. His marriage to Amelia does not bring him much joy other than his child. Dobbin mentions: “I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning” (Thackeray 893). He seems to have always known deep down that Amelia was not as perfect in real life as she was in his head. This seems to reflect Thackeray’s married life to Isabella before she became ill. Soon after marrying Isabella, Thackeray started seeking companionship elsewhere. He realized that while
she certainly was a good housewife and mother, she was not interesting to spend time with. This could perhaps have been due to her lack of education and the fact that she was very young. However, she was described as being simple minded just like Amelia. When writing about Amelia, Thackeray was not able to distance himself enough from his inspirations as he was extremely close to all three women he drew from. Greig mentions that “The result was that Amelia became one thing one moment and another another, according to his mood and the real woman he was thinking of” (108). This is clearly reflected in the way that Amelia’s character gradually becomes incoherent as the story evolves.
5. Becky Sharp and possible inspirations for her

No women in particular served as inspirations for the character of Becky unlike Thackeray’s inspiration for Amelia’s character. Alternatively, the inspirations behind Becky’s character seem to originate in the opposing characteristics of the three women who inspired Amelia. However, there are a few women who could have inspired Thackeray in his creating of Becky. Greig mentions women such as Lady Morgan, originally named Sidney Owenson, who led a life very similar to Becky’s in the novel. Valérie Marneffe in Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette* is also mentioned, as well as Theresa Reviss, an illegitimate daughter of Charles Buller, Thackeray’s friend (104). However, it is likely that originally Becky was solely supposed to serve as the antagonist for the perfect Amelia. Becky therefore possesses many negative traits in direct opposition to Amelia’s good ones. Furthermore, as the story progresses, Thackeray’s characters also progress. They start becoming less exaggerated and less oppositional to one another. This may have been due to Thackeray growing as a writer, seeing as the novel was written continuously during the course of over a year. These changes may also have been intentional, in order to show the reader that everything is not always what it seems at first glance. Moreover, Thackeray may have wanted to show the reader through his character development that the standards pressed upon women were unrealistic and outdated, even for the nineteenth century.

The narrator’s description of Becky as a siren in *Vanity Fair* is certainly interesting as well as being very descriptive for her overall character:

“I defy any one to say that our Becky, who has certainly some vices, has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner. 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? When, however, the siren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbid over her, and it is labour lost to look into it ever so curiously. They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twangling their harps and
combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims” (Thackeray 848-849).

This description of Becky can be said to be an example of illicit sexuality (Warhol 85). Becky has many layers to her personality and men are advised to stay away from her despite the initial charm she may have on them. She is described as using her beauty to trick and deceive men, while underneath her looks she is a dangerous woman. Gilbert and Gubar note that Thackeray may be implying that a monster may reside within someone who appears flawless at first glance. He may also be implying that “the angel in the house” may have her bad sides, hidden from view, and that a bad woman may hide behind the looks and charms of a good one (29).

Looking at the story from a modern perspective, Becky is definitely the anti-heroine of Vanity Fair. She is sly, smart, and resourceful while being an interesting character that is not too exaggerated. A large part of what defines Becky as the anti-heroine and the fallen woman of the story is her sex appeal. Every man she comes in contact with is fascinated with her. She is funny, charming and very beautiful, although not in the same way as delicate Amelia. The character of Becky is generally viewed as the evil opposite to Amelia. However, a statement that Becky makes sums her character up quite nicely. She says: “I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year” (Thackeray 554). This statement perfectly reflects women’s position in the early nineteenth century. Generally, women did not have much of a chance of obtaining a good and financially secure life except if they found a rich man to marry. In order to obtain a rich husband, women had to have a good place in society or a considerable amount of money to their name. This can be seen in Vanity Fair where George’s father wants him to marry the mixed race woman Miss Swartz because Amelia’s parents had gone bankrupt. Miss Swartz was not of a high social status due to her race, but she was immensely rich. Therefore, marriage between her and George would have been a good match as he was rich and of a relatively good social status.

Vanity Fair largely revolves around this theme of women’s struggle in society. Becky is seen doing everything in her power to further herself in society in order to obtain a rich husband. The social norms and constraints pushed upon her force her to do despicable things during the course of the story, she is simply forced to climb the
social ladder any way she can in hopes of procuring her dream of a good future. Becky is certainly a well-written character, perhaps even the best one in the novel. She is complex and clever, and she uses her intelligence to get her way in the world. Despite often behaving as a sociopath, there are some instances in the novel where Becky shows that she can in fact feel for others. When Amelia is severely depressed because of George’s departure to the war, Becky reassures her friend: “‘He will come back, my dear,’ said Rebecca, touched in spite of herself” (Thackeray 400). Even Becky herself seems surprised that she is capable of reassuring her friend with such kind words. Another example of Becky’s good characteristics is in the end of the novel when “she frees Amelia of her loyalty to George by showing her a letter that confirms his guile” (Pietka 240). By doing this, Becky helps Amelia secure a good husband and some form of happiness in her life.

Becky is still relatively greedy and dishonest and will stop at nothing when it comes to getting what she wants. She dreams of glamorous parties and enough money to have every vanity she wants. Becky’s dreams do not include a family life or being a simple, obedient housewife. An expert on nineteenth-century culture mentions that a strong-willed woman who used her brain was generally viewed as unpleasant and even dangerous (Pietka 239). This is exactly the way Thackeray chooses to present Becky. Furthermore, it is suggested in the novel that Becky inherited her wild nature from her parents. They were not of a reputable social status, nor were they rich, and it is implied that it is merely in Becky’s nature to deceive and be dishonest (Pietka 240). Becky can also be viewed as Thackeray’s way of portraying how unfair and cruel he thought the world was towards women in the nineteenth century. If Amelia represents the good things in the world, Becky represents the bad things and the forces of society that compel people to do bad things (Ellis 77-78). Moreover, there are many unfavorable traits to Becky’s character and those are more apparent than the good ones. An example is how Becky always uses her femininity in order to further herself in society. She knows she is a charming, smart woman with good looks and uses her sexuality to get her way with men. However, despite using her feminine suggestive sexuality she also subverts gender roles in her marriage to Rawdon. This is reflected in the way that Becky takes control over their finances which was generally considered the man’s responsibility. It seems that Rawdon does not know what is going on in their lives or what their financial status is. Becky hides away her money and does not pay her husband’s debts out of selfishness. This shows a bad side of her
personality and suggests that she is incapable of feeling for others.

Another example of Becky’s bad nature is the fact that she seems to dislike or even hate her own son. This can seem rather exaggerated and paints her as an extremely bad person, especially during times when women were little else but mothers and wives. However, it is likely that Thackeray was referencing his own wife in relation to Becky’s indifference towards her son. Isabella’s mental deterioration began after she had her children and she stopped being able to care for them (Ray 23). Today, a factor in Isabella’s mental illness could be explained as postpartum depression, which is a common recognized condition that affects up to thirteen percent of new mothers (Wisner, Parry and Piontek 194). However, in the nineteenth century, it was not a recognized condition. It is possible that Becky suffered from postpartum depression just like Isabella most likely did. The condition often manifests as complete indifference for one’s children and the inability or disinterest to care for them (Wisner, Parry and Piontek 195). This can certainly be seen in the way Becky acts extremely indifferent and even mean towards her only son.

Furthermore, Becky’s scandal with Lord Steyne proves to be a difficult wake up call for her, and she seems to finally realize that she has gone too far in her antics. For a while after the scandal is revealed, she tries to abide to social norms and behave like a respectable woman with the help of her old friend Amelia. Becky assures Amelia that she is a changed woman and Amelia decides to help her friend out of a bad situation by allowing her to move into her home. Once Becky is settled there, she tries her best to imitate Amelia’s behavior. However, she soon grows tired of being perfect, or perfectly boring, and continues with her old dishonest life. At this point in the story, Thackeray presents Becky almost solely as the fallen woman. It is clear that she is beyond saving and will never manage to be a good woman like Amelia. In the end of *Vanity Fair* Thackeray even suggests that Becky murdered her old friend Jos Sedley in order to claim his life insurance. Supporting this notion of Becky having become a murderess, the names of the three solicitors helping her with her case are all names of notorious murderers (Litvak 223).
6. Comparison of the characters of Amelia and Becky

Thackeray was a liberal Victorian and his views are clearly reflected in most of his writings. Critics have often misinterpreted *Vanity Fair* and Thackeray’s presentation of the women in the story. However, looking at the background and inspiration behind the characters it becomes clear that Thackeray’s aim could be criticism of the position of women in the nineteenth century. His way of talking about *Vanity Fair* as a puppet show and placing the two women as opposites shows his intentions of portraying life exactly the way it was. Thackeray can be seen as trying to make the reader think not only about women’s position and the pressure put upon them, but also about how superficial people generally are. Merivale and Marzials think that Thackeray’s characters are convincing due to the fact that his descriptions are straightforward and he never made anyone “look larger than human” (144-145). Looking closely at the characters in the novel, this can certainly be agreed upon. The characters all have their flaws and their bad sides, even the angelic Amelia. The characters are quite exaggerated but none possess superhuman powers or are entirely bad or completely flawless. The characters’ range of emotions is shown in a very realistic way, which can be largely attributed to Thackeray’s dramatic personal life and his difficult situation with his wife. He seems to understand true emotion and uses his personal experiences as inspirations in the novel.

As Greig mentions, Becky and Amelia were originally meant to balance each other out (105). This can clearly be seen when looking at their opposing personalities, actions and even looks. Becky is charming, smart and extremely resourceful. She is beautiful and blonde, which is in fact unusual because in literature the bad people are usually darker than the good ones. Amelia is simple-minded, naïve, nice and pure. She has darker hair than Becky and is plainer looking despite being considered pretty. It is easy to say that Amelia is the heroine and Becky the anti-heroine, Amelia “the angel in the house” and Becky “the fallen woman”. However, looking closely at the story and Thackeray’s inspirations, it is clear that these roles are not as set in stone as they seem at first. When looking at these two opposing characters in the beginning of the story it becomes clear that “Amelia is all heart - she has no brain; Becky is all brain - she lacks a heart. The reader of Thackeray’s first installment discovers that he must use both heart and brain to sort out the experiences he is asked to witness” (Knoepflmacher 65). Therefore, as the story goes on, the reader is forced to look under the surface and it becomes clear that Becky and Amelia are not as simple as
they were made out to be at first.

It can be asserted that Becky’s position in society is weak from the very beginning. She is not born to parents of high status despite acquiring a good education in exchange for teaching French at the school. Becky always struggles and has to fight her way through society in order to not end up homeless and broke, she even thinks that she could be a good person if she had five thousand a year. Becky would definitely not be forced to go to the lengths she went to if she had come from a richer background. However, even if Becky had five thousand a year, the reader cannot know whether she would prove to be good or bad, as money alone does not define people’s character and personality. Becky shows that she is not capable of being a good, obedient woman for long when she lives with Amelia in the end of the novel. This boring life of the housewife simply does not suit her, for that she is too intelligent and adventurous. Jadwin mentions: “For centuries, female ‘virtue’ and ‘honor’ have denoted not truthfulness but ‘chastity, purity, virginity.’ As the male honor code forbids men to lie to other men, the female honor code forbids women to ‘lie’ with (other) men” (667). This proves to be Becky’s ultimate downfall as it is suggested that she committed adultery with Lord Steyne.

Ray mentions that such an intelligent man as Thackeray could not have had such simplistic views on women as reflected in Amelia’s character in *Vanity Fair*. Therefore, she must have been meant to serve as satire (36). However, after looking closely at the character of Amelia it is clear that her personality traits originate in real women in Thackeray’s life. She could be meant to serve as satire as the story progresses, as Thackeray seemed to realize later in his life that the stereotype of the perfect woman was not realistic. Amelia could also simply have been a reflection of the women Thackeray loved the most in his life. Thackeray had an unusual married life with his wife Isabella, tainted by his indifference towards her and her mental illness. In the beginning of their marriage, Isabella was the ideal angelic housewife and therefore, Amelia was as well. As Isabella’s condition grew worse, Thackeray’s views on women seemed to change. He realized that women were not as simple as he had thought and he recognized the negative impact he had had on Isabella’s mental health. This change in Thackeray’s views is clearly reflected in Amelia’s character development, as she seems to begin to change after the battle of Waterloo when she loses her husband. She gradually becomes more inconsistent and the reader gets to see more of her bad sides, and in contrast, of Becky’s good sides. Ray mentions that in
the beginning of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray seems to be trying to give people what they want in the angelic heroine Amelia, and her anti-heroine, Becky (36-37). Soon the reader sees that nobody is who they seemed to be and Thackeray’s approach shifts to show the characters’ flaws in a more realistic manner. It is clear when reading *Vanity Fair* that life imitates art, which imitates life. It can even be asserted that Isabella’s mental illness helped Thackeray change his views of how women should and should not be like, and helped him criticize the prescribed roles pushed upon women. Thackeray, much like Dobbin, always thought that Amelia was the perfect woman. However, as his views changed he mentioned in relation to Dobbin’s marriage to Amelia: “Well, he shall, and when he has got her, he will find her not worth having” (Greig 110). Looking closely at how Thackeray and Isabella’s lives together turned out, it becomes clear that he regretted not treating her better and not giving her more attention. Thackeray clearly thought that he could have saved her from the mental illness that plagued her until her death had he not been so careless. As Greig writes: “one wonders whether in the course of writing *Vanity Fair* Thackeray had come round to the same conclusion about himself and Isabella Shawe as he now allowed himself to express about Dobbin and Amelia” (110). Thackeray seemed to regret ever marrying Isabella as he was unable to treat her right and did not realize the negative impact it had on her fragile personality until it was too late.
Conclusion
Thackeray’s presentation of his two main characters in *Vanity Fair*, Becky and Amelia, can be said to be fairly realistic considering the inspirations behind them. At first glance the two characters seem exaggerated and simple, the reader has the feeling that they are merely supposed to present exact opposites with no depth to their character. However, as the story takes form, both Becky and Amelia are slowly revealed as being much more than the stereotypes of the devil and the angel, the fallen woman and the perfect housewife. These stereotypes were prevalent during the nineteenth century and women generally aimed to fit into the role of the gentle, angelic wife in order to please men. Amelia certainly fits this category at first, but her strengths and her flaws become apparent in the latter half of the novel. Becky serves as Amelia’s opposite, but her character has extraordinary depth and her struggle as a woman perfectly portrays women’s struggles in nineteenth century society. The women behind Thackeray’s two heroines provide a substantial basis for their character development as well as their personalities and looks. It is clear that Thackeray was very inspired by the women in his life while creating Becky and Amelia. Thackeray aimed to portray life in its realest form, without exaggeration or idealization and it is fair to say that he managed just that in *Vanity Fair*.

Life in the nineteenth century was far from being fair, especially regarding women’s rights. Women often had to go to extreme lengths in order to establish a good life for themselves and Becky is symbolic for this resilient nineteenth-century woman. Women were generally considered second-class citizens and did not have the same rights as men did. Therefore, they had to be clever and even cruel to get what they wanted and needed. Women’s right’s movements have certainly come a long way since the nineteenth century, especially in first world countries. However, women all over the world still have to fight for gender equality and respect on a daily basis, as misogyny is very prevalent to this day.
Works Cited


