



William Makepeace Thackeray

(1811-1863)

Life and works

William Makepeace Thackeray was born in 1811 into a **well-to-do family in Calcutta**, where his father worked for the East India Company. At the age of 6, after the death of his father, **he was sent to England** to be educated at the London public school and then **in Cambridge**. In his youth he dabbled at writing and drawing, and squandered his personal fortune.

He spent **some years in Paris** where he took up journalism working for the newspaper *The Constitutional*. The central event of this period was his **happy marriage to Isabella Shawe**, who bore him three daughters, but became mentally ill; this was an enormous tragedy in Thackeray's emotional life and it deeply affected his character and his writing. His first works were journalistic articles, travelling sketches, anecdotes and short stories; in 1844 he published the novel

The Luck of Barry Lyndon, which was serialised in *Fraser's Magazine*. Then he wrote *The Book of Snobs* (1848), a satire of the early Victorian cult for sophistication, snobbery and pretended romanticism.

He achieved fame with *Vanity Fair*, which appeared in monthly instalments **between 1847 and 1848**. Other novels by Thackeray are *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50) dealing with contemporary society; *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* (1852) set in the reign of Queen Anne (→ 3.2); *The Newcomes* (1853-55) and *The Virginians* (1857-59). He is also remembered for his lectures on *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (1851).

Thackeray travelled widely as a lecturer in Europe and in 1860 became the first editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*, where much of his later work appeared. He died in 1863.

Vanity Fair

(1847-1848)

TITLE

Vanity Fair owes its name to **Vanity**, a town visited by Christian, the protagonist of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by Bunyan, but while the inhabitants of that allegorical world could be saved by faith, **few members of this Victorian society are able to see the real values of life, since they embody the 'fair' of all vanities**. The subtitle of *Vanity Fair* is *A Novel Without a Hero*, with which Thackeray states his disapproval of unrealistic heroes or heroines with superhuman passions and virtues, since everyone is dominated by selfishness and vanity.

PROLOGUE

This novel opens with a prologue where the content as well as the technique of the whole novel are presented:

BEFORE THE CURTAIN

As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place. There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing and fiddling. [...]

Yes, this is vanity fair; not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy. [...]

He [the manager] is proud to think that his Puppets have given satisfaction to the very best company in this empire. The famous Becky Puppet, [...] the Amelia Doll, [...] the Dobbin Figure, [...] are among them.

From the very beginning, through the metaphor of the theatre, **Thackeray, who is the 'Manager of the Performance', reminds his readers that his characters are unreal**; he turns directly to the man 'walking through an exhibition', that is the reader, and asks him to make

himself acquainted with the 'Fair', of which he himself is an inhabitant. **Thus Thackeray's moral and artistic purpose is to force the reader, during the act of reading, to make comparisons between one world and the other and to break down the barrier between illusion and reality.**

PLOT AND SETTING

This novel is **set in England and on the Continent at the time of the Napoleonic wars**. The main characters are two school friends, **Becky Sharp**, the orphaned daughter of a poor artist, and **Amelia Sedley**, the daughter of a rich city merchant. **Becky is an ambitious, unscrupulous adventurer**, who, after an unsuccessful attempt at becoming Amelia's sister-in-law, tries to make her way up the social ladder through a marriage of convenience with Rawdon, the son of Sir Pitt Crawley. Sir Pitt, who had employed her as a governess for his daughters, is infuriated and turns them both out of the house. Later Becky becomes the lover of Amelia's husband, George Osborne, and when George is killed at the battle of Waterloo, she attaches herself to a certain Lord Steyne, whose financial contributions allow her to keep a place in society. She is discovered by her husband and they separate. Time passes and Amelia does not succeed in getting over the death of George until Becky, who is now a respectable lady, tells her of his infidelity. In the end Amelia marries Dobbin, who has always loved her.

CHARACTERS

All the characters of this novel can be divided into two groups, **the 'bad' and the 'weak'**, and are presented as **caricatures with utilitarian realism**. **Becky Sharp**, whose early life is described as one of mingled hardship, cunning and trickery, is the most striking character. She is **the**



personification of intellect without heart, of the new woman able to face a society which has sunk to the level of a market. She seems, indeed, a thoroughly original character and in her varied intercourse with many different characters, both men and women, is on the whole wonderfully successful. **Her sudden high social triumph, and yet more sudden social fall, are alike temporary**, her invincible self-control and knowledge of character, allied with a fearless and unscrupulous mind, enable her to resist and overcome nearly all the ill-nature and social jealousy she encounters.

Becky's friend, **Amelia Sedley**, has **heart without intellect** and embodies the Victorian model of 'the angel of the hearth'.

The most important male characters are **George Osborne**, who is handsome, very conceited and thoughtless, and **William Dobbin**, who is very plain, awkward and sincere and represents good in antithesis to the evil embodied by Becky.

A NEW SENSE OF TIME

Vanity Fair is a **satirical novel** which depicts the social rise and fall of the unscrupulous adventurer Becky Sharp. The two **main themes of Thackeray's fiction** appear here: **exposure of the hypocrisy and snobbery of the so-called respectable society, condemnation of unscrupulous**

villains who rebel against this society and violate its moral principles.

This novel also **deals with the passing of time**; Thackeray's characters get older, gain in wisdom in one direction, while their receptivity in another fades; meanwhile the narrator gets older, too, and reminds us that existence goes on, with its dramas and disappointments, but without resolution either for the fictional characters or for the readers. In fact, life has its own laws, which man is not able to alter, and **the novelist cannot be a social reformer, as Dickens was, but only a spectator**.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Thackeray draws from Fielding (→ Text Bank 22) the technique of the **obtrusive omniscient narrator**, who is **informative**, though not usually analytical, about the characters and the context in which they act, who **openly intervenes in the story expressing his personal comments** in the first-person, making ironic remarks, giving relevant information about the past and telling anecdotes. He is able to **identify himself with the general consciousness of the community, using the personal pronoun 'we'**, and to address the reader directly, who is asked to judge the characters of this story and to share the narrator's opinions about the Victorian upper class. Thus a close relationship between the reader and the narrator is established.

<i>Key idea</i>	<p><i>Vanity Fair</i> is a mixture of social satire and humour: it is both an attack on the opportunism and the unscrupulousness of the Puritan respectable upper middle class, and a celebration of its protagonist, who is a brilliant social climber.</p>	<p>The style Thackeray used in this work can be defined as ironic: his words are means to criticise his favourite target, that is, the snob, the person who pretends or believes himself to be something he is not from a social point of view.</p>
Social satire and humour		

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts and answer the following questions about William M. Thackeray and his novel *Vanity Fair*.

- 1 What crucial event had a deep impact on Thackeray's life?
- 2 What were Thackeray's first works?
- 3 Where does the title of *Vanity Fair* come from?
- 4 What does Thackeray remind his readers of in the prologue?
- 5 Where and when does *Vanity Fair* take place?
- 6 Who are the main characters?
- 7 What kind of novel is Thackeray's masterpiece? What are its main themes?
- 8 What is the role of the novelist?
- 9 What is the narrative technique employed in *Vanity Fair*?
- 10 Why is it possible to state that this novel is a mixture of social satire and humour?



Becky Sharp

The following passage takes place about midway through the novel. The scene is set in Brussels, on the eve of the battle of Waterloo, but the narrator centres his attention on a great ball given by a duchess, where all the main characters of the novel are present, Becky, Amelia, George (Amelia's husband), Captain Dobbin (Amelia's friend).

William Makepeace
Thackeray
Vanity Fair
(1847-1848)
Chapter 39

There never was, since the days of Darius¹, such a brilliant train of camp-followers as hung round the Duke of Wellington's army in the Low Countries, in 1815; and led it dancing and feasting, as it were, up to the very brink² of battle. A certain ball³ which a noble Duchess gave at Brussels on the 15th of June in the above-named year is historical. All Brussels had been in a state of excitement about it, and I have heard
5 from ladies who were in that town at the period, that the talk and interest of persons of their own sex regarding the ball was much greater even than in respect of the enemy in their front. The struggles, intrigues, and prayers to get tickets were such as only English ladies will employ, in order to gain admission to the society of the great of their own
10 nation.

Jos and Mrs O'Dowd, who were panting⁴ to be asked, strove in vain to procure tickets; but others of our friends were more lucky. For instance, through the interest of my Lord Bareacres, and as a set-off for the dinner at the restaurateur's, George got a card for Captain and Mrs Osborne; which circumstance greatly elated him⁵. Dobbin,
15 who was a friend of the General commanding the division in which their regiment was, came laughing one day to Mrs Osborne, and displayed a similar invitation, which made Jos envious, and George wonder how the deuce⁶ he should be getting into society⁷. Mr and Mrs Rawdon⁸, finally, were of course invited; as became⁹ the friends of a General commanding a cavalry brigade.

On the appointed night, George, having commanded new dresses and ornaments of all sorts for Amelia, drove to the famous ball, where his wife did not know a single soul. After looking about for Lady Bareacres, who cut¹⁰ him, thinking the card was quite enough – and after placing Amelia on a bench, he left her to her own cogitations there, thinking, on his own part, that he had behaved very handsomely in getting her new
25 clothes, and bringing her to the ball, where she was free to amuse herself as she liked. Her thoughts were not of the pleasantest, and nobody except honest Dobbin came to disturb them.

Whilst her appearance was an utter¹¹ failure (as her husband felt with a sort of rage), Mrs Rawdon Crawley's *début* was, on the contrary, very brilliant. She arrived
30 very late. Her face was radiant; her dress perfection. In the midst of the great persons assembled, and the eye-glasses¹² directed to her, Rebecca seemed to be as cool and collected as when she used to marshall¹³ Miss Pinkerton's little girls to church. Numbers of the men she knew already, and the dandies thronged¹⁴ round her. As for the ladies, it was whispered among them that Rawdon had run away with her from out of a convent, and that she was a relation of the Montmorency family. She spoke French so perfectly
35 that there might be some truth in this report, and it was agreed that her manners were fine, and her air *distingué*. Fifty would-be¹⁵ partners thronged round her at once, and pressed to have the honour to dance with her. But she said she was engaged, and only going to dance very little; and made her way at once to the place where Emmy¹⁶ sat quite unnoticed, and dismally¹⁷ unhappy. And so, to finish the poor child at once, Mrs Rawdon ran and greeted affectionately her dearest Amelia and began forthwith¹⁸
40 to patronise¹⁹ her. She found fault with²⁰ her friend's dress, and her hairdresser, and wondered how she could be so *chaussée*²¹, and vowed that she must send her *corsetière*²² the next morning. She vowed that it was a delightful ball: that there was everybody that every one knew, and only a very few nobodies in the whole room. It is a fact, that in a fortnight, and after three dinners in general society, this young woman had got up the genteel jargon²³ so well, that a native could not speak it better; and it was only from her

- 1 Darius. Dario il Grande, antico re della Persia.
- 2 brink. Orlo.
- 3 ball. Ballo.
- 4 were panting. Desideravano ardentemente.
- 5 elated him. Lo rese euforico.
- 6 how the deuce. Come diavolo, come diamine.
- 7 society. Alta società.
- 8 Mrs Rawdon. Becky.
- 9 as became. Come si addiceva a.
- 10 cut. Ignorò, snobbò.
- 11 utter. Totale.
- 12 eye-glasses. Monocoli.
- 13 to marshall. Condurre.
- 14 thronged. Si affollarono.
- 15 would-be. Aspiranti.
- 16 Emmy. Cioè, Amelia.
- 17 dismally. Terribilmente.
- 18 forthwith. Immediatamente.
- 19 patronise. Trattare con condiscendenza.
- 20 found fault with. Disapprovò, trovò da ridire su.
- 21 be so chaussée. Avere tali scarpe.
- 22 corsetière. Corsettaia.
- 23 genteel jargon. Gergo distinto, elegante.



French being so good, that you could know she was not a born woman of fashion.

George, who had left Emmy on her bench on entering the ballroom, very soon
 50 found his way back when Rebecca was by her dear friend's side. Becky was just
 lecturing²⁴ Mrs Osborne upon the follies which her husband was committing. 'For
 God's sake, stop him from gambling²⁵, my dear,' she said, 'or he will ruin himself. He and
 Rawdon are playing at cards every night, and you know he is very poor, and Rawdon
 will win every shilling from him if he does not take care. Why don't you prevent
 55 him, you little careless creature? Why don't you come to us of an evening, instead of
 moping²⁶ at home with that Captain Dobbin? I daresay he is *très aimable*²⁷, but how
 could one love a man with feet of such size? Your husband's feet are darlings – here
 he comes. Where have you been, wretch²⁸? Here is Emmy crying her eyes out for you.
 Are you coming to fetch me for the quadrille?' And she left her bouquet and **shawl**
 60 by Amelia's side, and tripped off²⁹ with George to dance. Women only know how to
 wound³⁰ so. There is a poison on the tips of their little shafts³¹, which **stings** a thousand
 times more than a man's **blunter** weapon. Our poor Emmy, who had never hated, never
 sneered³² all her life, was powerless in the hands of her remorseless little enemy.

George danced with Rebecca twice or thrice – how many times Amelia scarcely
 65 knew. She sate³³ quite unnoticed in her corner, except when Rawdon came up with
 some words of clumsy³⁴ conversation: and later in the evening, when Captain Dobbin
 made so bold as³⁵ to bring her refreshments³⁶ and sit beside her. He did not like to ask
 her why she was so sad; but as a pretext for the tears which were filling in her eyes, she
 told him that Mrs Crawley had alarmed her by telling her that George would go on
 70 playing.

- 24 lecturing. Sgridando, facendo una ramanzina.
 25 gambling. Gioco d'azzardo.
 26 moping. Intristirti.
 27 *très aimable*. Molto gentile.
 28 wretch. Sciagurato.
 29 tripped off. Corse via saltellando.
 30 to wound. Ferire, offendere.
 31 shafts. Frecce.
 32 sneered. Deriso.
 33 sate. Sat.
 34 clumsy. Impacciata.
 35 made so bold as. Si prese la libertà di.
 36 refreshments. Rinfreschi.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1 wounds | 6 secret plots or plans |
| 2 compensation | 7 tried hard |
| 3 promised | 8 thoughts |
| 4 get | 9 a piece of fabric worn by women on their shoulders |
| 5 less sharp | |

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

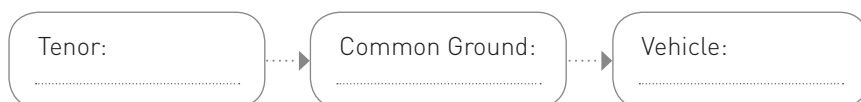
- Write down when the scene takes place.
- State why it was so important that everybody struggled to find tickets for the ball.
- Find out whether George and Amelia are welcomed as guests at this ball, and if someone keeps Amelia company.
- Rebecca's fluency in French is due to
- Decide whether Mrs Rawdon wishes to revive Amelia's spirits.
- Is Amelia able to contrast her friend's behaviour? Who does Amelia really love?
- Focus on the narrative technique used in this passage. Is the narrator internal or external to the story?
- Find examples where the narrator
 - expresses personal comments;
 - states his attitude to the society he describes.
- Consider the two female protagonists. Underline words and phrases about their physical and psychological description using different colours. Then collect your data in a table.
- What makes the contrast between the two women so sharp?
 - Amelia is virtuous and talkative; Becky is brilliant.
 - Amelia is virtuous but insignificant; Becky is wicked but talkative and brilliant.
 - Amelia is wicked but talkative; Becky is virtuous but insignificant.



- 11 Decide what message Thackeray wants to convey by depicting these two female characters.
- 12 Complete the table below considering the people's attitude towards Amelia and Becky. Then answer the questions below.

	Amelia	Becky
Ladies		
George Osborne		
Captain Dobbin		

- 1 Compare George Osborne's character to Captain Dobbin's.
 - 2 State what image of all the people at the ball the narrator intends to convey.
- 13 What kind of language is used in this passage? Tick as appropriate.
- ☐ Realistic.
 - ☐ Direct.
 - ☐ Abstract.
 - ☐ Critical.
 - ☐ Romantic.
 - ☐ Sophisticated.
 - ☐ Unromantic.
 - ☐ Sarcastic.
- 14 Define the tone of the passage.
- 15 Look up the word 'sharp' in the dictionary.
- 1 Write down the definition which applies to a person's character.
 - 2 Try to explain the reason why the author chose this surname for the character of Becky.
- 16 The fifth paragraph ends with an important image about Becky's character and her attitude to men. Find it and explain it completing the diagram below.



> COMPETENCE: CONTRASTING AUTHORS

- 3 **WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to point out similarities and differences between Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (→ Text Bank 25) and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as regards female protagonists, themes and aims.