

REBECCA AS A SOCIAL CRIMINAL IN *THACKERAY'S VANITY FAIR*

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Abstract. The scheming and calculating anti-heroine, Rebecca Crawley, Rebecca Sharp with her former name, is one of the female protagonists portrayed by William Makepeace Thackeray in his novel, *Vanity Fair* (1848). As an amoral woman of disadvantageous origins, she has the desire to become a respectful and influential person. However, on the way to achieving her ambition, her love of money and desire for a higher social status lead her to commit several crimes such as disregarding her son, cheating on her husband, and manipulating people. The views about Becky differ. It is still disputed if she is a person of guilt or an innocent and sympathetic individual who does what she must to gain higher status and affluence in a society in which a woman does not have many choices or possibilities to have what she desires. If she does not act the way she does, she will not be able to get by, or worse, she will have to do jobs degrading for women under the social conditions of the first half of the nineteenth century during the Regency period. This study aims to briefly dwell on the titles and the subtitles of *Vanity Fair* and treat Becky as a person who comes from humble origins and struggles to climb the social ladder by resorting to any kind of misdeed to help her way up, which would normally make her a social criminal, yet it is disputed because she is found relatable due to the conditions of the time.

Keywords: Rebecca Crawley, Rebecca Sharp, Regency, *Vanity Fair*, William Makepeace Thackeray.

INTRODUCTION

Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* was first published in serial form between the dates January 1847 and July 1848 as 20 monthly parts in the magazine called *Punch* published by Bradbury & Evans in London. Later in 1848, it was published as a volume and it was Thackeray's first novel to bear his real name as the writer. The novel satirizes Victorian society revealing its moral fallibility. Thackeray's criticism is directed toward individuals from every level or class of society and society as a whole attacking its values. The novel is in frame tale style and the narrator acts as the puppet master or the Manager of the Performance that sets the scene for the characters before they act. The novel's title, its subtitles and its narrator is of significance. They are important instruments to Thackeray's intention of satirizing Victorian society in which hypocrisy and material greed prevail. In this respect, the female character Rebecca Sharp, or Becky, who can be regarded as the protagonist in the novel is the microcosm of the whole Victorian society. This research's significance lies in the fact that one of the most important female protagonists in Thackeray's text, Becky Sharp, is scrutinized as a social criminal providing a new and objective insight into the character in contrast to the ones that support the fact that Thackeray sympathized with Becky and did not regard her as a criminal. Although this study may not fully achieve its aim because of Thackeray's supposed sympathy toward this character it aims to point out and illustrate

Becky's status as a social criminal referring to the novel and secondary sources.

METHOD

This paper analyses the primary text through the qualitative method. The female protagonist, Rebecca Sharp, in the primary text, *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray, is studied as a social criminal who struggles and commits various crimes to survive and climb the social ladder. Views from diverse journal articles, books, and newspapers are referred to prove the point. Quotations from the novel are given to reinforce the argument. They are explained by referring to secondary sources, utilizing different ideas belonging to various researchers. Some critics think that Thackeray does not regard Becky as a social criminal that would do anything to climb the social ladder and that he thinks she is a victim of society as a female having no opportunities males in this society have, this may be one drawback of the study. However, the study's primary aim is to elaborate on the character in an objective manner regardless of the author's own views of her.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the Victorian Era, women did not have many choices to sustain their lives and earn respectability. If they had low origins, it was harder for them to gain money, influence, and respect in society. Women depend on men to ameliorate their status, which subjects them to the patriarchal domination. In other words, the patriarchal society creates "the image of women easily exploited, manipulated and disposable" (Baysal, 2018: p. 981). Becky is an orphan whose parents died. Therefore, it is not easy for her, either, to raise her social station. Unlike Becky, Women in nineteenth-century England were expected to gain wealth and a high social status through the means provided by the males in the society. They were expected to be passive recipients instead of having an active role in it: "The whole point about a woman was that she was not self-sufficient... Englishwomen in search of paradise, whether in heaven or on earth, were expected to look for it in a place prepared for them by a man" (Derek Jarrett, 1974: p. 143). However, Becky was not such a woman to be just a passive recipient, unlike Amelia. This female character of Thackeray's does not need or expect sympathy or help from the patriarchal society of the Regency period in contrast to what is expected from her as a female. However, instead of feeling disgusted or contempt, the reader as well as the writer sympathized with her: "If dividing his story between two focal characters was a technical innovation, Thackeray's decision to make those characters to make one of them an unscrupulous and even immoral woman toward to whom the reader nonetheless responds sympathetically – was a remarkably bold step for a Victorian novelist to take" (Frazee, 1998: p. 228). Yet, this response of sympathy toward her does not absolve her of her crimes.

A. Titles and Subtitles of the Book

The novel's titles and subtitles are very suggestive and they help the writer to reach his aim of criticizing the society in which he lives. By the title *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray refers to John Bunyan's book *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

progress, people have to pass through a Worldly City to gain the right to enter the Celestial City” (Dooley, 1971: p. 701). However, “Thackeray was sometimes the censorious moralist, but generally, he attributed far more importance to earthly things than did Bunyan or the author of Ecclesiastes” (Dooley, 1971: p. 701). The book’s subtitle was Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society while it was being published in serial form. This title refers to the book’s content that satirizes the British society that values materiality more than anything in the world. Money takes precedence even over loved ones as illustrated by Thackeray who introduces Rebecca Sharp who does not care for her son as much as she cares for money. When the novel was published as a single volume, its subtitle became A Novel without a Hero: “Through the subtitle, ‘A Novel without a Hero,’ he announced his break with the conventions of contemporary fiction. By discarding heroes and heroines, villains and villainesses, he was enabled to dispense with the customary intrigue plot of the traditional novelist.” (Ray, 1955: p. 389). This subtitle is also indicative of the non-heroic characters in the novel who, even the most honest ones, have their weaknesses. For instance, Amelia Sedley, who is portrayed as a naïve young lady, is abusive to the people around her through her femininity and appears to be weak and in need of help. Furthermore, William Dobbin has a fairly good personality, yet he lets Amelia use his affection towards her, which is the weakness that prevents him to be a hero.

B. The Problem of Narrator

Undeniably, the narrator is different from what is expected by the reader from the books published during the Victorian Age (Ray, 1955: p. 389). The narrator of Vanity Fair is an omniscient, omnipresent, and self-conscious one. The reader feels his presence throughout the novel. The narrator was often associated with Thackeray himself. As the story goes on, he reveals himself to be an unreliable narrator. With this feature, it may be considered that Vanity Fair marks the transition between the traditional novel and the modern novel (Heiler, 2010: p. 61). It “marks a stage of transition between the traditional and what we now call the ‘modern’ novel.... The author has not yet withdrawn ‘to pare his fingernails, but he has already entered into the shadows and holds his scissors at the ready” (Iser, 1993: p. 776). The position of the narrator is ambiguous and ambivalent. It is hard to understand the narrator’s real purpose or where he is standing (Wolff, 1974: p. 190). Sometimes he speaks as one of the characters that are personally familiar with some of the characters in the novel with a first-person singular pronoun, sometimes he acts as if he gets the news about the characters and the events from someone else and tells about them to the reader as a gossip. However ambivalent and unreliable he may be, he is an important figure that has the mission to unify the plot. The narrator acts as a moral guide calling himself a moralist, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly telling his ideas about the matters that are related to life and society of the Victorian Age that take their share from human vanity and material greed.

“The narrator is the principle of unification for the book: his attitudes unify its plot and modulate its tone. A perpetual moralist, here guiding the reader’s reaction to events, there calling attention to his own realistic

craftsmanship, he consistently rejects vain standards in both life and literature.” (Blodgett, 1967: p. 211)

Thackeray plays with the conventional God-like narrator. By doing so, he uses the narrator as a tool to use in his criticism of Victorian society, especially the upper classes. “It is due to his formal and generic transgressions, his debunking of the tabooed omniscient narrator-God, that Thackeray manages to satirize the moral duplicity of the Victorian middle and upper classes” (Heiler, 2010: p. 62). Time and again, the narrator reveals himself to the reader as a character who knows the story and the characters very well: “And, as we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them” (Thackeray, 2001: p. 72). He declares to the reader that he is as close as a brother while at the same time he can distance himself from them. During his narration, after he makes his comments, he leaves the stage to the characters, but often makes his presence apparent by claiming the authority of the narration.

C. Becky as an Ambitious Female Figure that Seeks Higher Social and Economic Status

Rebecca Sharp is presented as a female figure who is beautiful, attractive, selfish, and a person who has the potential to commit a crime to achieve what she desires (it is highly likely that she poisoned Joseph and hastened his death) that is “profit, power and social recognition” (Kvas: 2011: p. 43). It is thought that Thackeray based her female character “on two historical figures from the Regency period, Mary Anne Clarke and Harriette Wilson” who were famous courtesans that achieved to be influential as much as males during the regency period (Frazee, 1998: p. 227). The narrator gives information about Becky’s background in Chapter II. Becky is the orphaned daughter of a poor artist who beats his wife and daughter when drunk and her mother is an opera dancer. Becky pretends to be proud of her roots on her mother’s side “And curious it is, that as she advanced in life this young lady’s ancestors increased in rank and splendor.” (11). She appears as a seductress who uses her feminine charm to get her desire and she even succeeds in her attempt to gain money and jewels to make herself quite a fortune.

“The unscrupulous woman in question is Rebecca Sharp who can be considered the embodiment of moral transgression because she commits a plethora of misdemeanors and crimes: lying, blasphemy, adultery, neglect of her only child, and (very likely) murder. In spite of violating any taboo a Victorian ‘angel in the house’ can trespass, Becky does not incur the wrath of a conventional poetic justice. What is more, her ‘angelic’ counterpart Amelia Sedley is exposed as a self-righteous hypocrite who subtly tyrannizes her environment through her pose of feminine weakness.”

(Heiler, 2010: p. 59)

Rebecca first tries to seduce Joseph and the narrator invites the reader to appreciate her cleverness: “If Miss Rebecca can get the better of him, and at her first entrance into life, she is a young person of no ordinary cleverness” (21). She is not afraid to get into illicit love affairs: “Lord Steyne attempts to buy Becky's favors with money and jewels,

and George Osborne offers to commit adultery during his honeymoon” (Jadwin, 1992: p. 665) and loses her respectability for marriage for some time because of her immoral behavior. She commits various social crimes such as seducing Sir Pitt and his son at the same time. When Sir Pitt proposes to her, it is too late for him as Becky and his son are already married. This situation saddens Becky deeply as she intended to become the lady of the house by getting married to Sir Pitt. That is, she weeps “some of the most genuine tears that ever fell from her eyes” (133). The tears are not shed because she has to turn down the proposal of Sir Pitt, but because she lost the opportunity to be the lady of the house. It was an opportunity that would carry up more than one level of society and she lost it.

Becky’s social standing coupled with her demeanor makes her a character not loved by anyone in Miss Pinkerton’s. She is scorned and deemed inferior to many of the characters. Miss Pinkerton, for instance, is a vain person who esteems only those that hold money and high status in the society and Becky hates her. She defies Miss Pinkerton which is solid proof that she is the one who is strong enough to climb the social ladder. When Miss Pinkerton asks Becky to teach how to play the piano to children, she refuses to teach it for free. She defiantly tells Miss Pinkerton that she is there “ ‘to speak French with the children... not to teach them music, and save money for you [her]” (14). She demands money in return for her effort if she is to teach this skill. It is revealed by her demand that he is a materialistic person. Her behavior astonishes Miss Pinkerton: “ ‘For five-and thirty years,’ she said, and with great justice, never have seen the individual who has dared in my own house to question my authority. I have nourished a viper in my bosom”” (14). Furthermore, she feels no gratitude towards her although Miss Pinkerton takes her in and gives her a chance to earn her own money to live on because she thinks that Miss Pinkerton took her to her school because she is useful. She is a strong character who does not bow down to her superior. Miss Pinkerton does not regard Becky as fit to be given a dictionary because of her humble origins. Although Miss Jemima, who is more sensitive and compassionate than Miss Pinkerton, wants to give one to Becky regardless of her class or origins, Miss Pinkerton denies her wish: ‘MISS JEMIMA!’ exclaimed Miss Pinkerton, in the largest capitals. ‘Are you in your senses? Replace the Dixonary in the closet, and never venture to take such a liberty in future.’ ‘Well, sister, it’s only two-and-ninepence, and poor Becky will be miserable if she don’t get one.’ (5). Miss Pinkerton is unwilling to give Becky a dictionary because Becky is an articulated student whose father is not wealthy nor a man of social standing. Miss Pinkerton thinks that she has done enough for her “without conferring upon her at parting the high honor of the Dixonary” (5). Becky does not value the dictionary or the school. She has just thrown the dictionary into the garden of the school with a horrifyingly livid look on her face which shocks Amelia:

“When Miss Sharp had performed the heroical act mentioned in the last chapter and had seen the Dixonary, flying over the pavement of the little garden, fall at length at the feet of the astonished Miss Jemima, the young lady’s countenance, which had before worn an almost livid look of hatred, assumed a smile that perhaps was scarcely more agreeable, and she sank

back in the carriage in an easy frame of mind, saying—‘So much for the Dixonary; and, thank God, I'm out of Chiswick’.” (10)

Even Mr. Sedley whose son is expected to propose to Becky, scorns Becky, thinking that she is just better than a black daughter-in-law (27). George explains to Joseph that Becky is below his station and dissuades him from marrying her. William Dobbin is also belittled by his friends. After all, his father pays his tuition in goods because he is a retail grocer. He is accepted by his friends when he defends his friends against the bullies. He is bullied because he is regarded as belonging to lower status by his schoolmates including Osborne. Even after the social situation of Dobbin's father improves and becomes a knighted alderman, Osborne continues to despise him and regards him as his inferior. It is apparent from this example that even when people from different classes become friends, the one from the lower level is likely to be despised by his friend.

Amelia is the moral contrast to Rebecca, she is beautiful as Rebecca, yet she does not care about the values of Vanity Fair while Rebecca has no regard for anything else. The novel is structured around the two characters. Since the day the novel was published, Rebecca's popularity surpassed Amelia's although Amelia is the amiable character who surpasses Becky in many aspects:

“Amelia was beautiful, meek, unsophisticated, loving, good but somewhat weak-spirited, amiable, and tenderhearted. As a student in Miss Barbara Pinkerton's academy for young ladies, Amelia was regarded as ideal-highly accomplished in various feminine arts”. (Cuff, 1949: p. 97)

Amelia's unsophisticated and meek nature is her major feature that makes her characteristics opposite of Becky's who is a deceitful person. Furthermore, although Becky does not love anybody, not even her son, Amelia loves her son deeply. The sharp contrast between Amelia and Becky is revealed when they part because Becky is supposed to start to work as a governess at the Crawleys'. While Amelia can connect with her true feelings, Becky just acts. Amelia is an earnest person who behaves by her feelings without hiding them or without pretending, Becky makes her every move calculatingly and therefore, cannot help but pretend to gain the vanities she seeks.

“Finally came the parting with Miss Amelia, over which picture I intend to throw a veil. But after a scene in which one person was in earnest and the other a perfect performer - after the tenderest caresses, the most pathetic tears, the smelling-bottle, and some of the very best feelings of the heart, had been called into requisition - Rebecca and Amelia parted, the former vowing to love her friend for ever and ever and ever.” (56)

Furthermore, even Captain Crawley, “who had seldom thought about anything but himself,” gets prepared to go on a campaign out of the sincere love he feels for Rebecca. He makes calculations not for himself, but for his wife, making a list of things that Rebecca can turn into money “in case any accident should befall him” (274). Contrarily, instead of feeling sorry for her husband and fearing for him, Rebecca makes calculations to find the worth of the items she can sell if her husband does not return from the campaign, which reveals a lot about her selfish personality. She does not

conform to the ideals of the nineteenth century about being a loving woman. Instead, she embodies the hypocrisy that dominated the era, which brings up the question if she is really a social criminal who challenges the dominant social order, which is an entirely different matter of debate. Concordantly, Becky is the star actress in *Vanity Fair*, but she is not the only one. It is implied by the Thackeray in the title as well as throughout the book that the whole society is *Vanity Fair* and Becky is just one of the residents in it. She is but a part of the whole who values mundane objects, desires, and pleasures.

Becky is, as a woman, supposed to be virtuous according to the social codes and conduct books of the time, resulting in the labelling of immoral and transgressive women as “a menace for the virtuous and angelic women of the time” (Baysal, 2019, p. 181). However, Becky uses her female charms to gain more vanities and climb up the social ladder by seducing men from the upper classes who can provide her with what she desires: “in the case of *Vanity Fair*, the character of Becky Sharp uniquely presents the opportunity to think through questions about gender and power, both in the Victorian era and our own” (Richardson, 2020, p. 2). In one instance, Rawdon escapes from prison just to find Rebecca and Lord Steyne alone at home where “He could hear laughter in the upper rooms... laughter within--laughter and singing.” Although there is no indication of sexual intercourse between Lord Steyne and Becky, it is obvious that she seduces him to have what she wants in the absence of Rawdon. Although she exclaims to be innocent, the scene Rawdon encounters upon coming home indicates just the opposite:

“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.” (506)

Without being afraid to be labeled as an immoral woman by society, Becky, who is likened to a siren by the author, uses her feminine beauty, attractiveness, cunningness, and intelligence to enamour Lord Steyne, who has the means and riches that will help her way up the social ladder. She always calculates her gain. Even when her husband goes on a campaign, she calculates what she gets in case her husband dies. She is a self-oriented person who has no regard for others including her son whom she does not treat with motherly affection but sends away. This, along with the likely murder of Joseph Sedley prove that her evil ways know no bounds to get what she wants. Becky is one of Thackeray's characters that prove “Thackeray's tales of relentless social climbing proved that the modern hero/heroine had indeed a thousand faces, not all of them palatable” (Guimarães, 2013, p. 1).

CONCLUSION

All things considered, Becky, avoiding any punishment she deserves, fights for respectability and loses it in the end. Her moral duplicity and her struggle to gain money and power are the reasons that help her gain the respectability that the class she comes from does not let her have. However, they are also the very reasons to lose what she

fighters, even kills for. She is the narrator's main tool to condemn avarice and satirize the society that, more or less, lives and behaves like Becky. Becky, in this respect, stands for the whole of early and mid-Victorian society. Her obsession with status and wealth is the main common point between her and the British people during the said era. The fact that she commits various kinds of crimes, including a possible murder, makes her seem like a social criminal. However, it is a known fact that her creator Thackeray sympathizes with her and never really declares her guilty. It is hard for him, the reader, and the critics to decide if she is guilty or not because all she does, she does to survive and have an influential status in society.

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