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***Vanity Fair:
a New Kind of Hero in the
Victorian Novel***

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Introduction

The figure of the hero is something that has always accompanied literary production since ancient times. Since the first stories were created, like figurative painting found in caves, there has always been a distinction in the characters, with one or more who were protagonists of such tales. During the evolution of literature to what it is today, the idea of a hero was never abandoned. Such a concept can be found in the stories handed down by both oral and written traditions, in which the recurrent figure of the hero has more or less always been present. The debate on the evolution of the heroes is something too complex to wholly discuss in this dissertation. Yet it can be said that heroes and heroines can be found in both prose and poetry. And the notion of the hero has accompanied the literary development of many communities and nations, never remaining the same but changing to fit every culture. One of the major changes that the figure of the hero underwent, occurred in Britain during the Victorian Age, specifically within the tradition of the English novel. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is officially recognised to be the first English novel and became the first of this new genre, whose effects are still visible nowadays. One of the major changes brought to the tradition of the English novel in the 19th century was the creation of middling, "grey" or ambiguous heroes/characters. In this respect a crucial role was played by *Vanity Fair*, written by William Makepeace Thackeray.

Vanity Fair was not originally thought as a single book, but as a series of monthly instalments in periodicals, serialized in 19 releases from 1847 to 1848. In 1848, after the publication of the last chapter, Thackeray republished his work as a single volume with the title: *Vanity Fair a Novel Without a Hero*.

As said by Sebastian Faulks in his *Faulks on Fiction: Great British Heroes and The Secret Life of The Novel*, Thackeray's aim with *Vanity Fair* was to deconstruct the idea of heroism, and especially of the "ancient hero"¹. Instead he favoured the creation of the modern idea of the hero, a man who is imperfect as any other, but possesses the ability to occasionally accomplish impossible feats. In *Vanity Fair* all the challenges and changes that the English society underwent in the 19th century, a period of great revolutions, are clearly visible. For this reason the novel, which contains many subgenres, can without doubts fall in the sub-genre of the historical novel.

The uniqueness of *Vanity Fair* comes from being the first novel in English literature to fully present a gathering of "grey" characters. Thackeray, by making an exemplary use of them, is able to give life-like qualities never seen before in novels. At the same time, he shows which new possibilities were emerging for the common people, especially for the women of the time, as the ancient costumes and beliefs were becoming obsolete. This dissertation originates in the desire to better understand the characteristics that the characters, and the figure of the hero, acquired in *Vanity Fair*, and how much they are different from the concept of the "ancient hero" and how they have influenced the modern genre of the novel. Therefore, this work discusses whether the main characters of *Vanity Fair* can be considered heroes and heroines according to the canons of the "ancient hero" and, if not, to determine what kind of hero they represent.

The first chapter of the dissertation is divided into five parts, each dedicated to introduce a different aspect of the novel seen in the background of 19th century Britain. The first two parts focus on the period in which the novel was both written and set, giving voice especially to the changes and revolutions of the period. In these

¹ S. Faulks, *Faulks on Fiction*, London, BBC, 2011, p. 14.

parts special attention is paid to the introduction of Victorian Novel, to the quest for realism and to the movement for the emancipation of women which finds in *Vanity Fair* an unexpected and slightly hidden supporter. In the third part of the chapter a brief introduction to *Vanity Fair* is presented, giving emphasis to the main characters of the novel, especially focusing on how the structure of the plot follows the intertwining of the characters' lives. The fourth part focuses on its style, underlining in particular the role of the narrator. Moreover it introduces the characters, giving a brief preview of how they were conceived. In the fifth and last part the theme hinted at in the subtitle of the novel is introduced, making readers and critics alike wondering if it really is "a novel without heroes".

The second chapter aims to discuss the opinions of the critics that since Thackeray's time have studied and commented his masterpiece. Their opinions focus especially on the characters and the debate to determine who is the real hero and heroine of the story. Special emphasis is given to the determination of who among the main characters reflects the canons of the "ancient hero" and who represents something new.

The third and last chapter is meant to give a different perspective if compared to the previous one. The focus in this chapter is shifted on all the main characters, and the critics' opinions on them are compared in order to obtain a general idea of how these characters are seen and which is their role in the story.

The last part of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of Thackeray's opinion of his own characters, emerging from sentences the narrator or other characters use in the novel, which reflect the author's opinion, or from some of the author personal letters.

Chapter I

The Book, the Author and the Period

Vanity Fair is a unique novel conceived by the mind and imagination of William Makepeace Thackeray. As summarized by Dyson:

Vanity Fair is surely one of the world's most devious novels, devious in its characterisation, its irony, its explicit moralising, its exuberance, its tone. [...] Thackeray acquired a heightened sense of human inequalities, of the diversity of criticism to which the unprotected and poor are especially exposed².

Due to the vicissitudes of his life, such as the need to write to make a living, or his wife's depression caused by the birth of their third child, Thackeray experienced social difficulties first-hand. Through his entire life the author was rarely without worries. In order to understand one of Thackeray's greatest works it is necessary to take into account the features of its context: what kind of man Thackeray was, to which genre the novel belongs to and the main characteristics of the historical period in which it was written and set.

² A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, in "Critical Quarterly", vol. 6, Spring 1964, Wiley-Blackwell, pp.11-32, p.12.

1.1 – The Victorian Novel

As said by Michael Wheeler in his book *English Fiction of The Victorian Period*: “The Victorian Age was not only the longest but also the greatest in the history of English Fiction. It was an age of the novel in the same sense that the restoration was an age of drama and the Romantic period an age of poetry”³. Although the past tense is used in the previous sentence Wheeler goes on stating the importance that Victorian fiction still has nowadays. He highlights especially its great influence on the genre nowadays, especially considering how much Victorian fiction is still read and successful. In fact, as professor Dehn Gilmore states:

[...] Victorian novelists wrote what Jonah Siegel has called a larger “culture of art” into their fiction, and that novelists depicted artists, showed characters visiting artistic spaces, and alluded frequently to the pictures hanging therein - for the Victorian novel’s invocations of the art world are subject of countless articles and chapters, not to mention the stuff of many colourful anecdotes in cultural histories of the period⁴.

Which means that it is possible to find a lot of sources of information about the Victorian novel, and more importantly, facts and curiosities which were written especially for the people of the period are still available because of how much the period is close to us.

³ M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*, New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 1.

⁴ D. Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and The Space of Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 2.

The Victorian novel can be considered as a genre in its own right, yet it is divided into many different sub-genres which represent how the different aspects of the society of the time were perceived. As Wheeler underlines, among the many sub-genres of the novel of the time, there were some that were more popular in comparison to others: historical, silver-fork, Newgate and social-problem, marine and Irish rogue. This subdivision, Wheeler says, has many similarities to the division drawn by Polonius in *Hamlet*: “tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral” and has clearly much less pedigree⁵. Of particular interest to this dissertation, as Wheeler informs us about, is the fact that much of Thackeray’s early works were modified to change both their purpose and method, in order to transform them in parodies. Particularly in “Punch’s Prize Novelists”, a collection of the most famous burlesques of the time, there is Thackeray’s opinion of at least the five sub-genres previously mentioned⁶.

Even though the English novel of the period shows the various elements that formed the different social values of the time, it is more focused on the values of the middle-class. In fact, if early Victorian novelists are taken into consideration, they share the belief that only those who are born in certain social classes possess the privilege of a “respectful law-abiding behaviour”⁷.

As Wheeler states:

The values, prejudices and assumptions of the middle class are often reflected more clearly in the specialized sub-genres of Victorian fiction, such as

⁵ M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*, cit. p. 16.

⁶ Cf. *Ivi.*

⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 11.

sensation novels, school stories and Utopian fiction, than in the work of the major novelists⁸.

At the same time, as previously mentioned, *Vanity Fair* is an exception because, although Thackeray is one of the main novelists of the time, his masterpiece includes many subgenres.

Another interesting aspect of the Victorian novel is how the majority of them, although divided into sub-genres, adopt the “themes, motifs and symbols of social-problem novel”⁹. What brought the major novelists of the time to select the sub-genre of the social-problem novel and transform it into the mainstream typology of the novel was the fear that individual freedom might be sacrificed. They came to this conclusion by examining the shifting relationship between individual and society of the time. In fact, the nineteenth century was a period in which the demographical number of people in Britain grew without stopping, which brought the major thinkers of the time to fear that the public opinion or “the growing number of unrepresented masses” could constitute a hindrance to, or even suppress individual freedom¹⁰. Yet the fear that the great literary minds of the time felt, caused them to create several masterpieces that changed both literary and visual culture.

From the middle to the late 19th century literary and visual culture, usually separated, were brought together and united thanks to a common interest and investment in selected representational models, subjects and values¹¹. Furthermore, the demographic explosion of the period caused an increase in literacy which, as a result, caused the literary world to be a witness to the spreading and increase of

⁸ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁹ *Ivi.*

¹⁰ *Ivi.*

¹¹ Cf. D. Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and The Space of Art*, cit. p. 3.

periodicals, to “a swelling tide of circulating libraries” and “a dramatic uptick in the number of published novels”¹². Among the great changes that this period witnessed, the demographic explosion and the improvements in literacy were, at least in part, the main cause of a redistribution of spare time. This event caused a great increase of the potential audience for the novel through the entire Victorian era, and as Gilmore suggested, in 1850 Trollope could pronounce the following sentence: “Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maids”¹³. One aspect that differentiates Victorian novels from those of other periods is the fact that, just as most of them deal with the problems of society, a substantial part teaches and entertains their generations by looking at the past, and becoming historical novels¹⁴.

By the middle of the 19th century, the Victorian novel encountered another problem, because in this period the distinction between romance and novel was brought to light. This issue became one of the main subjects of critical debate, yet it was swept within the broader debate that had as subject the confrontation of romance and “realism”¹⁵. In fact, the authors of the time, by making extensive use of historical facts to propose their vision of society and its problems, were at the same time trying to obtain the means to constantly improve their capacity to give life-like quality to their works. As a result of the debate between romance and “realism” there are two lines of thought that developed in the Victorian period: the “Real school” and the “Ideal or Romantic school” expressions forged by the critic David Masson in 1859.

¹² *Ivi.*

¹³ A. Trollope, *On English Literature as a Rational Amusement*, quoted in D. Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and The Space of Art*, cit. p. 4.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*, cit. p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ivi.*

Masson believed these terms related to the distinction between romance and novel and to the subject of realism. By using Thackeray and Dickens as examples (“Thackeray is a novelist of what is called the Real school; Dickens is a novelist of that Ideal or Romantic school”¹⁶), Masson states that it is Thackeray’s aim to give a faithful representation of life as it is “actually and historically”, and for this reason in his works there are no “faultless characters, no demigods”. At the same time Masson affirms that Dickens is opposite to Thackeray, because his characters are created following the path of the ideal beauty and perfection for the “heroes” of his stories and the path of the utter ugliness and brutality for the “villains”¹⁷.

The fact that the Victorian novel is a mixed genre, argument that Masson acknowledged, is underlined again by Wheeler. At the same time Wheeler argues that “the specific convention of realism, in which writers attempt to engage directly and consistently with the complexities of human experience in the real world”¹⁸ is the subject that is at the centre of the 19th and 20th century critical discussion of English fiction.

Another aspect of the Victorian novel that Wheeler chooses to highlight concerns the moral of the novels and the methods used to convey it:

Moralism in Victorian fiction is conveyed largely through the commentary of authorial narrators and through judgements enacted in the plot, particularly in the endings of novels¹⁹.

¹⁶ *Ivi.*

¹⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ivi.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

As it will further be investigated in this dissertation, Thackeray follows this rule to the letter, using descriptions and especially the narrator to convey to the readers the moral of the novel. Although unreliable, very interesting is the comment made about the narrator by Harold Bloom in his book *The Victorian novel*:

But never in *Vanity Fair*, do I wish Thackeray the storyteller to clear out of the novel. If you are going to tour *Vanity Fair*, then your best guide is its showman, who parodies it yet always acknowledges that he himself is one of its prime representatives²⁰.

Wheeler suggests that “the more astringent novelists”, among which Thackeray, drew from various traditions of the 18th century and adopted the so called Carlylean metaphors and the use of satire to strip and show hypocrisy and corruption for what they really were²¹.

Wheeler believes that the didacticism of the early Victorian fiction was not limited to being moral and dogmatic but, as the critic Richard Stang suggested in the *Prospective Review* of April 1853,

Fiction, conjures up an ideal world in the midst of our prosaic realities, and men, absorbed in selfish interests, are awakened to more generous sympathies and their hearts, severed in the turmoil of the worlds, find a bond of fellowship by the creation of the *poet*²².

²⁰ H. Bloom, *The Victorian Novel*, New York, Chelsea House, 2004, p. 2.

²¹ Cf. M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*, cit. p. 10.

²² R. Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, quoted in M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*, cit. pp. 10-11.

Such statement of value is given to us by a critic whose attitude suggests continuities between Romantic poetry and the 19th century novel. And this is particularly interesting in the light of the fact that in the 1880s the concept of the novel as a “vehicle for ideas” becomes more prominent compared to the emphasis that previously was laid upon entertainment and moral improvement²³.

Extremely important points that characterized the Victorian novel are the decline in individualism and in the belief of the possibility of social salvation. As Wheeler underlines, it is possible to notice these changes because they are the reflection of estrangement:

[...] from the mediation of social reality through the consciousness of a hero or heroine, whose fate is ultimately secure in the hands of a God-like author-narrator, and towards tragic schemes in which the universe is either neutral or hostile²⁴.

The estrangement from the mediation of the consciousness of the hero has given the possibility to play more with the change of the tones in the novel, especially considering that Thackeray is primarily a satirist and a humourist. In fact, although he persuades the readers that his masterpiece, *Vanity Fair*, is a novel primarily centred on comic, the reality is that the novel is not comic at all. In fact, as stated by Harold Bloom, “The abyss beckons in nearly every chapter of *Vanity Fair*, and a fair number of the characters vanish into it before the book is completed”²⁵ just as it happens in everyday life. Furthermore, it is Thackeray’s search for life-like qualities and his belonging to the “School of Truth” which brought Charlotte Bronte

²³ Cf. Ibidem, p. 10.

²⁴ M. Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period*, cit. p. 12.

²⁵ H. Bloom, *The Victorian Novel*, cit. p. 3.

to acknowledge Thackeray as a master whose works are worth studying: “I regard Mr. Thackeray as the first of modern masters, and as the legitimate high priest of Truth; I study him accordingly with reverence”²⁶.

So, in the Victorian period, the genre of the novel was in continuous evolution in form of sub-genres that were created, expanded and evolved together with the people of the time that were not only witnesses of great changes but also the cause of them. The direction that the novel took is tightly bound to the direction that both readers and writers of the time chose. While the great authors of the time wrote in response to the action of the masses, the readers dictated the success of the writers with their preferences²⁷.

1.2 – Hard Times and the Quest for “Realism”

Many of the authors born in the Victorian Age like Dickens, Eliot and Thackeray, are today considered as Classics due to the masterpieces they created. Although they used different styles and techniques, all of them had something in common, which we might call the quest for “realism”. Subsequently many of the novels and works published in this period told stories about the rapid changes of society, the advent of industrialization and all the consequences they brought forth. This is particularly true for *Vanity Fair* due to its historical duality, which consists in the peculiarity of being a historical novel that is set just a generation back. This peculiarity implies that the novel is set within the lifetime of the author and many of his readers. *Vanity Fair* is capable of recreating and showing to the readers an authentic picture of England, and particularly of London, immediately before the

²⁶ C. Brontë, *Letters to W. S. Williams*, quoted in H. Bloom, *The Victorian Novel*, cit. p. 20.

²⁷ Cf. D. Gilmore, *The Victorian Novel and The Space of Art*, cit. p. 5.

Victorian era²⁸. By doing so Thackeray gives a sense of familiarity to the older readers and a faithful image of the recent past to the younger ones.

Feminism is one of the most important themes included in *Vanity Fair* because it is in the Victorian Period that for the first time there is a shifting notion of gender and consequently the founding of the Feminist movement. *Vanity Fair* presents the new form of female independence and the position the author, and the middle class, assumed in regard to it. As a matter of fact, in this period a large number of female novelists like the Brontë sisters were finally able to obtain recognition through their works, yet the increasing acceptance of exceptional women's ability marked just the beginning of a long path for all women.

The nowadays widely spread opinion about the poor treatment women received in the past centuries is considered as a stain in the pages of history, especially in regard to their objectification, which transformed them in goods to exchange while denying them the most basic rights of freedom. These occurrences became common especially in high-society, in which the more power and financial strength a woman had, the more she would be at the centre of any kind of plots especially those using the means of marriage. Yet in the 19th century the changes underwent by society became more pronounced giving, as a consequence, new possibilities to women. Those opportunities were taken advantage of in the second half of the century, resulting in the opening of a new path, which led, during the Victorian Age, to the creation and empowerment of the Feminist movement almost a century later. However, during this period of turmoil and great changes, many opinions regarding important topics changed. Among those, women's rights were amongst the most discussed and many new viewpoints were born. One of the most common point of view, which was shared by Thackeray, perceived the sexual and economic

²⁸Cf. C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, Sutton, Phoenix Mill, 1999, pp. 151-152.

exploitation of women as wrong, yet the only alternative suggested was to set women apart, to consider them as a higher order of moral beings which should not struggle with everyday business²⁹.

The theme of feminism in *Vanity Fair* is treated by Thackeray through many points of view, not limited to the one which underlines the new possibilities for women but keeping into consideration those born after the years he spent brooding on the brief but crucial period of his marriage. Thackeray decided to debate in *Vanity Fair* the whole question of the relationship between men and women, especially the reasons behind the behaviour that men assume towards women, treating them as objects, and why women would allow them to do it³⁰. So, different forms of behaviour, guided by emotions and profits, are displayed in the novel by using the characters to embody them.

Finally, the whole theme of feminism in *Vanity Fair* enables the reader to see glimpses to the changes that women were subjected to during that period, in which new possibilities opened to them, through the use of the two main characters which embody the two main typologies of the women of the time. The first is Becky Sharp who represents, even if in a somewhat negative way, a new path for women, which consists in the personal choice about how to use their body and intellect, finally free from the restraints of men. For this reason, she uses this new claimed independence to obtain results and achieve her objectives. At the opposite side, there is the mentality previous to the change, embodied by Amelia Sedley, who listens to the wishes of others and in one way or another has not the liberty to make her own choices. Although not directly, she is conditioned by the wish of her parents which

²⁹Ibidem, p. 79.

³⁰Ibidem, p. 162.

raised her to love and marry George Osborne; only near the end of the novel is she able to obtain the right to be true to herself.

1.3 – A Novel of Many Lives

Since ancient times all the works born in the mind of artists have been inspired by reality, even though they might not appear to contain any reference to it at all. Yet it is in the Victorian age that the situation intensely changed, and the authors do not look at reality in order to find a simple inspiration, but use all their personal ability, knowledge and experience, to take reality and transfer it in a book, giving birth to many masterpieces. Among them Thackeray made a further step researching the entirety of the society of his time, changes included, and writing about it giving to it such life-like qualities that is still admired today. One of the determining factors that brought such quality to Thackeray's novel is directly bound to his personality, because, as affirmed by Sutherland: "Of all the great Victorian novelists he is the most casual and, apparently, the most inattentive to his art"³¹.

Vanity Fair consists in the intertwining of many common lives whose simplicity determines their extraordinary life-like quality. The beginning of the story is communal for both protagonists, because the novel opens in the school in which they have been educated. From this point forward, it can be affirmed that their true life journeys begin. While Rebecca will use all her wits and abilities to try to enter in the highest circles of society and become rich enough to live without worries; Amelia only thinks of her marriage with George for which she was raised for.

Although both of them momentarily obtain what they wished for, Thackeray

³¹ J. A. Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work*, London, The Athlone Press, 1974, p. 1.

doesn't let them, or any other character, enjoy the happiness of life, but puts all of them in a situation of possible growth and change through pain. It is around the lives of these two girls that an entire world comes alive and the lives of many different characters intertwine with each other to give birth to an extensive mirror image of the society of the time. Another strong point of the novel is, as underlined by Dyson:

This brings us to the novel's true greatness, to its claim to be one of the undoubtedly major novels that we have. It was Charlotte Bronte, one of Thackeray's earliest admirers, who said: It is 'sentiment' in my sense of the term - sentiment jealously hidden, but genuine, which extracts the venom from that formidable Thackeray and converts what might be corrosive poison into purifying elixir³².

In the end sentiments are the real engines of the novel. It is the confrontation between the emotions and thoughts of the various characters that pushes on the story; love, rage, sense of betrayal and sadness collide against each other pushing forward the characters towards the realization of their aims and of their real self. Yet within every character there is another confrontation, which is prevalent in some of them, the clash between the emotions that give the characters a unique flavour, and the cold, calculative rationality that weights pros and cons for every action and word. An example of the cold, calculative rationality is George's father who decides that the Sedley are not good enough to be part of his family and makes sure to ruin them. Afterwards he disowns his own son for not following his orders and marrying Amelia. Another example, near the end of the novel, is that of Old Osborne deciding

³² A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., pp. 23-24.

to take care of his nephew George Jr., George and Amelia's son, at the condition that Amelia could see him only in rare occasions.

By reducing the contact with his mother and making his nephew live with him, Old Osborne hopes to influence George and to shape him into a younger version of George, by filling his head with false accusations against his mother and her family. Old Osborne's objective is to make his nephew take the place of his son at his side and filling the gap that George's betrayal and death have left.

Although the example of Old Osborne is a fitting one, it is in Rebecca and Amelia that emotions and cold rationality find the opportunity to best express the opposition between their characters, in both their opposition as polar opposites, and in the connection to each other. Rebecca can be considered as the incarnation of rationality, because she is primarily cold and calculative with very little space left for emotions, as if she was created in opposition to the other characters. Only in rare occasions do some emotions surface, making her lose some of her rationality, even if only for a brief period. An example of this loss of control is near the end of the book, when she gives Amelia the letter, she received from George the day before he departed to the war. By means of the letter in which George proposed to her to escape together, Rebecca frees Amelia of her devotion to him and helps her to find happiness with Dobbin. This is a line of behaviour that cannot be found in the remaining pages of the book. In opposition to Becky, there is Amelia who, contrary to her friend, can be considered the incarnation of emotions in their most pure state. She is completely dominated by emotions without the capacity or the will to operate rational choices. An example of this is her incapacity to accept Dobbin's love due to her obsession for her late husband, which almost precludes her any chance of happiness.

Thackeray was known as somebody who would not let anything to chance while writing and he made use of the experience gained from many years of writing for magazines. As mentioned by Catherine Peters, “Thackeray’s writing, [...] seems often process rather than product”³³, an assertion that can be read in different ways. On one hand it can indicate the fact that *Vanity Fair* is believed not to have an ending but is rather abruptly terminated. But this opinion is contrasted by other critics that believe that Thackeray voluntarily let the ending be an open one permitting the readers to imagine how the story would go on. This second hypothesis can be assumed as the most likely, taking into consideration that one of Thackeray’s main aims while writing this novel was to be true to reality as much as possible³⁴. So as the life of a person does not end after an episode of his/her life has been lived through, so the life of his characters doesn’t come to an end with the end of the book.

1.4 – Characters and Style

Among the critics that have analysed *Vanity Fair*, although she is one of the most recent, Catherine Peters has shown great depth especially in the analysis of the characters and the style of the novel. The following extract shows how she underlines the special stylistic strategy in the novel:

The discovery of the title with its didactic and religious implications, gave the book an extra dimension which turned it from an entertaining, [...], piece of satire, into a novel in which the repeated destruction of form becomes an

³³ C. Peters, introduction to *Thackeray, a Writer’s Life*, cit., pp. IX-X.

³⁴ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, London, Macmillan, 1879, p. 94.

essential way of mediating the reader's response to the fiction, and ensuring that any complicity with the characters can't last for long...³⁵

The primary object of writers such as Edgeworth, Austen, Bulwer, and Dickens is to create complicity between the characters and the readers. To do so, they try to arouse the interest of the readers, by creating a connection between the characters and them which, as a result, creates sympathy. Once again Thackeray goes against the habit of the time and proceeds in a different manner: "Alas, alas! The meanness of human wishes, the pooriness of human results! That had been his tone. There can be no doubt that the heroic had appeared contemptible to him, as being untrue."³⁶ Thackeray does not adopt the same means of his contemporaries but chooses another way, entirely different from, if not opposite, to theirs. He does not create characters with specific characteristics, to avoid making them appear completely evil or good. This typology of characters, which cannot be seen as "black" or "white", makes more difficult for the readers to pick a side and simply enjoy the reading, because they do not know where the author's sympathy is.

Thackeray was instead inspired into creating the so-called grey characters, (which are not completely good or bad but a mixture of the two), to give them a life-like quality. Through the peculiarity of his characters, innovation was brought to the readers. Almost all the characters in *Vanity Fair* are grey, keeping the readers away from clearly distinguishing the good and bad characters and, consequently, from taking sides, because they do not know beforehand how the characters would evolve. Therefore, all the choices made by the readers would depend on pure personal preference and, as a consequence, the preference might not correspond to

³⁵ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. 150.

³⁶ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 91.

the main character. With the creation of this new kind of character, a new path for the future writers was opened. While the ancient hero was an image of the perfection of humanity that was to follow specific canons and couldn't move outside of them, in the 19th century a new kind of hero developed, that could be considered as the equivalent of the rock stars of our time, becoming the first hero who is in reality a villain. These new main characters were prevalently criminals, often at odd with a society that was not less corrupt than them, who committed any sort of crimes, yet had something similar to a code of honour which let them be more likeable in the readers' eyes. Many of the novels that were published took into consideration real time stories, using them as foundations for the fictional outcome as it happens in *Jack Sheppard*. Finally, with Thackeray an ambiguous hero was created in the making of Rebecca Sharp, giving birth to new possibilities for the future of the novels. A special feature of characterisation which can be found in *Vanity Fair* is the ambiguous rendering of the servants and the masters inside the novel. The former is usually depicted as possessing more wit and sharper intuition than their masters.

They are always the first to see through people and to understand their real intentions: "In *Vanity Fair*, the servants are sharper-eyed than most at seeing the exact truth about the would be heroes and heroines... Becky is always found out first by the servants' hall"³⁷. This peculiarity shows a stereotype and some hidden truth in regard to the difference between the common people and their masters, usually belonging to the middle class. The common people, especially the servants, are those that have the capacity to see through the characters, in particular the main ones. At the same time, it appears that almost all nobility is made of people who, even though quick witted, let their emotions have the best of them and easily mislead them. An example of this is the Pitt family, both Mr Pitt and his sister.

³⁷ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. 146.

Finally, the middle class family appears to have reached a kind of balance: Amelia's parents understand what kind of person Becky is. To conclude this first part of the paragraph, as Catherine Peters said while describing Thackeray: "He was not yet fully aware that his great strength as a writer lay precisely in his ambiguity of response, that 'sneaking kindness' for the sheer energy and inventiveness of the less admirable characters"³⁸. This statement helps to understand one of the points of strength of *Vanity Fair*, the full characterisation of the lesser characters. The entirety of the novel is kept together not only by the author's ability to create a life like society, but by the fact that every single character, including those defined as minor characters were brought to life by Thackeray with the same care as the main ones.

The first part of this paragraph was dedicated to the characters of the novel, now, in the second part the style will be analysed, starting with a feature among the most remarkable of *Vanity Fair* that is linked to both of them: the narrator. When the object of analysis is the narrator in *Vanity Fair*, the critics are almost unanimous in affirming that it is unreliable and cannot be considered omniscient. There are times in which the narrator shows partial knowledge, like an observer would do, while claiming to be omniscient, which is inconsistent. Although it often interrupts to the progression of the story, the narrator is often able to link together the different parts of the narration, both descriptions and actions³⁹. In every pause made, all the narrator's comments and descriptions appear at first as nothing more than a nuisance in the eyes of the reader⁴⁰. However, these suspensions of the plot are a true stroke of genius by the author, even though they seem to be almost careless and more of a nuisance than a help, they help the readers to better understand the characters, particularly because they are not impartial and are always trying to sway the readers.

³⁸ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. 86.

³⁹ Cf. Ibidem, p. 152.

⁴⁰ Cf. Ibidem, p. 150.

Through these pauses in the narration and the comments they contain, the author seems at first to suggest which characters are good, which are bad and which one we should prefer to read about. Yet by doing so, the author provokes the readers to think, to reflect about what they have just read and make sure that their opinions, which are usually hidden in the recesses of the mind, emerge. These pauses benefit the readers that usually do not stop to think about the characters, but try to reach the end of the novel, especially if it is interesting and captivating. So, Thackeray gives space to the readers to elaborate a personal image of the characters, and more importantly lets this image emerge and transform from the status of an embryo to a fully formed one. This is the reason which brought *Vanity Fair* to be defined as a multi-layered book, which achieves its effect through ambiguity and indirection⁴¹:

Though the reader may feel a dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the human lot at the end of the book, [...], the sense of satisfaction which the book as a work of art gives us is all the greater because we feel the essential truth of the 'unhappy ever after' ending which reaches out into a grey-toned and believable future.⁴²

Usually "The art of novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality..."⁴³ it is this concept that can be considered as one of the guidelines of 19th century novels, because many of them were works that represented reality and acquired a historical function. To reach this aim Thackeray uses a style that can be defined as informal, especially considering the time in which the novel was written. Many critics state that Thackeray's style of writing is more

⁴¹ G. Tillotson, D. Hawes, *Thackeray The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, p. 66.

⁴² C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. 144.

⁴³ C. Peters, introduction to *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. X.

similarity to a process, a work in progress, rather than a finished product⁴⁴. The same can be said of the novel as a whole, which appears to be almost incomplete due to the use of a third-person obtrusive narrator that often interrupts the narration. Yet the narrator, in conjunction with the “grey-toned” open ending, gives the reader the impression of an unprecedented life-like quality and closeness to the characters.

Finally, the narrative style adopted by Thackeray is unique, because all the pauses and the suggestions inserted in the text which are addressed to the readers gives the impression of a narration garrulous and therefore discursive while giving the impression that what is being said is nothing of importance. The technique the author is using is what Catherine Peters has defined as a “dual narration”: “which first describes what the characters are and do and feel; and then comments on the description in ways which make one doubt its reliability”⁴⁵.

As underlined by Pollard the way in which the tale is told is, in a rather special sense, the manner of gossip; not only in being casual and allusive; but also in actually being indirect, making suggestions that are almost subliminal. The author often manages to offer more information than what he is actually prepared to say, not only through the voice of the narrator but even through the voices of characters who, in the novel, resemble more background actors than real characters. The method of gossip has a certain life like quality, because enables to see various aspects of the same figure from many sides and hear many different opinions: “a single man seen in all the mirrors of the London club”⁴⁶. Fundamental to the narrative is the use of double irony, which works by adding an extra twist to the usual irony, creating an opposite meaning. As a result, the use of this device leaves the readers wondering about what the narrator actually meant, and adds even more

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. IX-X.

⁴⁵ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit. p. 152.

⁴⁶ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 57.

doubt to its reliability⁴⁷. Finally, there are other extremely important aspects of the novel to take into consideration during the analysis. First, as it has already been underlined, the reader of *Vanity Fair* is forced to remain active and alert, to keep his or her focus during the reading, particularly when it is the narrator who speaks. Secondly, although the world of the novel is real and solid enough, due to Thackeray's ability, the reader is not drawn into it, as into a dream or fantasy. The novel is not intended to enchant and let the reader be fully immersed in the story and the world described in it. On the contrary it has a compensating energy, an atmosphere of alertness which reaches out to the reader without enveloping him but nonetheless giving him the possibility to be captivated by the events and follow them⁴⁸. Through all these characteristics and the frequent use of pauses made by the narrator, the readers obtain the ability to compare the society depicted in *Vanity Fair* to the one they are living in, and see for themselves how much they resemble each other.

1.5 – A Novel Without a Hero

In *Vanity Fair* one of the most important and discussed issue is the definition of who is the main character, argument that is a source of division not only among the critics but among the readers as well. Among the different points of view that were formed, the one which has the larger group of supporters endorse the idea of Becky Sharp as the main character of the novel. While the other major party prefers to assign the role to Amelia Sedley or at least affirm that they are equally important.

⁴⁷ Cf. C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. 154.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 155.

Finally, a minority separate itself from the more common opinions and affirm that in novels like *Vanity Fair*, it becomes necessary to know what the World thinks of the characters; for indeed in the novel the chief character is the World. Although to determine who has the role of the main character is important, it does not mean that the main character is also a hero. The subtitle itself underlines Thackeray's idea that in the novel there are no heroes, at least not as they were usually intended to be.

If by the term hero we mean someone who is infallible, who does not have a dark side, who, just as an "ancient hero" of the old heroic ages, embodies all the virtues and is an incarnation of them, then the subtitle can be considered true in saying that there are no heroes in *Vanity Fair*. On the other hand, if the idea of "ancient hero" is abandoned and there is a necessity to choose a main character, a "hero" within the novel, then two of them can be found, Amelia Sedley and Rebecca Sharp. If they can be considered the heroines of the novel than it means that the concept of hero had changed, like many other notions, in the Victorian Era. The reasons that brought Thackeray to the creation of this kind of "incomplete" and "imperfect" characters is probably connected to the vicissitudes of his life, which fostered his preference for deflated heroes instead of the idealised ones and his will to give the novel enough life-like quality to show to the readers English society in its infancy⁴⁹. As many of the people of his era, the author has come to believe that the concept of hero has changed as a consequence of the change of the people's point of view on the world.

For this new generation of authors and readers the image of the hero does not represent the exceptional man, but the common one. Because it is only the common man who is able to surpass the others during a crisis, when a great chance present itself, and once that critical moment has passed, he goes back to be part of the

⁴⁹ Cf. A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., p. 11.

mediocrity. More specifically Thackeray's idea of the hero is different because it follows the rules that create what was to him the ideal form of conduct: that which makes a man into a gentleman⁵⁰. The definition of hero which has been discussed until now was applied to different characters, due to the hypothesis made by the critics, to understand who the most suitable character to obtain such mantle was. Pollard, separating himself from the common point of view, proposed a different concept, that of "the way of the world". In this perspective the role of the main characters is given to the world, which obtains the ability to observe and judge all the other characters, including the comparatively rare heroes and villains⁵¹.

⁵⁰ Cf. M. Praz, *La crisi dell'eroe nel romanzo vittoriano*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1981, p. 209.

⁵¹ Cf. G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction to Vanity Fair*, 1930, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, London, Macmillan, 1978, pp. 57-62, p. 58.

Chapter II

Vanity Fair, its Critics and the Debate about its Protagonists

2.1 – Thackeray’s Philosophy in Vanity Fair

The second chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to better understand Thackeray’s point of view about characters and heroes in *Vanity Fair*. To do so, the work of some of the most renowned critics, who analysed Thackeray’s masterpiece, will be studied in chronological order to understand how their notion of a hero, changed in the last two hundred years. Yet, before trying to analyse the point of view of the critics, it might be useful to take a look at the philosophy that the author applied in the novel, because the underlying ideology and the messages contained in the novel are inextricable from both its characters and style: “A good novelist always has a philosophy; but a good novel is never a book of philosophy. The moral philosophy behind Thackeray unites him rather with the old moralists than with the modern pessimists”⁵².

Although under many perspectives *Vanity Fair* can be considered as a revolutionary novel, the philosophy of Thackeray’s masterpiece had manifold connections to the moralists of the English literature of the preceding centuries. This connection to the past indicates that, although he was writing of the changes that the society was undergoing, Thackeray did not forget his origin or that of the society he belongs to. *Vanity Fair* can be defined as a novel that connected two different eras,

⁵² Ibidem, p. 61.

yet the author abandoned the philosophy of the past, which was more centred on the principles of virtues and divine blessing used to obtain ultimate happiness, to adopt instead a more modern attitude, more fitting the contemporary cultural revolution. Clues about Thackeray's philosophy can be found throughout the entire story, by observing how the various events unfold and the reasons behind them. In the end it is possible to infer as a lesson, that true happiness is not available to those that simply have virtues, while punishment does not always hit those who are guilty. Yet, even if morality appears to have a minor influence on the unfolding of the events in the novel, the important factor, necessary to success, is the capacity to grow as a person and to embrace change. So, if the old philosophy that distinguished between merit and guilt was abandoned, a more realistic one was selected, in which change is the quintessence of possibility.

Thackeray's philosophy was without doubt influenced by the experiences of his life, which shaped him into the great author known around the world. There are some episodes of his life that had a particularly strong impact on him. First of all, it is possible to affirm that Thackeray's education had not been what would be expected from a writer of his stature. When he enrolled at university, he chose to pursue a career in Law, yet after a couple of semesters in which he wasted most of his time by enjoying himself rather than studying, he decided that it was not his destiny to be a man of law.

It is worth noticing, that both the editorial and journalist work for which he became renewed were picked up by him already during school years, a period in which he wrote and drew for the school magazine. He continued in this work in the brief period at university and thereafter it became his primary source of income and of literary production during his life, since most of his fictional works were firstly published as episodes in magazines, and only afterwards transformed into their

complete versions. It was the experience of writing for different periodicals that gave him the opportunity to experiment with varied styles and different levels of discourse, which were to become a distinctive feature of his major fiction⁵³. The benefits he received from his work as an editor and journalist are many more. For example, he had the chance to create different personae, all distinct characters with different styles, personalities and backgrounds, which greatly influenced *Vanity Fair*.

2.2 – Anthony Trollope: Real Heroes and Heroines

Among the critics of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* we decided to discuss in this dissertation, Anthony Trollope is one of the first, being one of the author's contemporaries. Trollope's focus on the novel is directed more to the concept of the hero than to the general analysis of the characters, since it was one of the major changes that Thackeray's work brought to the literature of the time. Another of the changes brought by Thackeray consists in the way he infused "realism" into his novel. Trollope's own words, for Thackeray to achieve his desired result in making the novel as alive as possible, he needed "that the representation made by him should be life-like"⁵⁴. To achieve this objective, he gave form to the novel by intertwining many different stories, all of them extremely common, with some that presented instead some characteristics different from the norm of the time. By doing so not only did he show the lives and customs of the society of the period but compared the new, emergent culture and way of thinking with the old one, giving, as

⁵³ Cf. C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p 99.

⁵⁴ Cf. A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 94.

a result, a lot of the mirror image of changing Victorian society. Among all the intertwined stories, Trollope believes that in *Vanity Fair* there are two main storylines, that intertwine with each other, one “new” and the other “traditional”, which form the novel as we know it today:

“There is a double story running through the book, the parts of which are but lightly woven together, of which the former tells us the life and adventures of that singular woman Becky Sharp, and the other the troubles and ultimate success of our noble hero Captain Dobbin.”⁵⁵

So, differently from other later critics like Peters, he does not attribute the leading roles of the story to Rebecca and Amelia, but believes that, although on one hand Becky is one of the leading characters of the novel, on the other hand Amelia, as her counterpart, is not eligible to cover such a role, even if later he compares the two. Trollope believes that together with Becky Sharp, the second real main character of the novel is Captain Dobbin, which is defined by the critic’s own words as “our noble hero”. The reason that sustains this choice is Trollope’s belief that, although the readers of the time pretended to prefer “the romantic to the common”, the truth of the matter is that “the absurd, the ludicrous, and the evil” leave a stronger impression than “the beautiful, or even the good”⁵⁶.

Since Trollope was almost Thackeray’s contemporary, it is possible to see in his analysis the influence of the changes society underwent in that period. The critic believes that because the author declared his work to be “a novel without a hero”, no

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p 98.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Ivi*.

one has the right to complain about the absence of this figure or for the conduct of the characters.

In his book about Thackeray, Trollope focuses especially on the issue of the hero, and even though he does not explicitly show his idea about the changes that the figure of the hero underwent in his period, he underlines the differences between the “ancient hero” and the characters he considers might be its substitutes in the novel. Many critics of *Vanity Fair* have provided definitions that could describe both the modern and ancient heroes, but all of them have been focused on the general definition of the concept. Among all the critics that studied this novel, Trollope might be considered as the only one who makes a clear distinction between the figures of the hero and of the heroine, providing at the same time, a definition of how they were depicted in the past. This critic is probably among the very first scholars to have analysed *Vanity Fair*, and among them one of the first to make a comparison between what might be called “the ancient hero” and the successive characters that have taken such a role.

Due to the period in which he lived, Trollope is able to tell the readers about the canons that formed the idea of the hero before the Victorian Age: “he ought to be dignified and of noble presence, keep his cool and beauty in all the situations and never lack readiness, address, or self-assertion”⁵⁷. By these characteristics Trollope affirms that Captain Dobbin does indeed resemble an ancient hero, but a deficient one, who lacks something not easily identifiable, something like the will to conquer his love and interest at any costs. Yet the reason for the incompleteness of Dobbin as a hero is not to be attributed only to him, but to the changing canons of a changing society and to the structure of the novel, which prefers and gives more importance to

⁵⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, p 92-93.

“the vicious and the absurd” than the “good and the noble”⁵⁸. Trollope compares Dobbin and Rawdon, giving them the roles of the male heroes, yet both are incomplete. While the first is the good version, the second is depicted as the bad hero of the book, yet, although defective, they complete one another, what one lacks the other has and vice-versa.

About George, although some critics give him importance due to his role in the story, Trollope appears to belittle him by describing him as “a poor kind of fellow”, who although a brave soldier, is selfish and thinks too much about himself. From a certain point of view the truthfulness of Trollope’s statement can be seen by confronting George with Dobbin or even with Rawdon. Although Dobbin is an imperfect hero and Rawdon can be defined as a good man, even if not a hero, they both took care of their loved ones, putting them always before anything else, something that George found unthinkable.

About the heroines of the novel Trollope gives a definition of what they were like before the Victorian Age, and helps the readers to make a comparison with the female characters of the novel in order to understand who among them is the closest to the definition:

Heroines should not only be beautiful but should be endowed also with a quasi-celestial grace, -grace of dignity, propriety, and reticence. A heroine should hardly want to be married, the arrangement being almost too mundane, - and, should she be brought to consent to undergo such bond, because of its acknowledged utility, it should be at some period so distant as hardly to present itself to the mind as reality.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

By comparing the two female main characters of the novel with this definition, it is clear that none of the two corresponds to the given description. From a certain point of view Amelia can be defined as the representative of the English young women, or at least of the behaviour that they were expected to conform to. Amelia shows indeed some of the characteristics mentioned by Trollope, such as a quasi-celestial grace and empathy for every person she encounters. Moreover, she is a true, honest-hearted, individual who loves her promised one because she sees him as grand, and to love him she devotes all her heart⁶⁰. Yet, according to the definition provided by Trollope, her attachment to the idea of marriage and the obsession with George make her incomplete, and inadequate to take on the mantle of heroine. Her character, added to the fact that during the whole of the novel she demonstrates she is absolutely true to her nature, has often brought the readers to complain about her, probably because if compared to a character like Rebecca she appears to be somewhat flat.

Opposite to Amelia there is Rebecca who is considered, by most of the critics, the true heroine of the novel. By looking at her in the light of the definition of the ancient heroine given by the Trollope, it becomes blatant how she and Amelia are the complete opposites. Becky is utterly false, selfish, covetous and almost successful in the endeavours to become powerful and rich; she uses her grace when she thinks it is the best means to obtain what she wants. In Trollope's opinion between her and Amelia there is only one similarity, which corresponds to one of the engines of the entire story, marriage. This is true, even if they get married for different reasons, because, while Amelia marries for love, even though unrequited, Rebecca marries for money and the chance to gain prestige. As Trollope affirmed:

⁶⁰ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 104-105.

“To have made such a woman really in love would have been a mistake”⁶¹ because she rather likes, than loves, her husband because she considers him a part of her possessions, but the truth is that she would be capable to marry any man, no matter how very foul, wicked or unattractive he might be, the only matter of interest for her being the riches and power he possesses.

Finally, Trollope separates himself from the opinions of the other critics, which will be discussed in this chapter, in affirming that the real hero and heroines in the sense of the male and female protagonists of a modern story are no other than Becky Sharp and her husband Rawdon Crawley. The reason that has brought him to make this statement is extremely simple, because it is with the two of them that the readers’ interest is stimulated. In Trollope’s opinion it is to the two of them that the thought of the readers goes while reading the story, and it is by following them that in the end the readers would judge the book⁶².

2.3 – A. E. Dyson: Deflated Heroes and Heroines

Almost a century after Trollope, Dyson took the commitment of analysing *Vanity Fair*. By confronting him with his predecessor, it is possible to observe the changes that the way of thinking of the English society underwent in the period of a century. Although in his essay, published in the “Critical Quarterly”, he gives his opinion on the novel as a whole, the topic of the heroine is at the centre of his analysis. The first detail to mark Dyson as different from the preceding critics of *Vanity Fair* is the total focus on the two girls who detain the role of main characters,

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 104.

⁶² Cf. Ibidem, p. 93.

almost excluding from his analysis every other character, especially the male counterparts that appear in his work only in reference to the two girls.

As Trollope before him, Dyson takes into consideration, and comments, the subtitle of the novel, about which he states that it has “a very modern sound”. In his opinion, in the hundred years that passed after the creation of *Vanity Fair*, the readers have become more and more familiar with novels in which the main characters were valued for their lack of qualities that, otherwise, would make them heroes. For this reason, Thackeray’s work is seen in a new light and he is considered more and more as a pioneer novelist, especially for his preference of deflated heroes over idealised ones because they better represent the condition of the people of the time⁶³. Yet, differently from his predecessor, Dyson considered a nuance in the subtitle which he claims, “we should not overlook”. Dyson underlines how George Osborne is far from being a hero in both the ancient and modern concept, yet he is regarded as such by Amelia. By making George become Amelia’s moral ideal, Thackeray is able to deflate his heroines, even though half-playfully, by affirming that “As she was not a heroine there is no need to describe her person”⁶⁴. He makes irony while speaking of Becky later in the novel, claiming that “If this is a novel without a hero, at least let us lay claim to a heroine”⁶⁵, yet, by doing so, he makes the readers uncertain because even though the context and the tone are satiric, he remains ambiguous and the direction of the satire is not as clear as it seems.

As seen previously, in Trollope’s opinion Thackeray needed to intertwine different stories which were inspired by real events to give life-like quality to the novel and to his characters, but in Dyson’s opinion the author chose another way to obtain the same result. By presenting both Amelia and Becky as deflated characters,

⁶³ Cf. A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., p. 11.

⁶⁴ *Ivi.*

⁶⁵ *Ivi.*

Thackeray could claim the right to be a realist, which means for him to come to terms with a radically unheroic world⁶⁶ that corresponds to his perception of the world he lives in.

As it has been seen so far, Thackeray often proposed innovations in many aspects of the novel and for this reason he is considered, by almost all the critics that have studied his masterpieces, a pioneer of his times. Among them Dyson himself chose to address one specific change that Thackeray created in *Vanity Fair*, the role he had in the creation of his characters. Specifically, Dyson focuses on how in the opening pages of his novel Thackeray presents himself as a puppet-master declaring himself as the sole creator of his characters and their destiny, fact that by the laws of art is self-evidently true. Besides, this is true of every writer, because they create their characters and decide their fate. Yet by “the laws of great art” this can be defined as a half-truth at best, because “the greater the writer, the more likely he is to find other laws taking a hand”⁶⁷.

Vanity Fair is among those masterpieces in which the author assumes the role of a puppet-master, who, although he is the sole creator, is bound by shackles that he has forged through his own greatness. All the authors, after some successful publications would be almost obliged by the readers to follow a specific way to write their next book, because with their precedent works, the style that they have adopted, and has been successful, would be look for by the readers, who would expect the same style thereafter. In this way the characters can become alive a be more linked to the readers, yet their creator, in the role of the puppet-master, can

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

either praise or belittle them only superficially because of the expectations that the readers have about the author⁶⁸.

In the case of *Vanity Fair*, the characters come alive in the real world as well, because they can be judged by moral standards, especially those that are mutating because part of an epoch of great changes. Thackeray needs to give to the characters a great variety of emotions that allow them to appear as possessing complex and sensitive emotions for every kind of situation, like every living person would have, whether he fully approves of such complexity or not. In Dyson's opinion, at the apex of his capacity of characterisation, Thackeray created Becky Sharp, which the critic considers as an outstanding example of a round character because she defies the traditional rules of characterisation, dominating until that moment. Although this is true for all the characters, Becky, in particular, becomes extremely familiar to the readers, as if they had known her all their lives and she were part of reality and not of a novel. In accordance with Trollope and all the following critics, Dyson sees Becky as unfit to be a heroine, at least while referring to the ancient concept of heroism; and so, she is not the kind of heroine that the female public of the Victorian Era expected.

Differently from Trollope, Dyson admits that does not only Becky represent a new model of heroine, closer to reality and to the times she lives in but possesses some of the qualities the readers would expect to find in the male version of ancient heroism, such as courage, independence, resilience and even magnanimity⁶⁹. An interesting point made by Dyson is that not only does she possess those virtues, but that she does possess them beyond those of "any other character in the book". Although it is relatively easy to understand why Dyson assigned to Becky virtues

⁶⁸ *Ivi.*

⁶⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

like courage, independence and resilience, the fact that he assigned even magnanimity makes the readers wonder in which occasions has Becky ever been magnanimous. There are very few of such occasions in the entire novel, yet the most significant is the episode in which she gives Amelia the letter that George gave Rebecca before departing for the war, in which he asked her to flee together.

Dyson agrees that Becky might have used the letter to crush Amelia and make her crumble in despair. Instead she, who in the end considers Amelia almost as a sister, used such a device to ignite Amelia's change and possibilities for the future. Yet Becky's feelings must have been especially complex and mixed in such an occasion, because they must have included a certain sensation of triumph over Amelia, as over somebody who needed her friend to wake up from the dream she lived till that moment⁷⁰. The ambivalence that the readers feel towards Becky's virtues is at the origin of the novel capacity to keep high their interest and bring them, and especially the critics, to wonder whether Thackeray regarded her as his heroine even though he apparently treats her with scorn during the novel, a reaction which was the expected from the readers of the time.

As almost every critic of *Vanity Fair*, Dyson makes a comparison between Becky and Amelia, underlining how much their destinies are intertwined. He defines Amelia as a representation of the conventional heroine, whose role Thackeray refuses, and Becky as a villainess designed to break every pattern that was considered common until that moment.

Thackeray's quest for the truth was recognized by all the critics of his masterpiece, yet Dyson is one of the few to underline his subtlety while criticizing the personal characters of the leading actors of the novel, especially Becky and Amelia whose moral characters are often confronted. This contrast between the two,

⁷⁰ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

who are considered by many critics as the leading characters of the novel, is compared, to some degree, by Dyson to a contrast between mental health and mental defeat. While Becky survives through everything that her life has set aside for her, Amelia keeps her weak attitude and fears even when she achieves, or so it seems, her most inner desire⁷¹.

Through their characters Thackeray makes his “heroes and heroines” appear imperfect and more real, using them to make satire⁷². Very telling about his philosophy of the characters is the letter that Thackeray wrote to his mother in July 1847:

My object is not to make a perfect character or anything like it. Don't you see how odious all the people are in the book (with the exception of Dobbin) -- behind whom there lies a dark moral, I hope. What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy, pompous, mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue⁷³.

With this description, sent to his mother, Thackeray is capable of encompassing all the characters in the novel. Some possess only a few of the characteristics described by him, some possess all of them and only Dobbin is the exception, and, as a character, he can be considered as the only link with the past tradition of the British novel that the author decided to keep.

⁷¹ Cf. A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., p. 25.

⁷² Cf. A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., pp. 15-16.

⁷³ A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., p. 17.

2.4 – Geoffrey Tillotson, Donald Hawes: Collection of Essays

The fourth part of this chapter is dedicated to understanding Thackeray's characters through the analysis offered by Geoffrey Tillotson and Donald Hawes in their book "The Critical Heritage", which is a collection of articles dated 1848. All the essays collected in this book agree on a common point: the characters created by Thackeray were inspired by reality. The author used common people who aroused his interest, and their everyday life, as a basis to create the characters of the novel, presenting them by means of brief, decisive, yet always most discriminative, touches and separating himself from his colleagues, who looked for inspiration in "books and fancy"⁷⁴. Together with Trollope and Dyson, Tillotson and Hawes reiterate the fact that Thackeray's choice to create a world, and especially characters, with life-like quality resulted in the inclusion of not only the virtues but even the vices and negativity that are present in the real world. Therefore, characters with complex personalities were created, making them resemble real people.

There are some characters that were crafted as possessing great natural talents and energy, making them appear as if they could accomplish everything if they were free from the plot. Yet for the sake of reality, they, who possess energy and possibilities in the highest degree, were also given much unredeemed depravity and negative sides, as to compensate and balance their talents. The characters with this disposition are those that in *Vanity Fair* are usually considered as main characters in the novel, around which almost every event spins. It is their complexity, and

⁷⁴ Cf. J. Forster, *Review*, "The Examiner", July 22th 1848, now in G. Tillotson, D. Hawes (eds.), *Thackeray the Critical Heritage*, cit. pp. 53-58, p. 54.

difficulty, in managing their stories that appears to be one of the moments in which the author enjoys himself the most⁷⁵. A supporting argument for this supposition is the fact that the scenes and events in which the main characters find themselves involved are able to create amusement or exhibit the society of the time. Such a kind of amusement is difficult nowadays to understand considering that almost two hundred years have passed, and although critics are still able to understand the purpose of these parts of the novel, it appears to be extremely difficult to completely comprehend them due to the passage of time and, more importantly, the changes of society⁷⁶. An aspect underlined in Tillotson and Hawes' collection is the social background of the characters, because Thackeray's novel is focused prevalently on the middle-class with some apparition of the common people under the guise of servants and only few traces of nobility.

The point of the novel is expressed through the eyes of the main characters that belong to the middle-class, which look at the fashionable circles of nobility with envy and try to imitate them, sometimes with hilarious results. In Robert Bell's article, one of the many in the collection, he argues that if *Vanity Fair* were about the upper-class it would have been very different, since a certain "equanimity of breeding" would absorb all the shortcomings of the characters in question⁷⁷. Which is true for almost all the characters, because the novel depicts some of the worst forms of behaviour that can be found in civilized society. Among them some of the most common are: deep egoism, which often characterised the mercantile families

⁷⁵ Cf. J. Forster, *Review*, "The Examiner", cit., p. 56.

⁷⁶ Cf. R. S. Rintoul, *Review*, "Spectator", July 22th 1848, now in G. Tillotson, D. Hawes (eds.), *Thackeray the Critical Heritage*, cit. pp. 58-61, p. 61.

⁷⁷ Cf. R Bell, *Review*, "Fraser's Magazine", September 1848, now in G. Tillotson, D. Hawes (eds.), *Thackeray the Critical Heritage*, cit. pp. 62-67, p. 63.

so typical of the middle class, and faithlessness, not only in a possible god but even in other people or in themselves⁷⁸.

Tillotson and Hawes chose to focus especially on Becky and on her role in showing the dark part of society; they underline how the people who suffer at the hands of Becky are in truth at fault, because in their folly they let themselves be used. This means that Thackeray uses Becky not only to incarnate the worst part of society, but to show how in every man and woman there is darkness that waits to be awakened and used by other people. Through this the author instils the doubt in the readers that Becky might not be pure evil which corrupts everyone she has around, as argued by Dobbin, but that she is simply an opportunist capable of using the guilt and vices of others to obtain benefits⁷⁹. As argued before, Thackeray gave strong personality traits to all the main characters, and it is through their actions and conduct that they are revealed to the readers.

A peculiarity of Old Osborne that Robert Stephen Rintoul has found is that, excluding Rebecca, he is the character with the “most large and truthful delineation”. He is in a class of his own, because he is capable to obtain the readers’ attention and to keep it through the force that he shows in his will, even though he is described as a sordid, selfish, sullen man, meanly subservient to greatness⁸⁰. Besides, the vices and weaknesses that these conducts might expose should not be too obvious, because Rintoul states that, if the characters possess strong personality traits and do not have “a type of nature”, they tire the readers. As a result, these characters become unsuitable for a lengthened exhibition because the readers do not develop any sympathy for them⁸¹. Yet it is sometimes possible for this kind of

⁷⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁷⁹ Cf. J. Forster, *Review*, “The Examiner”, cit., p. 56.

⁸⁰ Cf. R. S. Rintoul, *Review*, “Spectator”, cit., p. 61.

⁸¹ Cf. *Ibidem*, 59.

characters, or “personages” as are defined by the critics, to obtain the recognition of the readers and gain their respect and sympathy, even if only for a fleeting moment.

The capacity of the characters to be likeable to the readers is, in most of the times, directly bound to their moral nature. In the past, weak or evil characters were not beloved by the readers, yet with the Victorian novel this neat separation, caused by the moral outlook, is made ambiguous by the life-like quality the novels were acquiring. In *Vanity Fair*, with few exceptions, the characters resemble the 19th century life-style, fact which makes their behaviour resemble reality and it becomes almost impossible to draw any distinct pure moral attitude. Only the actions and words of every single character are left to appeal to the hearts of the readers and to influence their preference⁸². Yet another reason for their life-like quality is the mutual dependence of the characters on each other, so there is no one stuck on a higher pedestal but all of them are rather alike in one way or another. Among all the characters which, in the critics’ opinion, were clearly created on the basis of real people, there is one exception: Sir Pitt Crawley senior.

Elizabeth Rigby believes that, although he is one of the characters among the most distant from life-like quality in the entire novel, he is so unique that is difficult to recognize what makes him different from the others and for this reason Thackeray could “stick [him] into a gallery so full of familiars”⁸³. Taking into consideration the capacity of the characters to be liked by readers, Charles Astor Bristed affirms that there is not a single great character in the entire novel and, therefore, that all of them are not good enough, or too incomplete, to gain the readers’ recognition. The only

⁸² Cf. E Rigby, *Review*, “Quarterly Review”, December 1848, now in G. Tillotson, D. Hawes (eds.), *Thackeray the Critical Heritage*, cit. pp. 77- 86, p. 80.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

exception is Becky Sharp, who is the only one that can be called a first rate hit and, in his opinion, one of the reasons for the success of the novel⁸⁴.

Finally as almost all the critics of *Vanity Fair*, Rintoul comments about the title of the novel and more specifically he focuses on the subtitle: “Vanity Fair is said by its author to be a novel without a hero: which is undoubtedly a truth but the heroines do not make up for the omission, since one is without a heart, and the other without a head”⁸⁵. So, although Rintoul agrees with Thackeray affirming that the novel is without hero, he takes a different approach from that of his colleagues. He affirms that the two main characters of the novel are not adequate to fill the gap left by the absence of the figure of the hero. In his opinion Becky and Amelia cannot take up the role of the hero due to their incompleteness, because the former is seen by the critics as a heartless woman, incapable of feeling deep emotions and do some good to others. The latter is defined as without a head on her shoulders and therefore is incapable of rational thinking or is generally devoid of the ability to make decisions for herself. In opposition to Rintoul, John Forster states that *Vanity Fair* has two heroines, one who is “artistically accomplished, clever, daring and unprincipled” named Becky and the other a “good, amiable but selfish and insipid” named Amelia. In Forster’s opinion both of them have the capacity to lead the readers into a journey, one from beggarly scenes to external decency, yet without virtue; the other from vulgar comfort and splendour to a home of worth and virtue⁸⁶.

Not only does Forster believe in the presence of two heroines, but that there is even a hero in the story, Dobbin, who, although elaborated too much, can be considered as “a noble portrait of awkward devoted affection, of unobtrusive talent,

⁸⁴ Cf. C. A. Bristed, *Review*, “American Review”, October 1848, now in G. Tillotson, D. Hawes (eds.), *Thackeray the Critical Heritage*, cit. pp. 68-76, p. 70.

⁸⁵ R. S. Rintoul, *Review*, “Spectator”, cit., p. 59.

⁸⁶ Cf. J. Forster, *Review*, “The Examiner”, cit., p. 56.

and of uncompromising integrity”⁸⁷. In opposition to Dobbin as a hero, Bristed presents Rawdon Crawley who, although in his opinion does not possess the qualifications to be a respectable alternative to the Captain, yet, even if he embodies the common man, is capable sometimes of noble behaviour. An example is when he is defending his honour against Lord Steyne during which “even his guilty wife is forced to admire her husband, as he stands, strong brave and victorious”⁸⁸.

2.5 - Arthur Pollard: Thackeray's Moral as an Author

Similarly to the collection of essays intitled *Thackeray, the Critical Heritage*, composed by Tillotson and Hawes in 1968, Pollard's *Thackeray. Vanity Fair* published ten years later, in 1978, is a compendium of various essays written by many critics through the years. Through this collection, it becomes even more clear how much Thackeray innovated the representation of life by *Vanity Fair*, especially concerning the characters. In fact, all the characters created by Thackeray possess characteristics taken by people the author met. This brought to two consequences on the novel: the first was the improvement of the life-like quality of characters and novel in general, while the second consisted in simplifying and enhancing the connection between the characters and the readers.

The place of the characters in society is decided by Thackeray, who defines for each of them the step in the social ladder they belong to, leaving the characters with the illusion of possessing the ability to move up the social structure, which is, as a

⁸⁷ *Ivi.*

⁸⁸ Cf. C. A. Bristed, *Review*, “American Review”, cit., p. 72.

matter of fact, always denied to them in the novel⁸⁹. Although Thackeray creates characters who are part of different circles of society, almost all of them belong to the middle-class, and among this group only Becky tries to change her social identity and become part of the higher circle of society. She is the only character who is temporarily able to climb the social hierarchy and to almost become part of the upper echelon of society. Her failure is partly due to her lack of some qualities and partly due to Thackeray's will, who hinders her from succeeding.

The author is extremely close to the characters he creates, because, as already argued in the previous chapter, he is almost a contemporary of theirs. As Charles Whibley states in his 1903 essay *William Makepeace Thackeray*, Thackeray forgets too often the impartiality of the artist and treats the characters as real people, talking of them and with them⁹⁰. Indeed, as Thackeray himself says at the end of chapter VIII of *Vanity Fair*:

[...] 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; if they are good and kindly, to love them, and shake them by the hand⁹¹.

In his 1921 essay *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock comments about Thackeray's continuous interferences, stating that such behaviour from the author is a sign of his inexperience in writing novels and of the little faith he has in his

⁸⁹ Cf. K. Tillotson, *The Debatable Land between the Middle Classes and the Aristocracy, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, 1954, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. pp. 127-141, p. 128.

⁹⁰ Cf. C. Whibley, *William Makepeace Thackeray*, 1903, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. pp. 47-50, p. 48.

⁹¹ W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair, A Novel Without a Hero*, (1848), London, Penguin, 2001, Chapter VIII, p.90.

characters, so he gives them no freedom and independence⁹². In her 1954 essay *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Kathleen Tillotson is the only one to describe at length a peculiarity of Thackeray's characters noted by all the critics:

Thackeray's personages are never portrayed in isolation. They are a part of the milieu in which they exist, and which has itself therefore much more distinction and relief than an environment which is merely a framework. How they regard each other, how they feel toward and what they think of each other, the mutuality of their very numerous and vital relations, furnishes an important strand in the texture of the story in which they figure. Their activities are modified by the air they breathe in common. Their conduct is controlled, their ideas affected, even their desires and ambitions dictated, by the general ideas of the society that includes them⁹³.

One of the first essays which can be found in Pollard's book was written by Forster in 1848 for as a review in *The Examiner* and is focused on the morals of both author and characters. While discussing about morality, Forster proposes the idea that the characters of *Vanity Fair* who suffered due to Becky's wits are at faults and not to pity: "It is the vices of the victims that subject them to her power – whether their vices be inherent [...] or superinduced [...]"⁹⁴. The only characters immune to her "spell", as Forster calls it, are those who retain their moral integrity: "unsuspicious virtue and innocence – as in the case of Dobbin and Amelia – have a charm in their own simple integrity that unconsciously baffles her spells"⁹⁵. While

⁹² Cf. P. Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, 1921, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. pp. 51-57, p. 55.

⁹³ K. Tillotson, *The Debatable Land between the Middle Classes and the Aristocracy*, cit. p. 129.

⁹⁴ J. Forster, *Review*, "The Examiner", cit. p. 28.

⁹⁵ Ivi.

the described characteristics make Dobbin and Amelia akin to the ancient heroes for the presence of many virtues within them, there is another character who has a power similar to Becky's, Lord Steyne. He, as Becky, makes use of people's weaknesses to control them and obtain whatever he aims at.

Although they are different, in both importance and focus in the story, Becky and Lord Steyne appear to be completely calculative, with no space for anything that could block the path to their objectives. A feature that all the characters of the novel share is described by Elizabeth Rigby in her essay published in the *Quarterly Review* of December 1848: "every actor on the crowded stage of *Vanity Fair* represents some type of that perverse mixture of humanity in which there is ever something not wholly to approve or to condemn"⁹⁶. By this statement, Elizabeth Rigby reaffirms what many critics before her had underlined, which is one of the innovations brought by Thackeray in English literature: characters are morally ambiguous, and this influences their life-like quality.

The characters are not completely good or evil, but they are a "perverse mixture", enhancing both their credibility as characters based on real people and their ability to be likable to the readers. Yet as previously discussed, Thackeray himself did not want to create characters that would make the readers immerse completely into the novel plot, but wanted the readers to create their own opinions about the characters, their personalities and behaviour. He did not want the readers to accept everything the narrator says, nor did he want them to sympathise with the characters. All that the author wanted was to show off his writing and sketching ability and proof of this is given by Charles Whibley, in his essay *William Makepeace Thackeray*: "The author does not ask his readers to profess sympathy

⁹⁶ E. Rigby, L. Eastlake, *Review*, "Quarterly Review", 1848, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. p. 30.

with his ruffians. He demands no more than an appreciation of a witty presentment and of deft draughtsmanship”⁹⁷.

In his essay, Charles Whibley gives another interesting information about *Vanity Fair*: he states that Thackeray’s intention was to create “a set of people living without God in the World”⁹⁸, so that the novel had not a “plan” or “motive”. However, the author was indeed able to achieve his objective, because the only character who presents a connection to religion and God is Young Pitt Crawley. For the rest of the novel all the other characters are completely devoid of any reference to the church and any religious belief. By separating the character from the figure of God, Thackeray was able to separate the heroes and heroines of his masterpiece from the figure of the ancient heroes, since in their actions they did not have to keep into consideration the possibility of divine punishment. This characteristic, together with the dominance of the reason and raw emotions in the characters, helped to increase their life-like quality. As already stated, every character in *Vanity Fair* is inspired by a real person of Thackeray’s time. However, G. and K. Tillotson tell us that Henry Kingsley, one of Thackeray’s contemporaries, claimed that Lord Steyne is too real to be a fictional character:

too perfect a character ever to have existed; he is so perfect, that we have to argue ourselves out of the belief that he is drawn from life... People tried to represent the wicked nobleman often enough. Let them try no more. Lord Steyne is in the field.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ C. Whibley, *William Makepeace Thackeray*, cit., p. 48.

⁹⁸ Ibidem, p. 47.

⁹⁹ G. and K. Tillotson, *Thackeray: Historical Novelist*, “Introduction to Norton edition of *Vanity Fair*”, 1963, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, pp. 83-91, p. 86.

Yet G. and K. Tillotson's opinion differs, from Kingsley's, they believe that the origin of Lord Steyne is the same as any other character in the novel, a mixture of reality and invention, moreover they affirm that he has an important role in giving the feeling of 19th century London:

By borrowing some of the authentic monstrosity of life and combining it with his own invention, Thackeray created a character who belongs as it were to the borderland between historic fact and his own fiction. Lord Steyne contributes more than any other single character to a novel as a picture of its time; from him flows much of the authentic sense of period that colours it¹⁰⁰.

2.6– Catherine Peters and Thackeray's Notion of a Hero

The last of the critics, chronologically speaking, we are going to talk about is Catherine Peters, who, in her *Thackeray a Writer's Life*, not only gave an exhaustive and comprehensive description of Thackeray's masterpieces and life but provided the readers with a more modern point of view. Moreover, Peter's work contains references and comments made by some of the oldest critics, including documents normally difficult to obtain. These are some of the reasons that make Peters' book an indispensable addition to the understanding of Thackeray's opinion in matters of characters and of heroes.

Peters underlines how since the first publication of *Vanity Fair* the critics' opinions have been unexpectedly divided: some of them have questioned

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi.*

Thackeray's capacity to manage his characters, claiming that, the readers know more about them than the author himself does. At the same time, other critics affirmed that the narrator lies to the readers when talking "intimately" about the characters and that, for these reasons, Thackeray had lost control of his own book¹⁰¹.

A very important piece of evidence which reveals something about Thackeray's vision about characters and heroes is the title the author chose for the novel. Both the title and the subtitle give different information, and, by Thackeray's own admission, the original title was not the current one. However, the choice of *Vanity Fair* as the main title provoked some consequences: by doing so, the novel was believed, by the readers and critics alike, to contain new and various didactic and religious implications. Although untrue, as Whibley explained, this belief changed the way in which the novel was perceived, adding a certain ambiguity about who the main character was, what was her or his role and in what way the events of the novel had to be read.

Even though without its title the novel could be considered as a very entertaining satire, with the addition of it the book lost a great deal in term of pure satire and acquired something considered more precious, life-like quality showing the reality of 19th century Britain. Moreover, the discovery of this title gave the novel:

an extra dimension which turned it from an entertaining, [...], piece of social satire, into a novel in which the repeated destruction of form becomes an essential way of mediating the reader's response to the fiction, and ensuring that any complicity with the characters can't last for long [...]¹⁰².

¹⁰¹ Cf. C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p 151.

¹⁰² Ibidem, p 150.

as if the characters and the reader were separated by a veil.

Although it is possible to read it in many different ways, the subtitle, “A novel without a hero”¹⁰³, gives specific clues on the characters of *Vanity Fair*. The more literal interpretation is that the novel is written in a way that does not require the presence of a main character, becoming more similar to a collection of intertwining stories set in the same locations but with different characters. This first point of view can be considered faulty, because, even though it is true that there are many characters whose stories are inexorably connected to other stories inside the novel, it is possible to select two of them as the most important. For these reasons although there is no official hero or heroines in the novel, unofficially there are at least two main characters. The other way to read the subtitle, which is by far considered more suitable by the critics, concerns the very essence of the characters in the novel. Owing to the changes of society which we mentioned previously, there is the disappearance of the concept of hero as someone that is the incarnation of the divine virtues and that could not be tainted by worldly desire. Following this logic, it becomes clear how this novel was created to be intrinsically different from the past tradition, especially in regard to the characters, who, for much as they strove to achieve divine virtues, are not able to do it, also due to a world that has changed.

All the characters in *Vanity Fair* possess a negative quality inside them, which preclude them the possibility to become like ancient heroes. Although this absence may appear as a handicap, it gives them the possibility to choose different roads and adds to them a factor of unpredictability making them become more human and closer to reality, in a way in which none could before. To take as examples the two main characters: Becky is more similar to what was usually considered as an antagonist than a hero, while, although Amelia has many of the

¹⁰³ Cf. *Ibidem*, 145.

virtues and somehow partially resemble a hero in character, she is still devoid of something that leave an incomplete feeling to the reader.

Although it may seem as if there are no more heroes that follow the ancient canons in *Vanity Fair*, one can still be found: William Dobbin. From his first appearance in the story it is possible to gain a superficial understanding of this character's values and how much profoundly different he is from the rest. He is introduced by a flashback which brings the readers back to the character's youth, in particular at the episode in which he appears, probably for the first time, as a hero. After a fight for defending a defenceless George he is described as "a big boy who never initiates a fight, but will always fight in defence of a smaller boy who is being bullied"¹⁰⁴. This episode is, altogether, proof of life-like quality because Thackeray did not completely invent it but used an event of his own youth because he found himself in Dobbin's place¹⁰⁵. Excluding this episode, in which the author represents the most classic concept of good, probably due to the presence of children which can still be considered pure, for the rest of the novel not only it seems that good does not triumph over evil, but it is apparent that it cannot. In this way Thackeray makes a distinction between the world of children and that of adults: while in the first there is no vanity, sin that accompanies almost all the characters in their adulthood, in the second wits are rewarded.

Even more complex is the matter of punishment in the novel, because while it is initially expected that the characters receive a suitable punishment, task that with the ancient hero was left to divine justice, in truth, they are not punished in the least. It appears as divine punishment has lost all its power and it is on the brink of

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 14.

extinction, because, to make an example, “Becky’s punishment is no more than the boredom and wariness that she feels after each successive triumph [...]”¹⁰⁶.

Peters believes that Thackeray, as all the other writers of the same period, was heavily influenced by the new possibilities and ideologies of the previous movement, the romantic revolution. As a matter of fact, it is in the romantic period that the cult of the hero assumed greater importance, becoming central in the literary beliefs. It is possible to affirm that both the concepts of hero and of realism that were formed during the Victorian period were greatly influenced by those of the previous age. Thackeray himself recalled within *Vanity Fair* those very concepts even if to create satire. For example the story of Becky Sharp is an ironic parody of the bildungsroman of the period in which the novel is set¹⁰⁷: in fact with her humble origins, she attempts to rise in the social ladder using only her indomitable strength of character, her wits and sharp intelligence, but only to discover that every triumph leaves a greater void inside of her together with boredom and unhappiness.

In her book Peters makes many references to Becky and Amelia, especially while comparing the two, because it is her belief that the novel, even though it is proclaimed to be without a hero by its title, presents two heroines of different kinds. On one side there is Becky, defined by her cleverness, wits, and hunger for success, while, on the other, there is Amelia, who is described in her first appearance in the novel as a “rosy, round checked and healthy woman always in good humour”, who has no ambition whatsoever. Yet Peters sees a negative similarity between the two: “If Becky is a mermaid, feeding on drowned corpses, Amelia is a parasite sucking the life from the man she clings to”¹⁰⁸. While Becky uses her abilities to enchant men and women to make her bidding and raise to success, Amelia is completely

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 151.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, p. 149.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 157.

dependent on others, especially on the sentimental level. Yet this is not true for the entirety of the novel, and while it is true that Becky does not change her ways, Amelia is able to change and to become more independent.

Finally, Thackeray uses some of the main characters to embody his ideas; the most iconic is without a doubt Becky Sharp, used by Thackeray to create the embodiment of Carlyle's idea of modern writer: "[...] Nothing but a pitiful Image of their own pitiful Self, with its vanities, and grudgings, and ravenous hunger of all kinds, hangs forever painted in the retina of these unfortunate persons"¹⁰⁹. Yet, by doing so, he created one of the great characters of English fiction and, at the same time, opposing Carlyle's definition that the writers of the time were too much self-centred and could not create any great character¹¹⁰.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 164.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Ivi.*

Chapter III

Different Types of Heroes and Heroines

3.1 – Rebecca: the Real Heroine?

There are many debates about *Vanity Fair*, among which the most important one concerns the main characters of the story, Amelia and Rebecca. As Forster stated in his essay for the *Examiner*, the novel supposedly has two heroines, yet, as previously discussed, the majority of the critics who studied *Vanity Fair*, believe Rebecca to be the main character, due to her importance in many passages of the novel. Almost all opinions on the main characters in *Vanity Fair* differ slightly. For example, Trollope shares Dyson's affirmation that Becky is the main character, the heroine, of the story; on the other hand, he differs from his colleague by adding that there is also a hero in the novel which is Captain Dobbin and that the plot is essentially composed by their "lightly woven together" stories¹¹¹.

Yet in Forster's opinion Becky is the only heroine and is described as an "artistically accomplished, clever, sensible, daring, selfish, and unprincipled"¹¹² person who leads the readers to:

the squalid resorts of tattered finery and habitual vice which lie beyond; and thence again, into that withered, sapless and flowerless region where sham

¹¹¹ Cf. A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 98.

¹¹² J. Forster, *Review*, "The Examiner", cit., p. 56.

penitents find a refuge, who have returned to external decency without reawakening to virtue¹¹³.

At the same time, Dorothy Van Ghent in her essay *The “Omniscient Author” Convention and the “Composition centre” Function*, affirms the importance that Becky detains from a moral point of view, even if it is necessary to be careful to not confuse Becky’s morality with “virtue”. Van Ghent specifically underlines that Rebecca’s morality symbolizes the morality of her world “at its greatest intensity and magnitude”¹¹⁴. This statement means that the characters usually have a simple vice whereas Becky has them all. They are amplified by her cunning and calculative mind, because she is able to use them to the fullest. Moreover, about the question of morality, Kathleen Tillotson suggests that Becky’s undoing is caused by the relationship she has with her husband Rawdon Crawley, who, in the critic’s opinion, is the person she despises the most. This reveals that it is “the innocent and stupid who confound her”¹¹⁵.

Although there is nothing about happiness that Becky can teach to female readers, especially not the virtue of “humble dutifulness”, a traditional female virtue, Van Ghent underlines the importance of her activities as the turning points of the novel:

From Becky’s delighted exercise in being alive we can learn nothing about the happiness to be derived from humble dutifulness. [...] The actually functioning compositional centre of *Vanity Fair* is that node or intersection of extensive

¹¹³ Ivi.

¹¹⁴ D. Van Ghent, *The “Omniscient Author” Convention and the “Composition centre” Function*, in ibidem, *The English Novel: Form and Function*, New York, 1953, now in A. Pollard (ed.), *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. pp. 114-126, p. 119.

¹¹⁵ K. Tillotson, *The Debatable Land between the Middle Classes and the Aristocracy*, cit. p. 137.

social and spiritual relationships constituted by Becky's activities: her relationship with a multitude of individual – [...] – and, through these individuals, her relationship with large and significant blocks of a civilization [...] ¹¹⁶.

In fact, she specifically refers to all contacts Becky has with the other characters, underlining that these encounters are the true engines of the story. Dyson gives us another point of view about Becky as a heroine:

Becky may be very unlike a heroine of the kind that Victorian young ladies had come to expect, but she does have qualities of courage, independence, resilience, even magnanimity, beyond those of any other character in the book ¹¹⁷.

So, while Van Ghent underlines Becky's negative traits, Dyson instead underlines the positive ones, because, even though in the novel the episodes where Becky does morally good actions are few, it cannot be denied that even Becky possesses virtues, no matter how much she is considered evil. Some among them are qualities previously rarely seen in any female heroine in the novels, because they usually appeared in the male hero. Courage, independence, magnanimity and even resilience are qualities almost never encountered before in any female character but common in male protagonists. Than another interesting opinion about Becky is the one given by Trollope, who states that she never changes during the novel and

¹¹⁶ D. Van Ghent, *The "Omniscient Author" Convention and the "Composition centre" Function*, cit, p. 117.

¹¹⁷ A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., pp. 11-12.

remains “utterly false, selfish, covetous, and successful”¹¹⁸ in her endeavours to deceive and lie to others for her benefit.

Last but not least, there is the evaluation of Becky given by Catherine Peters, although in chronological order she is one of the latest critics to have studied *Vanity Fair*, she has done one of the most comprehensive study of the novel and its author. Peters presents Becky in a different way from Trollope, underlining her cleverness and gifted intellectual abilities, yet like Trollope, Peters gives the readers a predominantly negative view of Becky, representing her as a mermaid, who enchants men, in order to trick them out of their wealth and favours¹¹⁹.

Love might have caused Becky’s ruin, yet as Anthony Trollope underlines, to make such a woman really fall in love would have been considered as a mistake. She has no room for feelings such as love that could stop her in her path of social climbing. In fact, Trollope affirms: “Her husband she likes best, - because he is, or was, her own. But there is no man so foul, so wicked, so unattractive, but that she can fawn over him for money and jewels”¹²⁰.

Forster in his essay has two main points, the first one is about the complexity and innovation of Becky as a character, and the second is about Thackeray’s attitude as her creator, namely if he approves of a character as complex as Becky:

for, whether the creator fully approves of such complexity or not. As E. M. Forster has pointed out, Becky Sharp is an outstanding example of a ‘round’ character; she defies any rule of characterization that simple logic might prescribe, and becomes as familiar and unpredictable as if we had known her all our lives. Thackeray, of course, knew when his characters came alive as well as

¹¹⁸ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 104.

¹¹⁹ Cf. C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer’s Life*, cit., p 157.

¹²⁰ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 104.

we do, and his role of puppet-master is only one of the various *personae* he adopts¹²¹.

So, in Forster and Dyson opinions' Becky Sharp is among the first characters that can be defined as "round", owing to her complexity. Furthermore, Dyson underlines Becky's ability to reflect and represent the English society of the beginning of the 19th century, especially in how "in a society using Christian values almost wholly perversely, resilience and energy are forced to know themselves, in a Becky, as conventional sins"¹²². And, in Dyson's opinion, it is thanks to her courage and energy that she appeals to readers and, although she is a hypocrite, she does not try to convince the readers that her sins are virtues instead, but she does not make any excuses¹²³. In fact, as Catherine Peters states, Becky is the representation not only of the morality of the story but also of the mechanics of reward and punishment within the novel, because she "is the living proof that if virtue is not its own reward in *Vanity Fair*, neither does vice bring its own punishment"¹²⁴.

Yet it would be a mistake to consider her a purely evil character because in the novel Becky never pursues revenge against anyone, nor are her many wrongdoings gratuitous, only limited to what she can gain. Finally, there are times when she is generous, for example when Amelia lashes against her after George's departure, blaming her for his behaviour¹²⁵. On the contrary, in his essay in the collection edited by Tillotson and Hawes, Rigby states that readers and critics alike should be thankful to Becky, because during the novel she remains true to herself. Although her goodness is flawed and incomplete, going just as far as good temper, and her

¹²¹ A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., p. 13.

¹²² *Ibidem*, 21.

¹²³ *Ivi.*

¹²⁴ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p 163.

¹²⁵ Cf. E Rigby, *Review*, "Quarterly Review", cit. p. 83.

principles are no more than shrewd sense, they lead the readers to a better understanding of this character and at the same time of the inner reality of both the novel and the 19th century London Thackeray wished to represent¹²⁶. So, as Rigby states, the only occasion in which Becky's actions are "painful" to the readers is when her path crosses that of another character, who is a "more genuine child of this earth" and who can be manipulated by her¹²⁷.

A peculiarity noticed by Catherine Peters is the similarity which can be discerned between Becky and Thackeray, because as the author creates different "personae" that will people the novel as characters, so Becky is depicted as a creative artist who "who concentrates her energies on the making of a persona to present to the world for her own advantage"¹²⁸.

As we have already seen, Becky is considered by many critics as the main character of the story for many different reasons, yet Bristed in his essay for the "American Review" reprinted in Tillotson and Hawes' collection, underlines how not only is Becky the heroine of the novel, but she is the only great character in the entire novel and absolutely the only one that can be considered as a "first rate hit"¹²⁹. Moreover, he stresses Becky's uniqueness by defining her as the "object of envy and admiration for her cleverness and accomplishments to many a fine lady"¹³⁰.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 82.

¹²⁷ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 84.

¹²⁸ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p 164.

¹²⁹ Cf. C. A. Bristed, *Review*, cit., p. 70.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

3.2 – *Amelia: a Weak Heroine?*

Amelia is the second main female character in the novel, the opposite of Becky in almost everything, and she is considered by some critics, like Dyson, as the real heroine of the story. In fact, although Amelia always appears to be weak and defenceless, she is stronger than many give her credit for. As said before, being Amelia the counterpart of Becky and an equally important character for the novel, almost all the critics of *Vanity Fair* have devoted at least a paragraph of their work to their comparison. Forster especially wanted to underline how Becky's and Amelia's fortunes both describe society at that time:

In tracing, on one hand, the fortunes of the good and amiable but somewhat selfish and insipid Amelia, we are led from the vulgar comfort and splendour of the *bourgeoisie* of Vanity Fair, through sudden reverses of bankruptcy; allowed again to emerge into commonplace affluence; and after a short excursion through the stately haunts of poor German princes, are conducted finally to a home of worth and virtue¹³¹

Among the critics who compared Becky and Amelia, some have compared the way the two characters are presented in the novel, and among them there is Chesterton. He gives a brief description of Amelia and of what she initially represents: “Amelia is made at the very beginning a mere pink and white doll to be foil to Becky; and she represents a rather stale and vapid sort of sentimental comedy”¹³². Catherine Peters, the last in chronological order of the critics, underlines their physical appearance, and Amelia is described as “rosy, round-

¹³¹ J. Forster, *Review*, “The Examiner”, cit. p. 55.

¹³² G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction to Vanity Fair*, cit., p. 59.

checked and healthy and always good humoured” while Becky as a “clever, gifted intellectual”¹³³.

As stated by Trollope, Amelia possesses many qualities that belong to the “ancient heroine”, especially aesthetic ones: “heroines should not only be beautiful but should be endowed also with a quasi-celestial grace, - grace of dignity, propriety, and reticence”¹³⁴. Yet she could never be one because what she is looking for is love and marriage, while:

A heroine should hardly want to be married, the arrangement being almost too mundane, - and, should she be brought to consent to undergo such bond, because of its acknowledged utility, it should be at some period so distant as hardly to present itself to the mind as reality¹³⁵.

Although Amelia possesses beauty which respects the aesthetic canons of the “ancient heroine”, such beauty might bring the reader to wrongfully judge her. In fact, as affirmed by Kathleen Tillotson in her essay *The Debatable Land between the Middle Classes and the Aristocracy*: “Anyone who mistakes Amelia for a simple character has misunderstood *Vanity Fair*”¹³⁶.

More than once, in Catherine Peters’ opinion, Amelia is shown as weak, clingy, at the mercy of others, yet:

Amelia’s obstinate stupidity in refusing to acknowledge Dobbin’s love, and her deification of George, who had made her miserably unhappy during their few weeks

¹³³ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer’s Life*, cit., p. 157.

¹³⁴ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 92.

¹³⁵ *Ivi.*

¹³⁶ K. Tillotson, *The Debatable Land between the Middle Classes and the Aristocracy*, cit. p. 134.

of marriage, are set against her capacity for self-sacrifice and her lack of pretension¹³⁷.

Amelia's ideals allow her to stand out from the other characters and rather than make her suffer, they make her appear stronger, even if in a different way. Amelia's strength lies in her capability to suffer quietly, to endure everything that life throws at her and to remain absolutely true to her own nature, without hiding her true self nor trying to change it¹³⁸. Furthermore, Trollope suggests that although Amelia does not possess the requirements to be considered as equal to the "ancient heroine", she can be considered as a representative of how the young English women were expected to behave according to society. A woman had to be "a true, honest-hearted, [...] young woman, who loves her love because he is grand, - to her eyes, - and loving him, loves him with all her heart"¹³⁹.

The critic Robert Bell shares a similar idea to Trollope's, underlining Amelia's diversity from any other female character of the story. He defines our heroine as the only woman in the novel from which one should not stay away:

With the exception of poor Amelia, whose lustre shines out so gently in the midst of these harpies, there is scarcely a woman in *Vanity Fair* from whom we should not shrink in private life as from a contagion. And poor Amelia goes but a short way to purify the foul atmosphere¹⁴⁰.

Yet as Bell underlines, Thackeray did not make her perfect, because by giving her a heart capable of pure love, he took away her ability to live independently and

¹³⁷ C. Peters, *Thackeray, a Writer's Life*, cit., p. 157.

¹³⁸ Cf. A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 105.

¹³⁹ Ibidem, p 104-105.

¹⁴⁰ R. Bell, *Review*, "Fraser's Magazine", September 1848, now in A. Pollard, ed, *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. pp. 28-29, p. 29.

above all to make decisions: “The author has given her a heart, but no understanding. If he has made her patient and good, loving, trusting, enduring, he has also made her a fool”¹⁴¹.

From the constant confrontation to which Becky and Amelia are submitted, the critic G. K. Chesterton affirms that is possible to obtain the chief truth of *Vanity Fair*, that in his own words “most of the critics have missed”. In his opinion by comparing the failure of both heroines, so different from one another, this truth emerges:

The simpler, more innocent and more bewildered person is still capable of settling down into some sort of consolation and contentment; whereas she who has hardened herself against scandal and remorse has also hardened herself against hope¹⁴².

Dorothy Von Ghent’s opinion differs: if a complex character such as Becky is the depiction of the predominant morality of the 19th century then there is no room for a character as Amelia who is an inadequate representation of morality¹⁴³. Because while the former represents a society that is full of vices, the latter represents a kind of morality that has become inadequate.

¹⁴¹ *Ivi.*

¹⁴² G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction to Vanity Fair*, cit. p. 61.

¹⁴³ D. Van Ghent, *The “Omniscient Author” Convention and the “Composition centre” Function*, cit. p. 118.

3.3 – *Dobbin: the Ancient Hero in the 19th Century*

The next character is Captain Dobbin, who, in *Vanity Fair*, is considered as a viable candidate for the role of “ancient hero”. Although Becky and Amelia are usually considered as the heroines of the story, Dobbin finds himself in an ambiguous position. The Captain can be considered as an incomplete representation of the “ancient hero”. Although he is a hero through and through, he is not seen as one of the main characters in the novel by all the critics of *Vanity Fair*. Trollope, in particular, compares Dobbin to Rawdon, considering the former as a good hero and the latter as a bad hero due to their characteristics¹⁴⁴. Dobbin is the prototype of the hero. He possesses characteristics like temperance, honour, patience and pure love and the only thing he and Rawdon have in common is the pure love for their loved ones. Of all the critics who have researched *Vanity Fair*, Trollope is the one who has dedicated more time to the analysis of Captain Dobbin.

In his opinion the two stories that are woven together to form the novel are not, as many believe, those of Amelia and Rebecca, but that of Rebecca and Dobbin, presenting the life and adventures of the former and “the troubles and ultimate success of our noble hero Captain Dobbin”¹⁴⁵.

As many critics before and after him, Trollope analyses the subtitle of the novel and states that because Thackeray specifically declared in the title that *Vanity Fair* is a novel without a hero, we, as readers have no right to complain, especially about the absence of heroism within the novel and in any male character in particular. Yet in his opinion it is possible to find a hero within the story, Captain

¹⁴⁴ Cf. A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p. 97.

¹⁴⁵ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p. 98.

Dobbin, who although he has many of the characteristics that distinguish him as a hero, is also deficient¹⁴⁶. Forster shares Trollope's opinion; he states that "The hero, (for after all there is a hero in the novel), Dobbin..."¹⁴⁷, although is too elaborate and provides insignificant details, it is in truth a portrait of a "noble yet awkward affection", of "unobtrusive talent" and of "uncompromising integrity"¹⁴⁸. In fact, in Theodore Martin's opinion Dobbin is "the only thoroughly excellent and lovable character in the book, so ungainly as to be all but objectionable"¹⁴⁹. This is demonstrated to be especially true by Trollope, who, regarding the matter of affection, states: "He had nothing to get for himself, but loving her as he did, it was the work of his life to get for her all that she wanted"¹⁵⁰.

Yet, "seeing that the love of Dobbin for Amelia is the finest delineation of pure and unselfish devotion in the opposite sex"¹⁵¹ makes it ever more vexatious and sadder that "even Dobbin has found his ennobling dream of devotion to be weariness and a vanity"¹⁵². In fact, this can be considered Dobbin's main defect. While he is described as a bold man, without fear on the battlefield, he is unable to feel the same ardour and fearlessness in love matters and to take initiative after George's death, and declare his love for Amelia, or, on the contrary, he is unable to let go of a love that is constantly hidden. This is what makes him an incomplete "ancient hero".

¹⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁷ J. Forster, *Review*, "The Examiner", cit. p. 55.

¹⁴⁸ *Ivi*.

¹⁴⁹ T. Martin, *Review*, "Westminster Review", April 1853, now in A. Pollard, ed, *Thackeray: Vanity Fair*, cit. pp. 32-33 p. 32.

¹⁵⁰ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p. 106.

¹⁵¹ T. Martin, *Review*, "Westminster Review", cit. p. 32.

¹⁵² *Ivi*.

3.4 – *Rawdon: the Modern Hero*

Another character that can be considered as part of the main characters of the novel is Rawdon Crawley. His moment of greatest importance is generally identified by the critics with the single scene in which he discovers Becky's betrayal with Lord Steyne. Trollope is almost the only critic who has something of importance to say regarding this character. In his opinion, although *Vanity Fair* is declared by the author as a "novel without a hero", one of Rawdon's main tasks is to be compared to Dobbin and to play the part of the antihero. In fact, if we can consider Dobbin as the good hero, then Rawdon would be the bad hero¹⁵³. While, as has been previously described, Dobbin is the incarnation of the "ancient hero", even though imperfect, Rawdon presents a series of behaviours that define him as a different kind of hero: he gambles, tricks others, lives a life of luxury without possessing the means to pay for it, he duels and although bad, he remains a hero in the eyes of the readers. Although Rawdon is labelled by the critics as a bad hero, he cannot be considered as a completely bad person, at least from a modern point of view, because he dearly loves his wife and child, readily giving them everything he possesses. He is capable to rise to the occasion and be a hero even if momentarily and in predetermined circumstances. This is true in the scene where Rawdon as a character has come to outlive his importance for the plot of the story:

Rawdon Crawley is not a very lofty character; he frequently comes before us in a position not even respectable; but when he is defending his honour against the

¹⁵³ Cf. A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p. 97.

old sybarite Lord Steyne, he rises with the occasion: even the guilty wife is forced to admire her husband, as he stands ‘strong, brave, and victorious’.¹⁵⁴

Trollope believes that Becky and Rawdon are the real heroine and hero of the novel, Thackeray wishes for the readers to focus on them. Trollope states: “It is with them that the reader is called upon to interest himself. It is of them that he will think when he is reading the book. It is by them that he will judge the book when he has read it”¹⁵⁵.

3.5 – George: True Citizen of Vanity Fair

Then there is George Osborne. Although he is present only in the first half of the novel, his importance is paramount in the plot of the story. His role is somewhat simple, but the effects of his death are protracted till almost the end of the novel. Just like Rawdon the critics have not said much about him, probably due to his cut-clear role. Unlike him he is not a hero, at least not for the readers. Yet Dyson defined him as a hero by stating:

Though George Osborne is far from being a hero in the romantic sense, he is regarded as such by Amelia. She worships the ground he treads on, making him the excuse for increasingly serious moral evasions of her own¹⁵⁶.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 93.

¹⁵⁵ *Ivi.*

¹⁵⁶ A. E. Dyson, *An Irony against Heroes*, cit., p. 11.

And yet he is described by Trollope as “a poor kind of fellow”, that “though he is a brave soldier. He thinks much of his own person and is selfish”¹⁵⁷.

So, George, just like Rawdon, although being considered one of the main characters, is the only one who does not possess the characteristics required to distinguish him, in a way or another, among the common folk of the novel and elevate him to the status of hero, good or bad. On the contrary he can be considered as being a true citizen of *Vanity Fair*.

3.6 – Thackeray’s Notion of a Hero

This last chapter is devoted to the understanding of Thackeray’s personal ideas about the characters he created, especially the heroes and heroines of the novel. To do so, various extracts from *Vanity Fair* will be discussed, in which the author’s thoughts, expressed through the narrator and characters emerge. The letters to his mother in which he freely expresses and explains some of his feelings about the novel and the characters provide additional information. In one of his letters he expresses his most honest opinion:

Of course you are quite right about *Vanity Fair* and Amelia being selfish – [...]. My objective is not to make a perfect character or anything like it. Don’t you see how odious all the people are in the book (with exception of Dobbin) – behind whom all there lies a dark moral I hope¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁷ A. Trollope, *Thackeray*, cit., p 105.

¹⁵⁸ W. M Thackeray., Letter to his mother Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, 2 July 1847, now in A. Pollard (ed.) *Thackeray. Vanity Fair*, London, Macmillan, 1978, pp. 33-34. p. 33.

Firstly, it is important to understand his view on Becky. Being at the centre of the novel, the relationship between Becky and Amelia has always been the object of debate among critics, because they were uncertain whether Amelia could really be considered her friend or her rival. Throughout the novel Rebecca's reactions when she encounters Amelia give us clues: "Rebecca took such a tender leave of Amelia as became two women who loved each other as sisters [...]"¹⁵⁹. Another clue is, for example, the description the narrator gives of Rebecca after they had quarrelled because of George's interest in Becky the night before the men's departure to war. In this description, the narrator defines Rebecca as "good-natured" and of "obliging disposition", in particular he underlines that Rebecca liked Amelia rather than the contrary, giving as proof the small weight that Rebecca gave to Amelia's words in such an occasion: "Even her hard words, reproachful as they were, were complementary – the groans of a person sitting in defeat"¹⁶⁰. There is yet another scene that confirms this hypothesis, in which Rebecca speaks to herself about Amelia and knows that she could destroy her mentally, but does not:

"Poor wretch," she said, twirling round the little bit of paper in her finger, "how could I crush her with this! – And it is for a thing like this that she must break her heart, forsooth – for a man who is stupid – a coxcomb – and who does not care for her!"¹⁶¹

Except for this well-known confrontation it is possible to see many other sides of the complex character Rebecca represents. In fact, Becky is often depicted as full of wit, cleverness, and flippancy that assured her rise in London's society among a

¹⁵⁹ Thackeray W. M., *Vanity Fair*, cit., Chapter XXV, p.288.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem, Chapter XXXI, p.355.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, Chapter XXXII, pp. 371- 372.

certain class¹⁶². Moreover, she has the great ability to attract attention at social events and to make sure she benefits from her appearance: “In the midst of the great persons assembled, and the eyeglasses directed to her, Rebecca seemed to be as cool and collected as when she used to marshal Miss Pinkerton’s little girls to church”¹⁶³. In other occasions, such as the departure of her husband for the war, the great emotional resilience and absence of emotions are visible and define this great character:

Knowing how useless regrets are, and how the indulgence of sentiment only serves to make people more miserable, Mrs Rebecca wisely determined to give way to no vain feeling of sorrow, and bore the parting from her husband with quite a Spartan equanimity¹⁶⁴.

And Rebecca, as we said, wisely determined not to give way to unavailing sentimentality on her husband’s departure. She waved him an adieu from the window, and stood there for a moment looking out after he was gone¹⁶⁵.

Until now only the positive aspects of Becky have been shown, however she is best known as a character with an antihero behaviour. Such attitude, especially the feeling of triumph and her calculative mind are shown when she counts the money she possesses during the war, coming to calculate and daydream even about how much she could profit in the case of her husband death:

¹⁶² Cf. *Ibidem*, Chapter XXXVII, p. 432.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*, Chapter XXIX, pp. 329.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, Chapter XXX, p. 336.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, Chapter XXX, p. 339.

Every calculation made of these valuables, Mrs Rebecca found, not without a pungent feeling of triumph, and self-satisfaction, that should circumstances occur [...] And she passed the morning disposing, ordering looking out, and locking up her properties in the most agreeable manner¹⁶⁶.

And then she fell to thinking what she should do if – if anything happened to poor good Rawdon, and what a great piece of luck it was that he had left his horse behind¹⁶⁷.

Thackeray eventually seems to consider the possibility that Becky might obtain the same results using a different approach, one without all her lies and calculations:

It may, perhaps, have struck her that to have been honest and humble, to have done her duty, and to have marched straightforward on her way, would have brought her as near happiness as that path by which she was striving to attain it¹⁶⁸.

So, as said Becky is an extremely complex character, considered by many as the real heroine of the novel, despite her antihero behaviour, but more importantly through these extracts we can come closer to understanding Thackeray's point of view on her. The author put much effort in creating this character and he considers her someone whose method is disagreeable yet does not mean any real harm to anyone. All she wants is to be recognised, not for her birth conditions, but for her abilities. Thackeray himself states that maybe she could have undertaken a different

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem, Chapter XXX, p. 340.

¹⁶⁷ Ibidem, Chapter XXXII, p. 372.

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem, Chapter XLI, p. 491.

path and could have been different, but even she does not want to lose the only real friends she has ever had despite all her calculative schemes.

Next, we need to understand Thackeray's opinion on Amelia. In the letter to his mother the author underlines how she possesses a quality "above most people whizz: love"¹⁶⁹ that makes her unique.

Within the novel one of the first thing that the readers are able to understand is underlined by Thackeray in the first part of the book: Amelia is not a heroine¹⁷⁰.

In fact, she usually lives recollecting the happy moments she had in the past and constantly daydreaming about them, especially when the subject of such dreams is George Osborne¹⁷¹.

Amelia is also extremely susceptible and emotional, she can be considered to be too sensitive and although this peculiarity can be considered as one of her positive aspects, it makes her appear silly and often devoid of any strong will:

But our little Amelia was just on the bank of her new country, and was already looking anxiously back towards the sad friendly figures waving farewell to her across the steam from the other distant shore¹⁷².

[...] here was the lot of our poor little creature and harmless lost wanderer in the great struggling crowds of Vanity Fair¹⁷³.

Thackeray's opinion of Amelia can be seen in two of the strong points he gave her. The first is love. She is the only character who firmly believes in love, and that

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem, Chapter XII, p. 131.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Ibidem, Chapter XIII, p. 143.

¹⁷¹ Cf. *Ivi*.

¹⁷² Ibidem, Chapter XXVI, p.297.

¹⁷³ Ibidem, Chapter XXVI, p.298.

makes her seem vulnerable: “Love had been her faith hitherto, and the sad, bleeding, disappointed heart began to feel the want of another consoler”¹⁷⁴.

Her other strong point is her ability to enchant everyone effortlessly without realizing it:

Her simple, artless behaviour, and modest kindness of demeanour, won all their sophisticated hearts; all which simplicity and sweetness are quite impossible to describe in print¹⁷⁵.

I think it was her weakness which was her principal charm – a kind of sweet submission and softness, which seemed to appeal to each man she met for his sympathy and protection¹⁷⁶.

Amelia is in clear contrast with the artifices and efforts Rebecca uses to obtain the same results. Thackeray often uses the narrator to give information about the characters, even though they are sometimes unreliable. He defines Amelia to be too happy for her own good, because happiness and love blinded her from fears and doubts, especially against her beloved George¹⁷⁷. Thackeray believes Amelia is a lovable young girl whose simplicity warms the heart of anyone she encounters, yet this same quality forces her to rely on others for everything: sustain, guidance and love. In fact, Thackeray, by making use of the narrative voice, describes her future: “The future, had she regarded it, offered a dismal prospect; but Emmy was too shy, so to speak, to look to that, and embark alone on that wide sea, and unfit to navigate it without a guide and protector”¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem, Chapter XXVI, p.298.

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem, Chapter XXVII, p.304.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, Chapter XXXVIII, p. 450.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Ibidem, Chapter XX, pp. 229-230.

¹⁷⁸ Ibidem, Chapter XXV, p. 278.

Now it is time to confront Thackeray's idea of the character that has been often defined as the hero of the novel. From the author's letter to his mother it is clear what he thinks of Dobbin: "Dobbin & poor Brigs are the only 2 people with real humility as yet"¹⁷⁹. Although this statement defines the essence of "our noble Captain", it is just the tip of the iceberg. The fact that he is so close to the definition of the ancient hero, makes him completely unaffected by Becky's tactics and moreover he "shrank from her with instinctive repulsion"¹⁸⁰. Yet sometimes his heroic disposition is exactly what puts him in awkward positions painful for him:

Without knowing how, Captain William Dobbin found himself the great promoter, arranger, and manager of the match between George Osborne and Amelia. But for him it never would have taken place. He could not but confess as much to himself, and smiled rather bitterly as he thought that he of all men in the world should be the person upon whom the care of this marriage had fallen¹⁸¹.

Specifically, it is the missing piece that makes him the imperfect form of an ancient hero and that makes his weaknesses more apparent to the readers: the complete absence of will to fight for what he loves. Dobbin is nonetheless a man full of resources, especially when it comes to Amelia, although he is in love with her. He does all he can to assure her marriage to George, even trying to manipulate others: "So, this Machiavellian captain of infantry cast about him for some happy means or

¹⁷⁹ W. M Thackeray, letter to his mother Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, cit., p. 33.

¹⁸⁰ W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, cit., Chapter XXVI, p. 274.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem, Chapter XX, p. 220.

stratagem by which he could gently and gradually bring the Misses Osborne to a knowledge of their brother's secret¹⁸²”.

So, in Thackeray's eyes Dobbin is the representation of the virtues of the ancient hero that although they find their place in a modern society, they do not fit perfectly. Dobbin is indeed a hero in Thackeray's opinion but not a perfect one. He is a man, who loses his way when in love:

Conducted to the ladies, at the Ship Inn, Dobbin assumed a jovial and rattling manner, which proved that this young officer was becoming a more consummate hypocrite every day of his life. He was trying to hide his own private feelings, first upon seeing Mrs George Osborne in her new condition, and secondly to mask the apprehensions he entertained as to the effect which the dismal news brought down by him certainly have upon her¹⁸³.

Thackeray describes George Osborne as a villain, a perfect inhabitant of *Vanity Fair*. George has many qualities, yet none of them are positive. Through the thoughts of two of his comrades Thackeray clearly underlines an aspect of George's personality: his personal search for beauty, especially in the form of women: “Stubble and Spooner thought that to be a “regular don Giovanni”, by Jove, was one of the finest qualities a man could possess; and Osborne's reputation was prodigious amongst the young men of the regiment”¹⁸⁴.

Another characteristic of this character is his vanity, which makes him selfish. Such selfishness is well expressed in many different occasions, the first in which he prefers to buy an ornament for himself rather than make a present to his fiancée:

¹⁸² Ibidem, Chapter XXIII, p. 252.

¹⁸³ Ibidem, Chapter XXV, p. 273.

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem, Chapter XIII, p. 132.

And I dare say he would have bought something very handsome for Amelia, only, getting off the coach in Fleet Street, he was attracted by a handsome shirt-pin in a jeweller's window, which he could not resist; and having paid for that, had very little money to spare for indulging in any further exercise of kindness¹⁸⁵.

On another occasion his selfishness becomes even more profound, because in Amelia: "He saw a slave before him in that simple, yielding, faithful creature, and his soul within him thrilled secretly somehow at the knowledge of his power"¹⁸⁶.

The last of George's "qualities" that Thackeray underlines through the narrator is his lack of love or anything that resembles feelings. To do so the author uses the character's own actions in giving Amelia the news of his call to arms abroad:

George was too humane or too much occupied with the tie of his neckcloth to convey at once all the news to Amelia which comrade had brought with him from London. He came into her room, however, holding the attorney's letter in his hand, and with so solemn and important an air that his wife, always ingeniously on the watch for calamities, thought the worst was to befall, and running up to her husband [...]¹⁸⁷.

Finally, let's analyse Thackeray's opinion of Rawdon Crawley. As stated previously this character has been defined by some critics as a hero in a more

¹⁸⁵ Ibidem, Chapter XIII, p. 136.

¹⁸⁶ Ibidem, Chapter XX, p. 220.

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem, Chapter XXV, pp. 279-280.

modern sense. In the author's opinion Captain Rawdon is indeed a citizen of Vanity Fair because of his selfish demeanour that is often demonstrated:

Rawdon Crawley , on the other hand, like a selfish heavy dragoon as he was, never took the least trouble to conciliate his aunt's aides-de-camp – showed his contempt for the pair with entire frankness – made Firkin pull off his boots on one occasion, sent her out in the rain on ignominious messages, and if he gave her a guinea, flung it to her as if it were a box on the ear¹⁸⁸.

This selfishness differs from that of George because it is applied only to people he doesn't like. Although his behaviour is not heroic, because of gambling, duels and unpaid bills, he is a honest man to those he loves. Such a quality is described by the narrator when his marriage is mentioned: "It seems to me, for my part, that Mr Rawdon's marriage was one of the honestest actions which we shall have to record in any portion of that gentleman's biography which has to do with the present history"¹⁸⁹. The traits that Rawdon share with the ancient hero are those of military prowess and love, in fact at the time of departure for the war: "Captain Rawson himself was much more affected at the leave-taking than the resolute little woman to whom he bade farewell"¹⁹⁰.

Yet there is a characteristic of Rawdon's that Thackeray wishes to underline, his faithfulness to the point of appearing stupid: "He believed in his wife as much as the French soldiers in Napoleon. [...] Her husband was stupid certainly – all English are stupid – and, besides, a dull husband at Paris is always a point in a lady's

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem, Chapter XIX, p. 209.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem, Chapter XVI, p. 175.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem, Chapter XXX, p. 336.

favour”¹⁹¹. To conclude Thackeray’s idea of Rawdon is that of the prototype of the modern man, who, although possessing many flaws, is somewhat honest and brave necessary and is always ready to act for his loved one, without ever losing faith in them up to the point of making a fool of himself.

¹⁹¹ Ibidem, Chapter XXXIV, pp. 402-403.

Conclusions

With his aim in *Vanity Fair* to deconstruct heroism, Thackeray gave his contemporaries a revolutionary way to create and to give characters more life-like qualities. In this way not only did his characters acquire more life-like qualities but they also obtained a depth uncommon for the characters of the time. In *Vanity Fair* the use of the canons that distinguished the “ancient hero” was demolished. Even Captain Dobbin, the only character that more or less respects such canons, is imperfect and contaminated by a more modern approach to life. The “ancient hero” was the personification of the best qualities of man, such as prowess in battle for the classic hero, temperance, fealty and magnanimity for the medieval one, depending on the time in which the work was written or set. Thackeray’s grey character is imperfect, lacking, and no longer represents the idealization of man’s best qualities but represents common people in all their splendour and ugliness.

This new grey hero has inner demons, can be defeated and more importantly no longer represents the canons to which every man or woman should aspire to, but it suddenly becomes equal in status to the readers. He became just like any other person without anything exceptional but his or her ability to make use of the situation to gain something. So, the “grey” characters are in a moral grey zone which grants to the writer the liberty to give antihero’s behaviour to the main characters of a story. Critics have shown that it is due to the creation and extensive use of the grey character in *Vanity Fair* that Thackeray can be considered as one of the founders of the modern novel. In fact, since his time the use of grey characters, especially of “grey heroes”, has spread and has made the genre of the novel as we know it today. At the same time, it opened the path to adaptations of the figure of the hero,

transforming him into what we perceive it to be today. Another merit that can be attributed to Thackeray, thanks to *Vanity Fair*, is the input that he gave to the creation of the feminist movement. In fact, the 19th century was a time in which, among other great changes, women started to acquire more self-awareness of their worth. Thackeray, by using heroines in *Vanity Fair*, showed how women were expected to behave and compared them to the new possibilities and to the freedom they could gain, giving them a push toward the creation of the feminist movement.

So, the 19th century can be considered as a great turning point for the genre of the novel, because then it underwent great changes. This period is especially characterized by the discovery and use of life-like qualities applied to the novels. Sir Walter Scott was among the first writers of this period who made use of these new features in his works, in fact with it he created the sub-genre of the historical novel. Yet as argued in this dissertation, Thackeray made great contributions to the development of the genre of the novel. Not only did he introduce middling or “grey” characters, but he also created a novel which contains many of the sub-genres originated in the Victorian Period.

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