William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*:
The portrayal of Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley
I realize that a good dissertation is the result of great patience and several revisions. On that account I want to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. M. Demoor who advised and assisted me with constructive criticism. I would also like to thank my family and friends who encouraged and supported me these last few months.
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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**  

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INTRODUCTION
**Vanity Fair** is probably the best known novel by William Makepeace Thackeray. In this work he portrays ‘an upper-class Regency world’\(^1\) situated in the first half of the nineteenth century. He describes this society as a fair of vanities where greed, selfishness and materialism rule. The narrator is of great importance in this work, since he guides the readers throughout the story and provides all sorts of comments. The comments elucidate Thackeray’s intentions: to criticize humanity’s vanity. In his view ‘(...)', we are for the most part an abominably foolish and selfish people ‘desperately wicked’ and all eager after vanities.'\(^2\) This does not mean that Thackeray holds a very negative view on mankind, but he prefers to focus on our human imperfections. Blodgett writes that:

‘The narrator is not ambivalent towards his characters (whose individual worth he has correctly estimated). But he is aware of multiple wrongs and therefore compassionate in his appraisals. He proposes to effect the same awareness in his readers, who also must both judge and judge not.'\(^3\)

In this way the narrator functions as a social critic, ridiculising whatever he dislikes. Harriet Blodgett\(^4\) is therefore right when she claims that despite the characters’ responsibility for their deeds, it is society which is corrupt in *Vanity Fair* and that influences its members in a negative way.

Thackeray was born into British high society; his father was a high-ranking official in service of the East India Company. Greig wrote that ‘he [Thackeray] grew up in the belief that he would always be comfortable, and with rather lordly views on the value of a guinea.’\(^5\) But by 1833 he had squandered most of his fortune. His passion for gambling and the Indian banking crisis of 1830-34 are the most important reasons for the loss of his riches. When

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\(^1\) This term is used by Robert Mathias, who was responsible for the Cover Design of the 2001 edition of *Vanity Fair – A Novel without a Hero*, published by Wordsworth Editions Limited, at the back flap of the novel.


Thackeray lost his comfortable fortune, he lost the benefits and comforts which his money had provided him with. Harry Shaw believes that these experiences provided Thackeray with the necessary insight and knowledge to create *Vanity Fair*:

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) was in many respects well situated to give a picture of the middle and upper classes in nineteenth-century England. Socially, he was both an insider and an outsider, which gave him both knowledge of and distance from the society he portrayed.  

The loss of his fortune forced William Thackeray to look for an occupation and an income, so he turned to writing. Ioan Williams writes that ‘between 1830 and 1844, (...) Thackeray contributed articles, reviews, sketches and stories to over twenty-four newspapers, magazines and periodicals.’ He even owned a magazine called *Journal of Literature, Science, Music and the Fine Arts* and more than once fulfilled the function of editor. Thackeray had not always been a writer. In fact he had had difficulties in finding a suitable occupation. He tried various educations, but never managed to complete one. In 1829 he went to Cambridge University, but only to set off again the following year. After leaving Cambridge, William paid several visits to the continent, exploring Germany and Paris. In Germany he started writing short pieces, which he contributed to Ottilie von Goethe’s magazine. When he returned from Germany, he started studying law, but did not see it through. Thereupon he went to Paris, where he tried bill broking as a profession. After a short period in London, William eventually settled in Paris, where he tried his luck at studying art. Despite his inability to decide which profession would be the right one for him, Thackeray showed interest in writing all along and slowly he developed his literary qualities.

It was not until January 1847 that Thackeray started publishing *Vanity Fair* in *Punch* magazine. From that point on ‘(...) the novel appeared in regular monthly numbers containing three or four chapters until the last double number in July 1848.’ Jones and Knowles write

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9 Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 15.

10 Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 57.
that Thackeray was ‘a relatively little known author’ when he started publishing it. William did not only provide *Punch* magazine with the story, he also drew the accompanying illustrations. Although the first chapters did not appear until January 1847, they had been written years before. In 1844 Thackeray started to write on the subject and entitled the result ‘Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society’. Thackeray did not finish this; according to Shaw he ‘dropped it in favour of other projects’. In 1846 he took a new look at his ‘Pen and Pencil Sketches’, made some improvements to them and found a publisher. Initially the title of ‘Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society’ was maintained. Jones and Knowles point out how this title ‘suggested a work of loosely connected sketches in the typical *Punch* satiric manner’ and how this might have resulted in the fact that the writings were no immediate success. As Thackeray’s chapters grew out to be a coherent story, the previous title could not be maintained, and *Vanity Fair* became the new title. The novel was a success. *Vanity Fair* already appeared in book form in 1848 and received the subtitle *A Novel without a Hero.*

Although the novel counts many characters, the second part of the title warns the readers that they will not find the usual hero in here. Almost every character in *Vanity Fair* has human failings. The narrator himself also points out that no hero will be described:

All which details, I have no doubt, JONES, who reads this book at his Club, will pronounce to be excessively foolish, trivial, twaddling, and ultrasentimental. Yes; I can see Jones at this minute (rather flushed with his joint of mutton and half-pint of wine) taking out his pencil and scorning under the words ‘foolish, twaddling’, etc., and adding to them his own remark of ‘quite true’. Well, he is a lofty man of genius, and admires the great and heroic in life and novels; and so had better take warning and go elsewhere.

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Thackeray wants to describe real people, no romantic heroes or other fictional characters. He is concerned with the importance of realistic representation in his novel, as appears from the following excerpt from a letter of his:

(…) the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality – in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically; but in a drawingroom drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics.16

This explains why William does not portray fantastic heroes, but depicts characters with human imperfections. He creates Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley as the basic principles for his analysis of society in *Vanity Fair*. Through them, the reader is introduced to many other characters belonging to this immoral world. These two women are more or less described as opposites; Rebecca is a clever and cunning woman, while Amelia is a rather naïve and sensitive person. Nevertheless we need to say that Thackeray does not describe both women because they are so different, but rather because they represent two different ways of being vain, as Williams explains:

(…) the contrast results, for the most part, in showing us two ways of being ‘vain’ (in the biblical sense of ‘futile’ or ‘worthless’). (…) The difference between Amelia and Becky is not that between a good woman and a bad but that between a selfishly good one and a selfishly bad.’17

During my reading of *Vanity Fair*, I became fascinated with the character of Rebecca Sharp. She is such a versatile and strong character with a zest for living that she easily attracts the reader’s attention. She knows exactly what she wants from life and she makes sure that she will get whatever she wishes for. Despite her vices, she is such an appealing character that one might wonder why Thackeray even bothered to portray a second protagonist, being Amelia Sedley. In this dissertation I will investigate how Thackeray portrayed these two women and discuss their importance in the larger context of the novel.


I. REBECCA SHARP
INTRODUCTION

Carole Jones and Owen Knowles\(^1\) observe that ‘the reader’s pilgrimage\(^2\) through Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* is largely conducted along two parallel but contrasting routes, those taken by Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp.’ Initially, the lives of these two women are related to one and other and dealt with simultaneously, but gradually their paths separate and the development of two alternating plotlines becomes evident. Despite the structural analogy of the stories, a striking difference can be noticed between its main performers. The contrast does not only exist in the nature of the characters, the difference between their position in society is emphasized as well; Amelia is a good natured merchant’s daughter, whereas Becky is a strong willed orphan. Initially, this might give the impression that the author is simply highlighting a straightforward contrast between a poor and a rich girl, or a good and a bad one, which would allow the author to provide his audience with a traditional moral. Owen and Knowles\(^3\) explain how ‘many readers of 1848 were inclined to regard the novel as having a simple moral design’;

In Amelia they [critics and readers] could easily find a blueprint of the conventionally middle-class ‘Angel in the House’\(^4\), whose credentials include her infinite capacity for self-sacrifice, commitment to home and family, and decorous anonymity. By reference to such a revered domestic norm, only one judgement was possible concerning the novel’s other female protagonist: Becky Sharp was Amelia’s moral opposite.

Thackeray’s female protagonists can be identified as two different traditional prototypes of characters. In this view Amelia renders the character of the virtuous woman, who confines

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\(^2\) The title of *Vanity Fair* is based on John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. It is a religious allegory about a pilgrimage to the Celestial City. If the pilgrims want to reach their destination, they have to resist the temptations of Vanity Fair.

\(^3\) Carole Jones and Owen Knowles, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.

herself to the domestic sphere. And Rebecca, by contrast represents the ‘adventuress’ who looks for fame and fortune, ‘foolishly moving beyond her proper sphere’. Nevertheless, there is more to the characters than there appears to be at first sight. The readers will discover that Thackeray does not want to make a distinction between right and wrong, but rather between two ways of being selfish. Ioan Williams even claims that the novel discourages its readers ‘to make a straightforward qualitative contrast between the two ‘heroines’. Little by little, the author expresses his contempt for Amelia, no longer allowing her to fulfil the part of the ideal Victorian wife. Owen and Knowles claim that the author shows ‘a decided impatience with the very basis of the conception of the ‘Angel in the House’. Furthermore, Thackeray even dares to show some sympathy for Rebecca Sharp, describing her as the product of the hypocritical and vain society in which she lives. Therefore Harriet Blodgett is right when she claims that ‘although the characters are undeniably responsible for their personal misdeeds, society supplied the corrupting worldly atmosphere.’ Owen and Knowles point out how Rebecca’s behaviour can be understood as a measure of survival:

With striking speed, she [Rebecca] soon grows to realise what the novel as a whole provocatively tends to endorse, that her society is fundamentally Darwinian in its operation: capital domination resides with a powerful patriarchy; the stronger or more adaptable animals survive at the expense of the weaker; there is a glaring chasm between the haves and have-nots. This being the case, the burning question for Becky is how, as a social orphan without obvious credentials, she will survive in an unwelcoming world.

But this does not prevent Thackeray to formulate a very negative view on Becky; she is presented as one of the most selfish figures in this novel. Thackeray does not represent his characters as ideal and thus deprives his audience of the possibility to make a straightforward distinction between the two female protagonists; neither Amelia, nor Rebecca is completely good or bad.

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I will look in more detail at the female protagonists and analyse how Thackeray portrays them, starting with the character of Rebecca Sharp. I will investigate how the author makes use of a number of themes which help develop her character.
PEDIGREE

The difference between social classes is an important topic in *Vanity Fair*. The Victorian era was characterised by industrial growth, which brought along a new generation of rich people, the so-called ‘new gentry’. The rise of this new class confirms that social stratification was an important topic in the nineteenth century. There was a very large distance between the poor and the rich, and in between there were several intermediate classes. In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray gives an insight into how the more powerful circles aspire to distinguish themselves from the common people. He emphasizes the importance of pedigree in this world full of vanities. Birth and fortune are means to distinguish oneself from ordinary individuals. Thackeray describes elaborately how this affects his female protagonists; Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley. The novel also demonstrates how shallow the conquest for reputation is; it is difficult to obtain and very easy to lose. Tameca Jones correctly says that in the end there is no guarantee for fulfilment or happiness. Yet, for Rebecca Sharp, there is nothing more important in life. ‘She was driven by her overriding ambition to pursue wealth and social position by any method in her power.’

Rebecca Sharp was born into one of the lowest social classes. Her parents were impoverished artists and their professions were not considered respectable. Her father was an artist who gave drawing lessons at Miss Pinkerton’s Academy. He is described as a disillusioned individual with a fondness for liquor:

He was a clever man, a pleasant companion, a careless student; with a great propensity for running into debt, and a partiality for the tavern. When he was drunk, he used to beat his wife and daughter; and the next morning, with a headache, he would rail at the world for its neglect of his genius, and abuse, with a good deal of cleverness, and sometimes with perfect reason, the fools, his brother painters.

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Her mother was a French opera-girl who had received ‘some education somewhere’.\textsuperscript{15} This ‘profession’ was associated with moral corruption and contrasted sharply with the ideal image to which women were expected to live up. Despite the fact that her mother practised a profession unworthy of a lady, Becky only referred to her as the descendant of a prominent family:

> The humble calling of her female parent Miss Sharp never alluded to, but used to state subsequently that the Entrechats were a noble family of Gascony, and took great pride in her descent from them. And curious it is, that as she advanced in life this young lady’s ancestors increased in rank and splendour.\textsuperscript{16}

Rebecca deliberately withheld the details about her mother’s disreputable profession because its exposure would degrade her even more; she would be considered immoral and this would make it quite impossible for her to rise into society.

When her mother died, her father begged Miss Pinkerton to take care of Becky if anything should happen to him. When Rebecca’s father died as well, Miss Pinkerton took the girl into her school, but only because she could gain by it; Rebecca spoke French with ‘purity and a Parisian accent’\textsuperscript{17}, a rare quality in those days and the main reason for her stay at Chiswick Mall. She became an articled pupil, teaching young ladies French.

> It was in this Academy that Rebecca was confronted with young ladies born into high society, before this ‘she had never mingled in the society of women’.\textsuperscript{18} It became clear to her that she was treated as a lesser person and she realised that her situation did not look very bright; she was a penniless orphan in a society which judged its inhabitants by their income. Envious as she was, Rebecca felt as if injustice was done to her; many of those wealthy girls did not possess half the qualities and skills she did, nevertheless they were treated as ladies and she was not. She felt wronged, but was strong-willed and determined to claim a position where she would receive everyone’s admiration:

\textsuperscript{15} VF., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{16} VF., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{17} VF., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{18} VF., p. 13.
The happiness, the superior advantages of the young women round about her, gave Rebecca inexpressible pangs of envy. ‘What airs that girl gives herself, because she’s an earl’s granddaughter!’ she said of one. ‘How they cringe and bow to that Creole, because of her hundred thousand pounds! I am a thousand times cleverer and more charming than that creature, for all her wealth. I am as well-bred as the earl’s granddaughter, for all her fine pedigree; and yet everyone passes me by here. And yet, when I was at my father’s, did not the men give up their gayest balls and parties in order to pass the evening with me?’ She determined at any rate to get free from the prison in which she found herself, and now began to act for herself, and for the first time to make connected plans for the future.  

This was the beginning of Rebecca’s struggle for status. The only option for her to become a member of the upper class was to marry someone with money: ‘Thus it was that our little romantic friend formed visions of the future for herself, - nor must we be scandalised that, in all her castles in the air, a husband was the principal inhabitant.’ She knew that this would not be an easy task, since she had no money at all and came from a disreputable family. Thackeray employed this label of Rebecca as the aggrieved party in order to rouse a certain degree of compassion in his readers. It also serves to establish some kind of admiration for her perseverance, since Miss Sharp would experience a lot of counteraction from snobs who considered her an intruder of their precious surroundings during her pursuit of vanity. Some of them would sense what she was up to and would try to prevent it. She would have to rely on her wits and charms to get what she wants.

19 VF., p. 13.

20 VF., p. 79.
Dorothy Compton\textsuperscript{21} describes how the Victorians were obsessed by physical appearance; ‘To the Victorians, a face and figure could reveal the inner thoughts and emotions of the individual as reliably as clothing indicated his occupation.’ She also observes that ‘In the Victorian novel, physical appearance was a primary means of characterization.’ and that ‘A hero or heroine's beauty (or lack thereof) was probably the most important aspect of his or her character.’ In \textit{Vanity Fair} Thackeray does pay a lot of attention to his character’s appearance, but the characterization in this novel does not only rely on these descriptions. He pays attention to his characters’ inner thoughts as well. Compton explains how the Victorians defined beauty; ‘For women, that definition is a strange mixture of ideals. The Victorians admired both the strong, hearty, statuesque lady (modelled on Queen Victoria herself) and the weak, fainting beauty (…).’\textsuperscript{22} She also says that during the first half of the nineteenth century the image of the tall and statuesque lady was the most popular.

Thackeray is not very extensive in his description of Rebecca’s appearance. At the outset of the novel, he provides his readers with a rough sketch; ‘She was small and slight in person, pale, sandy-haired, and with eyes habitually cast down: when they looked up they were very large, odd, and attractive – ‘.\textsuperscript{23} The emphasis on the word ‘attractive’ suggests that Becky is good-looking. This is supported by the narrator’s observation that a woman with plain looks will not receive men’s attention, let alone that she will be considered attractive;

A woman may possess the wisdom and chastity of Minerva, and we give no heed to her if she has a plain face. What folly will not a pair of bright eyes make pardonable. What dullness may not red lips and sweet accents render pleasant?\textsuperscript{24}

At one point in the novel, the narrator even refers to her as the representation of ‘Beauty’;

\begin{quote}
EVERY READER of a sentimental turn (and we desire no other) must have been pleased with the \textit{tableau} with which the last act of our little drama concluded; for what
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{23} VF., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{24} VF., p. 368.
can be prettier than an image of Love [Sir Pitt] on his knees before Beauty?  

In due course the author makes clear what it is that determines her beauty. It was quite obvious from the beginning that Rebecca did not correspond to the ideal of the ‘weak’ and ‘fainting’ beauty. However, she is no clear representation of the ‘tall’ and ‘statuesque’ lady either; Thackeray distinctly depicts her as a small person; ‘By the side of many tall and bouncing young ladies in the establishment, Rebecca Sharp looked like a child.’ Nevertheless she tends towards this second representation of the ideal Victorian woman because she displays perseverance and acuteness, which can be considered as features of inner strength. All in all, she is portrayed as a very strong woman who exhibits a lot of conviction and energy. So her attractiveness more likely lies in the combination of her looks and her self-confidence.

As the novel progresses, several remarks are made about Rebecca’s knowledge of fashion. She possesses the competence to make herself pretty according to the rules of fashion;

Two were in the carriage now – one a little person, with light hair, and dressed in the height of the fashion; the other in a brown silk pelisse, and a straw bonnet with pink ribbons, with a rosy, round, happy face, that did you good to behold.

Our beloved Rebecca had no need, however, of any such a friendly halo to set off her beauty. Her complexion could bear any sunshine as yet; and her dress, (…) was as handsome in her eyes and those of the public, some five-and-twenty years since, as the most brilliant costume of the most famous beauty of the present season. (…)Rebecca had as good taste as any milliner in Europe (…)  

This proves that Rebecca is aware that women are judged by their looks, and since it is her intention to gain fame and fortune, she deems it necessary to look her best in this male dominated world;

Becky came down to him presently: whenever the dear girl expected his Lordship, her toilette was prepared, her hair in perfect order, her mouchoirs, aprons, scarfs, little morocco slippers, and other female gimcracks arranged, and she seated in some artless and agreeable posture ready to receive him; whenever she was surprised, of course she had to fly to her apartment to take a rapid survey of matters in the glass, and to trip

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25 VF., p. 133.
26 VF., p. 12.
27 VF., p. 199, pp. 451-452.
down again to wait upon the great peer. (...) ‘Is it a crime to try and look my best when you [Lord Steyne] come here?’ answered Mrs Rawdon plaintively, and she rubbed her cheek with her handkerchief as if to show there was no rouge at all, only genuine blushes and modesty in her case.28

So Rebecca acknowledges the importance of appearance in this male-dominated society; she does not only employ her looks to receive men’s admiration, she also tries to dress as fashionable as possible in order to distinguish herself from the common people and to establish herself as belonging to the more genteel circles.

28 VF., pp. 455-456.
THE POSITION OF THE UNDERDOG

Rebecca’s attempt to rise into society is hampered by her social rank. She lacks those features which would enable her to enter society; she has neither money nor reputation. Thackeray employs these failings to emphasize Rebecca’s position of the underdog. This sets her apart from Amelia, who comes from a middleclass family with a proper reputation. Rebecca does not let a chance go by to emphasize how unfortunate she really is and to exploit her own situation; ‘I am a poor little girl without any friends, or any harm in me.’\(^{29}\) Her feigned self-pity contributes to the underestimation of her personality. Yet, Rebecca herself feels that she has every quality necessary to become a lady, but she lacks those things which one cannot practise; she will carry her unfortunate birth with her for the rest of her life.

Despite the fact that Rebecca is considered inferior to Amelia mainly as to class and descent, she has other qualities which Amelia lacks. Thackeray endows Miss Sharp with a strong personality. Her self-awareness and ability to measure people make it possible for her to make herself as desirable as Amelia. Throughout the novel, these two women take turns in being each others’ superior. Rebecca is determined to overrule Amelia;

‘I have nothing to look for but what my own labour can bring me; and while that little pink-faced chit Amelia, with not half my sense, has ten thousand pounds and an establishment secure, poor Rebecca (and my figure is far better than hers) has only herself and her own wits to trust to. Well, let us see if my wits cannot provide me with an honourable maintenance, and if some day or the other I cannot show Miss Amelia my real superiority over her. Not that I dislike poor Amelia: who can dislike such a harmless, good-natured creature? – only it will be a fine day when I can take my place above her in the world, as why, indeed, should I not?’\(^{30}\)

When they are in Brussels, Rebecca takes the upper hand as she has made her way through society;

Whilst her [Amelia] appearance was an utter failure (as her husband felt with a sort of rage), Mrs Rawdon Crawley’s [Rebecca] début was, on the contrary, very brilliant. She arrived very late. Her face was radiant, her dress perfection. 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. (…) and it

\(^{29}\)VF., p. 118.

\(^{30}\)VF., p. 79.
was agreed that her manners were fine and her air distingué.\textsuperscript{31}

But more towards the end of the novel, when Rebecca fled to the continent in order to try to outrun the scandal which pursued her ‘[she] abandoned all pretensions to respectability and lapsed into a degenerate life.’\textsuperscript{32} She even used a ‘rouge-pot’\textsuperscript{33}, which is considered inappropriate for a lady. Amelia by contrast, is then described as a lady with ‘bright eyes’ and ‘whose freshness of complexion bore daylight remarkably well’.\textsuperscript{34} Amelia’s fate was determined by the bankruptcy of her father and the death of her husband. But her fortune changed; her brother and Dobbin provided for her so that she no longer had to live in poverty. She was restored into society;

GOOD FORTUNE now begins to smile upon Amelia. We are glad to get her out of that low sphere in which she has been creeping hitherto, and introduce her into a polite circle: not so grand and refined as that in which our other female friend, Mrs Becky, has appeared, but still having no small pretensions to gentility and fashion.\textsuperscript{35}

Nevertheless, in the end Rebecca sees the opportunity to regain respect. She joins Amelia and Joseph and flatters everyone, except Dobbin, into liking her again. She even convinces the more genteel people that she is a worldly lady;

The German ladies, never particularly squeamish as regards morals, especially in English people, were delighted with the cleverness and wit of Mrs Osborne’s charming friend [Rebecca]: (…) When it became known that she was noble, of an ancient English family, that her husband was a Colonel of the Guard, Excellenz and Governor of an island, only separated from his lady by one of those trifling differences (…) nobody thought of refusing to receive her in the very highest society of the little Duchy; and the ladies were even more ready to call her \textit{du}, and to swear eternal friendship for her, than they had been to bestow the same inestimable benefits upon Amelia.\textsuperscript{36}

At this point Dobbin had left Amelia, which distressed her very much and brought her again in an inferior position regarding Rebecca; ‘Emmy was not very happy after her heroic

\textsuperscript{31} VF., p. 267.
\textsuperscript{32} “anon.”, Notes on W. M. Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, Study-Aid Series, London: Methuen & Co, 1968, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{33} VF., p. 622.
\textsuperscript{34} VF., p. 596.
\textsuperscript{35} VF., p. 568.
\textsuperscript{36} VF., p. 643.
sacrifice. She was very *distraite*, nervous, silent, and ill to please. The family had never known her so peevish. She grew pale and ill. Eventually Dobbin returns and marries her, which restores her to a more lively state of mind. Finally she and Miss Sharp turn out to be equally contented with their lives; Amelia can finally love and be loved in return, and Rebecca inherits half Joseph’s life insurance, which makes it possible for her to live comfortably. She also manages that ‘a very strong party of excellent people consider her to be a most injured woman.’ Nevertheless, they are both disappointed and dissatisfied in life, on which the author says;

Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? — Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.

37 VF., p. 644.

38 VF., p. 657.

39 VF., p. 657.
REBECCA’S MANIPULATIVE ABILITIES

Becky is a clever and intelligent woman, very aware of her manipulative abilities and not afraid to use them. Already as a little girl she exercised these powers to help her father: ‘Many a dun had she talked to, and turned away from her father’s door; many a tradesman had she coaxed and wheeled into good-humour, and into the granting of one meal more.’

Rebecca knows how to flatter people into liking her. She senses very accurately how people want her to behave. She is a fantastic actress who has little difficulty in convincing her audience of her sincerity. Thackeray mentions in his preface ‘Before the Curtain’ that ‘the famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire’. In other words, she knows how to manipulate people and does her utmost best to gain everyone’s favour. These characteristics establish Rebecca as an accomplished woman and make her appealing as a character; the reader cannot but admire her sharpness.

More than once, Rebecca is referred to as a snake; ‘I [Miss Pinkerton] have nourished a viper in my bosom.’ and ‘She writhes and twists about like a snake.’ This image of the snake might refer to the snake in the Garden of Eden, who cajoled Eve into disobedience. The snake cannot force Eve into temptation by strength; it has to rely on its forked tongue to overpower its victim. The same is true of Rebecca Sharp. She cannot force her way into society, lacking the fortune and reputation which is considered necessary. Nevertheless, the humbug will reach her goal because of her manipulative abilities.

Rebecca’s charms and her ability to entertain make her popular with men; her target audience. The Victorian society was dominated by men. Women belonged to the domestic sphere and had little or no political significance. Since Miss Sharp’s intention is to change her position in this male dominated society, it is in her best interest to impress and flatter men. Of

40 VF., p. 12.
43 VF., p. 263.
course this makes her unpopular with women, who consider her a temptress and a rival. Dorothy Compton\textsuperscript{44} describes the Victorians’ opinion on women’s capacity to control men;

The Victorians found sexually attractive women inherently threatening because they represented a powerful force that men could not resist or control. (…) This idea had its origins in the Book of Genesis, when Adam fell victim to Eve's temptations. Women could supposedly wield these terrible powers over men through their beauty, so a physically frail woman would probably be less aggressive, therefore less threatening and the preferable type.

Rebecca makes herself attractive by being lively and keen and so sets herself apart from Amelia, who is an excellent example of the frail and less aggressive woman. Becky has a lot of influence on the men who surround her. There are numerous examples of men who were swept off their feet by this little woman. Not all attempts are fruitful, but Rebecca considers her numerous flirtations as practice. Eventually, Rebecca gets married, but when her marriage proves to be a disappointment – not bringing her the financial improvement she had expected – she resumes making courtesies to men who can sponsor her. In fact, her marriage never stops her from flirting, because she feels the constant need to improve her situation.

Becky soon discovers that she can overpower men and use them to advance herself in life. For example there is the Revd Mr Crisp, the curate to the Vicar of Chiswick, at Miss Pinkerton’s Academy. He falls in love with Rebecca and proposes to marry her, but the swift interference of his ‘Mamma’ prevents it. Becky claims to be innocent and protests ‘that she had never exchanged a single word with Mr Crisp except under her [Miss Pinkerton] own eyes, on the two occasions when she had met him at tea.’ But later it is hinted that Rebecca is not so innocent after all;

(indeed, if the truth must be told with respect to the Crisp affair, the tart-woman hinted to somebody, who took an affidavit of the fact to somebody else, that there was a great deal more than was made public regarding Mr Crisp and Miss Sharp, and that his letter was in answer to another letter). But who can tell you the real truth of the matter?\textsuperscript{45}

Miss Sharp’s ultimate victim is Amelia’s brother Joseph. Tameca Jones unfolds Rebecca’s plan to conquer his heart. In her view ‘The methodical steps she takes to execute


\textsuperscript{45} VF., p. 15.
the difficult maneuver of ensnaring Joseph read like a *Cosmopolitan* magazine article on how to trap a husband in ten days and establish the mode of operation she employs throughout the novel’. According to Jones, four major steps can be distinguished. First Rebecca ‘appear(s to be) humble and virginal’ and shows interest in Joseph’s profession. Secondly, she convinces everyone of her ‘good sense of humor’. Thirdly, she tries to ‘appear cool and uninterested’ and last she ‘win(s) over his family and friends along with the household help’. It is true that she repeatedly makes use of these steps in her attempts to seduce men and to climb the social ladder. Despite all her efforts, Rebecca has the misfortune that Jos was dissuaded by George Osborne, Amelia’s fiancé and a terrible snob;

‘(…) Who’s this little schoolgirl that is ogling and making love to him? Hang it, the family’s low enough already, without her. A governess is all very well, but I’d rather have a lady for my sister-in-law. I’m a liberal man; but I’ve proper pride, and know my own station: let her know hers. And I’ll take down that great hectoring Nabob, and prevent him from being made a greater fool than he is. That’s why I told him to look out, lest she brought an action against him.’

Joseph escapes her grasp, but in the end he will be victimised by Rebecca, which will be discussed elaborately when I deal with Rebecca’s parasitical tendencies. 

It is striking that George Osborne, who initially despises the little governess, becomes infatuated by her as well. He is so easily attracted by fame and fortune, that he is overwhelmed by Rebecca once she obtains popularity and walks among the more genteel people; ‘He thought her gay, brisk, arch, *distinguée*, delightful.’ He flirts with her and even proposes to elope together, being convinced that ‘the wife [Rebecca] was dying of love for him’. But the truth of the matter is that Mrs Rawdon Crawley does not care much for George, she is now the one who looks down on him. She and her husband exploit George;

It is very likely that this worthy couple never absolutely conspired and agreed together in so many words the one to cajole the young gentleman, whilst the other won his money at cards — but they understood each other perfectly well (…) 

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46 VF., p. 53.

47 ‘How to live well on nothing a year’, p. 39.

48 VF., p. 223.

49 VF., p. 265.

50 VF., p. 265.
In her conquest of the Crawley family, Rebecca uses the same tactics as with Joseph Sedley. She makes herself agreeable to everyone in the house:

‘I must be my own Mamma,’ said Rebecca; not without a tingling consciousness of defeat, as she thought over her little misadventure with Jos Sedley. So she wisely determined to render her position with the Queen’s Crawley family comfortable and secure, and to this end resolved to make friends of everyone around her who could at all interfere with her comfort.\(^{51}\)

Becky is tolerant to her pupils, ‘with Mr Crawley Miss Sharp was respectful and obedient’\(^ {52}\) and she makes herself useful to the Baronet in many ways. At Queen’s Crawley she has many admirers. In a letter to Amelia, Rebecca makes clear that she is proposed to by the doctor and that her employer is keen on her as well;

The young doctor gave a certain friend of yours to understand that, if she chose to be Mrs Glauber, she was welcome to ornament the surgery! I told his impudence that the gilt pestle and mortar was quite ornament enough; as if I was born , indeed, to be a country surgeon’s wife! (...) Sir Pitt applauded my resolution highly; he would be sorry to lose his little secretary, I think; and I believe the old wretch likes me as much as it is in his nature to like anyone.\(^ {53}\)

This extract proves how Rebecca is not satisfied with a marriage proposal by a common surgeon. She would achieve little admiration by marrying him. So she awaits a more fruitful proposal.

Even Sir Pitt’s sister, Miss Crawley, is highly amused with Rebecca. She is a rich spinster who lives in London. Everybody tries to please her, hoping that one day they would profit by it. Her fortune makes it possible for her to rule the entire family. Miss Crawley who is bored with her own family demands Rebecca’s company throughout her stay at the countryside. She even takes her to London, much against the liking of Sir Pitt.

The most important admirer belonging to the Crawley family is Rawdon Crawley, Sir Pitt’s youngest son. He is true dandy with a fondness for gambling and swearing who lives

\(^{51}\) VF., p. 79.

\(^{52}\) VF., p. 81.

\(^{53}\) VF., p. 89.
under the protection of Miss Crawley. He is overwhelmed by Rebecca’s intelligence and her initial reluctance to respond to his flirtation. When he wrote her a note for the first time, she threw it into the fire and referred to it as a ‘false note’.

Nevertheless, Rebecca is flattered by his attention:

Shall I tell you a compliment the Captain paid me? I must, it is so pretty. One evening we actually had a dance; (...) Well, I heard him say ‘By Jove, she’s a neat little filly!’ meaning your humble little servant; and he did me the honour to dance two country-dances with me.

Rawdon, who is to inherit the largest part of his aunt’s fortune, is of course an ideal match for Rebecca. The fact that he took a liking into her, makes it easy for Becky to win him over. Eventually they get married in secret, out of fear of losing the inheritance. Despite Miss Crawley’s pronounced liberal views, she turns out to be a true Victorian socialite with traditional opinions on the matter. Although she proclaims Rebecca as her equal and as a fit candidate to become Lady Crawley, she is horrified by Becky’s marriage with Rawdon and had several ‘fit(s) of hysterics’. She eventually disinherits Rawdon and leaves him only a hundred pounds. Another negative consequence of her marriage with Rawdon is that Rebecca has to turn down Sir Pitt’s marriage proposal. It has already been mentioned that Sir Pitt was attached to his little governess, so when his wife died he saw it fit to bind Rebecca to himself for the rest of his life. Because of her secret marriage, Becky has to let her lifetime opportunity pass her by. After all, she could have been a baronet’s wife;

Well, then, in the first place, Rebecca gave way to some very sincere and touching regrets that a piece of marvellous good fortune should have been so near her, and she actually obliged to decline it. (...) But Rebecca was a young lady of too much resolution and energy of character to permit herself much useless and unseemly sorrow for the irrevocable past; so, having devoted only the proper portion of regret to it, she wisely turned her whole attention towards the future, which was now vastly more important to her. And she surveyed her position, and its hopes, doubts, and chances.

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54 VF., p. 97.
55 VF., p. 91.
56 VF., p. 148.
57 VF., pp. 138-139.
Initially, Rebecca’s marriage with Rawdon is a happy one. They are alike in their abilities to exploit others. Rebecca entertains men, while Rawdon empties their pockets through all sorts of gambling. Initially her husband helps her exploit others, because it provides them with an income. But when Rawdon can be of no more use to his wife, Rebecca starts to ‘work’ on her own, no longer involving her husband in her plans.

Rawdon’s disinherition causes Rebecca to continue her search for wealth and prestige and leads to her attachment with Lord Steyne. Rebecca wants to make her way among the highest circles of society, and therefore she needs to be on good terms with Lord Steyne, a very rich aristocrat. She entertains him and other important men at her house. He becomes very fond of her and expresses it by helping her in her conquest of the more genteel people. He is very aware that Becky uses him to get into society, but he allows her to;

‘Well,’ said the old gentleman, twiddling round his wife’s card, ‘you are bent on becoming a fine lady. You pester my poor old life out to get you into the world. You won’t be able to hold your own there, you silly little fool. You’ve got no money.’ ‘You will get us a place,’ interposed Becky, ‘as quick as possible.’ ‘You’ve got no money, and you want to compete with those who have. You poor little earthenware pipkin, you want to swim down the stream along with the great copper kettles. All women are alike. Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having!’ Gad! 58

They could take advantage of the other. Besides a position in the highest circles of society, Rebecca receives jewels and a large sum of money from Lord Steyne. And in turn, he has the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Becky. The purpose of the sum of money that Rebecca had received is to redeem the borrowed capital of Miss Briggs, who is Becky’s companion. Of course, Mrs Crawley does not settle her debts; she keeps most of the money to herself and simply buys honest Briggs — who is unaware of the arrangement between Rebecca and lord Steyne — a new dress to keep her satisfied. Nevertheless, the aristocrat finds out what Rebecca had done and admires her even more;

His Lordship’s admiration for Becky rose immeasurably at this proof of her cleverness. Getting the money was nothing, but getting double the sum she wanted, and paying nobody – it was a magnificent stroke. And Crawley, my lord thought – Crawley is not such a fool as he looks and seems. He has managed the matter cleverly enough on his side. Nobody would ever have supposed from his face and demeanour that he knew anything about this money business; and yet he put her up to it, and has spent the

58 VF., p. 456.
money, no doubt. In this opinion my lord, we know, was mistaken; but it influenced a good deal his behaviour towards Colonel Crawley, whom he began to treat with even less than that semblance of respect which he had formerly shown towards that gentleman. It never entered into the head of Mrs Crawley’s patron that the little lady might be making a purse for herself; 59

But he is misled by Mrs Crawley; it was she and not her husband who double-crossed him. Rebecca convinced the aristocrat that Rawdon was after his money, while he did not even know that his wife had received a large sum of money from the baronet. Lord Steyne’s weakness lies in his underestimation of Rebecca and perhaps of women in general. He does not think her capable of organising such a fraud on her own. Rebecca adapts herself to the situation and manipulates it in her favour.

The correspondence between Rebecca and Lord Steyne is broken off abruptly when Rawdon walked in on the two and suspected them of adultery. Thackeray never really clarifies whether Rebecca committed adultery or not, he only suggests the possibility. 60 This event means the end of Becky’s relationship with both her husband and Lord Steyne. Both of them are infatuated with her, but neither of them can live with the thought of having to share her with the other. At this point Rebecca’s manipulative abilities prove to be of no use, she cannot secure her position in society when such a scandal pursues her. In an attempt to confine the damage, she flees to the continent, where she tries to start all over again, using her manipulative abilities to gain access to certain milieus. But she finds that things have changed, the women avoid and insult her and she comes to understand that ‘the behaviour of men had undergone, too, I don’t know what change.’ 61 This is the beginning of her downfall:

This abattement and degradation did not take place all at once; it was brought about by degrees after her calamity, and after many struggles to keep up – as a man who goes overboard hangs on to a spar whilst any hope is left, and then flings it away and goes down when he finds that struggling is in vain. 62
In the entire novel, there is only one man who is not deceived by Rebecca’s flattery and who sees her for what she really is; Dobbin. He is the paragon of virtue in this novel, and he dislikes Rebecca immensely.

‘What a humbug that woman is!’ honest old Dobbin mumbled to George when he came back from Rebecca’s box, whither he had conducted her in perfect silence, and with a countenance as glum as an undertaker’s. ‘She writhes and twists about like a snake. All the time she was here, didn’t you see, George, how she was acting at the General over the way?’

Dobbin values kindness and sincerity, two characteristics which Rebecca can only feign. Dobbin senses that this little woman is pretending to be somebody else and therefore he is suspicious of her. The other thing which determines his disgust for Becky is his love for Amelia. He adores her with all his heart and Rebecca’s struggle to become Amelia’s superior does not make her popular with him. In a way, he represents the general Victorian opinion on the scheming female which proclaims avoiding such a woman. Becky herself senses Dobbin’s attitude towards her;

She did not like him, and feared him privately; nor was he very much prepossessed in her favour. He was so honest, that her arts and cajoleries did not affect him, and he shrank from her with instinctive repulsion. And, as she was by no means so far superior to her sex as to be above jealousy, she disliked him the more for his adoration of Amelia.

Ioan Williams is correct when he claims that Dobbin is one of the few characters in this novel who are unselfish. The difference between him and the men who fall for Rebecca’s charms is that he is little concerned with the vanities of his world.

All in all, it can be said that Rebecca Sharp has a lot in common with the character of the femme fatale. The femme fatale is a woman who uses her sexuality or other feminine skills to overwhelm and tempt men in order to achieve some hidden objective. She considers herself superior to men in general because she believes that they cannot outrun their sexual desire for her. These descriptions fit Rebecca’s character perfectly:

63 VF., p. 263.
64 VF., p. 221.
65 Ioan M. Williams, Thackeray, p. 65.
Lord Steyne was her slave – followed her everywhere, and scarcely spoke to any one in the room besides, and paid her the most marked compliments and attention.

The ladies at the other tables, who supped off mere silver and marked Lord Steyne’s constant attention to her, vowed it was a monstrous infatuation, a gross insult to ladies of rank.

She looked upon him [Rawdon] as her errand-man and humble slave.\(^{66}\)

The author even refers to Rebecca as a Siren, a creature which entices sailors through her singing in order to let their ship founder against cliffs:

They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twangling their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims.\(^{67}\)

This image sheds light on Rebecca’s dark side, on her capacity to perform evil. In a way, Thackeray announces Becky’s slyniness in advance by giving her the name Sharp; the name is used to describe her biting, discerning and cunning personality. These traits support the image of Rebecca as the artful Siren. However, Thackeray does not dwell on those aspects of her character, because he believes that ‘the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name.’\(^{68}\)

I defy any one to say that our Becky, who has certainly some vices, has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner. In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster’s hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the water-line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous, and has any but the most squeamish immoralist in Vanity Fair a right to cry fie?\(^{69}\)

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\(^{66}\) VF., pp. 488-89, p. 489, p. 493.

\(^{67}\) VF., p. 607.

\(^{68}\) VF., p. 606.

\(^{69}\) VF., p. 607.
Thackeray’s description of Rebecca as a manipulative femme fatale allows him to put her at odds with Amelia, who is considered to be the image of the angel in the house. Nevertheless, he does not simply reduce his protagonists to these descriptions; the attentive reader can notice that Thackeray deviates from the traditional contrast between the virtuous heroine and her immoral opponent. This emerges from the narrator’s assessment of the ladies. Although he mainly presents Rebecca as an immoral and self-centred person, he gives evidence of a certain degree of sympathy towards her. It is striking how Rebecca gets away with her crimes without any form of reprisal. Eventually, the author even allows her to succeed in her plan. So his sympathy for her arises from his description of Becky as the product of the hypocritical and vain society in which she lives. However, he does not approve of her behaviour and holds her responsible for her own actions. This ambiguous perception of Rebecca proves how there is more to Becky than her manipulative abilities; she is evil but likeable since the reader can understand her motivation.

And as regards Amelia, Thackeray makes clear that she is fallible as well and in that way unfitting to represent the image of the angel in the house. This shows how the author declines a one-sided assessment of his characters. He wants to make clear how both of them – despite their differences – serve as representations of self-centred persons and how this proves that the traditional characterization turns out to be untenable; neither Rebecca, nor Amelia is completely good or bad.
The notion of the fallen woman is a common theme in Victorian works. Elizabeth Lee describes the roles of men and women in the nineteenth century. She observes that ‘a dichotomy of temperaments defined feminine and masculine’. Women were described as ‘anabolic’ creatures that conserved much of their energy because they had to give birth and take care of their children. Men, by contrast, were considered to be ‘katabolic’ because they were active and energetic. Lee explains that ‘as a result, women’s position in society came from biological evolution -- she had to stay at home in order to conserve her energy, while the man could and needed to go out and hunt or forage.’ This implied that women had little interest in sex and that usually they were the victim of men who could not control their lusts. However, this interpretation did not last throughout the entire nineteenth century, in the later half another viewpoint presented itself; ‘women had to be held accountable [for their sexual acts], while the men, slaves to their katabolic purposes and sexual appetites, could not really be blamed.’ In Victorian society women were judged on their virtue and innocence. A woman’s chastity was her highest concern; without it she was lost. As a result, Victorian women tried to live up to this prescribed ideal.

In *Vanity Fair* the topic is treated as well, but in a very delicate way, so as not to offend any of its readers. The issue in this novel is whether or not Rebecca commits adultery, in particular with Lord Steyne. Her behaviour towards men proves that she is no model of virtue and innocence, but the narrator never explicitly states that Rebecca cheats on her husband. Nevertheless, authorial remarks are made on the inappropriateness of the matter, especially when Rebecca’s intimacy with Lord Steyne increases. The narrator also allows the characters to express their opinion on her behaviour, which gives him the opportunity to delay the sharing of his perspective on Rebecca’s affairs with his audience. Many readers will have expected the narrator to clarify if this little woman committed adultery or not, yet he let his audience decide for themselves. Thackeray does however provide his readers with the insights of several characters, from which the readers can draw their conclusion. The following three fragments are examples of those; the first one expresses the servants’ opinion on Rebecca’s

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flirtatious behaviour, the second Sir Pitt’s and the last Rawdon’s colleagues’ view on the matter;

And so — guiltless very likely — she was writhing and pushing onward towards what they call ‘a position in society’, and the servants were pointing at her as lost and ruined. (p. 422)

He [Sir Pitt; Rawdon’s brother] spoke of the honour of the family – the unsullied reputation of the Crawleys; expressed himself in indignant tones about her receiving those young Frenchmen – those wild young men of fashion – my Lord Steyne himself, whose carriage was always at her door, who passed hours daily in her company, and whose constant presence made the world talk about her. As the head of the house he implored her to be more prudent. Society was already speaking lightly of her. Lord Steyne, though a nobleman of the greatest station and talents, was a man whose attentions would compromise any woman, he besought, he implored, he commanded his sister-in-law to be watchful in her intercourse with that nobleman. (p. 498)

‘It’s about – about my wife,’ Crawley answered, casting down his eyes and turning very red. The other gave a whistle. ‘I always said she’d throw you over,’ he began – indeed there were bets in the regiment and at the clubs regarding the probable fate of Colonel Crawley, so lightly was his wife’s character esteemed by his comrades and the world – but seeing the savage look with which Rawdon answered the expression of this opinion, Macmurdo did not think it fit to enlarge upon it further. (p. 513)

These lines prove how the servants already consider Rebecca a fallen woman. Her brother-in-law is alarmed as well, but does not believe her ruined yet. Nevertheless, he notices the signs which announce Rebecca’s downfall, as do Rawdon’s colleagues. All these interpretations contribute to the construction of Rebecca’s character. They do not prove Rebecca to be guilty of adultery, but suggest that it is quite possible, since they depict her in such a negative way.

The narrator himself does not provide his audience with an answer, ‘leav[ing] the question of whether or not Becky committed adultery with Lord Steyne unsettled’ 72;

What has happened? Was she guilty or not? She said not; but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips, or if that corrupt heart was in this case pure? All her lies and her schemes, all her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy.73

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73 *VF.*, p. 508.
Rebecca herself maintains throughout that she is innocent, but her words are undermined by the description of the jewels on her hands, which are referred to as ‘serpents’. Ioan Williams\textsuperscript{74} describes how this can be interpreted as a ‘biblical echo’.

‘I am innocent, Rawdon,’ she said; ‘before God, I am innocent!’ She clung hold of his coat, of his hands; her own were all covered with serpents, and rings, and baubles. ‘I am innocent. – Say I am innocent!’ she said to Lord Steyne.\textsuperscript{75}

Lord Steyne’s reply, however, gives the readers the impression that Becky was everything but innocent;

‘You innocent! Damn you,’ he screamed out. ‘You innocent? Why, every trinket you have on your body is paid for by me. I have given you thousands of pounds which this fellow has spent, and for which he has sold you. Innocent by – ! You’re as innocent as your mother, the ballet-girl, and your husband the bully.’\textsuperscript{76}

He describes her as his prostitute; saying that Rawdon sold her and making use of the term ‘bully’, which can be interpreted as referring to ‘one who lives upon the gains of a prostitute’.\textsuperscript{77} Of course, the readers are aware that these accusations rest on the misunderstanding that Rawdon is the master behind all of this and that Rebecca merely serves as executor of his plans. Nevertheless, Lord Steyne’s attack reinforces the idea that Rebecca was guilty.

Finally, the author questions Rebecca’s innocence by describing how even her husband lost his faith in her:

‘She may be innocent, after all,’ he said. ‘She says so. Steyne has been a hundred times alone with her in the house before.’ ‘It may be so,’ Rawdon answered sadly, ‘but this don’t look very innocent,’ and he showed the Captain the thousand-pound note which he had found in Becky’s pocketbook. ‘This is what he gave her, Mac; and she kep’ it unknown to me. And with this money in the house, she refused to stand by me when I was locked up.’ The Captain could not but own that the secreting of the money had a

\textsuperscript{74} Ioan M. Williams, \textit{Thackeray}, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{75} VF., p. 506.

\textsuperscript{76} VF., p. 506.

\textsuperscript{77} VF., p. 689. In this edition extra notes are provided to clarify certain words or phrases. Note nr. 618 gives an explanation on ‘the bully’: ‘here, one who lives upon the gains of a prostitute’.
very ugly look.\textsuperscript{78}

So despite Thackeray’s refusal to make absolutely clear that Rebecca really committed adultery with Lord Steyne, he directs his readers towards an attitude of accusation. Everything that is said about Rebecca’s ‘innocence’ is such that it discourages the readers to believe in her virtue. Ioan Williams\textsuperscript{79} correctly notices how Thackeray ‘work[ed] through innuendo rather than by direct statement.’ Various reasons can be thought of to explain Thackeray’s treatment of the affair. Williams\textsuperscript{80} points out how the primness of Victorian society contributed to Thackeray’s vagueness on the matter. He also says that it does not matter whether Rebecca is guilty or not, because it ‘[does] not involve her selfish seeking after vanity.’ It is true that it is of little consequence if Rebecca cheated on her husband or not, because society already condemned her for it, people already believed her to be guilty. But the question remains; does Rebecca belong to the group of fallen women? No one – not even the narrator – can tell for sure, but it is suggested that it is very plausible.

\textsuperscript{78} VF., p. 514.

\textsuperscript{79} Ioan M. Williams, \textit{Thackeray}, p. 62.

\textsuperscript{80} Ioan M. Williams, \textit{Thackeray}, pp. 62-63.
‘HOW TO LIVE WELL ON NOTHING A YEAR’

Thackeray portrays a society in which appearance is of the greatest importance. People try to create the illusion of perfect happiness and financial comfort to be considered a respectable member of society or simply to arouse envy in one’s neighbour:

I SUPPOSE there is no man in this Vanity Fair of ours so little observant as not to think sometimes about the worldly affairs of his acquaintances, or so extremely charitable as not to wonder how his neighbour Jones or his neighbour Smith can make both ends meet at the end of the year.\(^8\)

Rebecca is the greatest impostor in *Vanity Fair*, constantly pretending to be something which she is not. Her entire quest for reputation and wealth is built on pretences; she pretends to be a descendant from a prominent French family, she claims to be virtuous and innocent, she pretends to be a good mother, to be in love, etcetera. In short, she pretends to belong. However, a person in her position will never amount to much by pretence alone. If one really wants to establish the illusion to belong to the higher classes of society, one has to have access to money. Rebecca is very aware of it and is always searching for a ‘sponsor’. As a result, she becomes skilled in the exploitation of others. Henri Talon points out that her behaviour towards others was determined by her self-centredness;

Becky seeks friends to serve her own ends, to show off her charm and wit, and to indulge in play. Anyone amusing she enjoys, anyone useful she coaxes. Others she certainly needs, but as we need luxuries that give piquancy to life, not as necessities without which we die. She does all she can to be liked, for to be liked is fun and profit, but to her it is not a primary emotional exigency.\(^8\)

Several remarks\(^8\) on Rebecca and Rawdon’s ability to live a good life without having to pay for it prove how they are both proficient in the exploitation of others;

On nothing per annum then, and during a course of some two or three years, of which we can afford to give but a very brief history, Crawley and his wife lived very happily and comfortably at Paris.

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81 *VF.*, p. 340.


83 *VF.*, p. 341, p. 481.
The truth is, that by economy and good management – by a sparing use of ready money and by paying scarcely anybody – people can manage, for a time at least, to make a great show with very little means; and it is our belief that Becky’s much-talked of parties, which were not, after all was said, very numerous, cost this lady very little more than the wax candles which lighted the walls.

Thackeray even entitles chapter XXXVI to this subject; ‘How to live well on nothing a year’. 84

It is remarkable that Rebecca shows no signs of remorse or scruples when she exploits people who are less fortunate than she is. Harriet Blodgett explains this by calling Rebecca ‘incapable of warm human relationships.’ 85 This also explains why Rebecca has no maternal feelings at all. 86 By emphasising Becky’s selfishness in this way, Thackeray works to establish a negative image; he depicts her as a parasite, which lives from its host until the host can be of no more use. Throughout the novel, Rebecca takes advantage of many people, the most important ones being Miss Crawley, Lord Steyne, Sir Pitt and last but not least Joseph Sedley. Her ultimate act of exploitation is directed at Jos. He becomes Rebecca’s sponsor and last resort at the end of the novel. She lives a degraded life among dubious figures after her flight from England. Joseph – or rather his money – is Rebecca’s ticket back to a more respectable way of living. Rebecca cannot lay hands upon Joseph’s fortune through marriage, since she is already married, and as result she has to come up with another plan. Thackeray never expands on what Rebecca exactly does, but he simply describes that Rebecca inherits a large sum from Mr Sedley, who died under suspicious circumstances. Here again, Thackeray refuses to clarify whether Rebecca is guilty of murder or not, but he provides the readers with information that suggests that Rebecca had something to do with the affair:

The solicitor of the Insurance Company swore it was the blackest case that ever had come before him; talked of sending a commission to Aix to examine into the death; and the Company refused payment of the policy. But Mrs, or Lady Crawley, as she styled herself, came to town at once (attended with her solicitors, Messrs Burke, Thurtell & Hayes, of Thavies Inn), and dared the Company to refuse the payment. 87

84 VF., p. 340.
86 Rebecca’s lack of maternal feelings will be further discussed in the paragraph on ‘Motherhood’, p. 41.
87 VF., pp. 656-657.
The names of Rebecca’s solicitors may also serve as a hint towards the truth of the matter, since they are the names of notorious murderers of the time. Nevertheless, Rebecca is restored in society; ‘The money was paid, and her character established’. This sentence proves that in *Vanity Fair* wealth is preferred over sincerity and morality; money can pardon any kind of behaviour. According to Harriet Blodgett, ‘Vanity Fair values success, charm, and glory, not truth; it substitutes selfishness and callousness for benevolence.’ From this we can deduce that Rebecca is not the only parasite in this novel. The author deliberately addresses his readers and accuses them of sharing his characters’ orientation towards the materialistic things in life:

Gratitude among certain rich folks is scarcely natural, or to be thought of. They take needy people’s services as their due. Nor have you, O poor parasite and humble hanger-on, much reason to complain. Your friendship for Dives is about as sincere as the return which it usually gets. It is money you love, and not the man; and were Croesus and his footman to change places, you know, you poor rogue, who would have the benefit of your allegiance.

Interestingly, Thackeray also refers to Amelia as a parasite; ‘— Farewell, dear Amelia. Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!’ Amelia was not interested in money; her fault lies in her treatment of Dobbin, in her demand of his unconditional love. My point is that Amelia’s selfishness is based on her desire to be loved, whereas Rebecca’s egoism is driven by her desire to gain fame and fortune.

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88 *VF.*, p. 694. In this edition extra notes are provided to clarify certain words or phrases. Note nr. 738 gives an explanation on ‘Burke, Thurtell & Hayes’: ‘a sly Thackerian joke, since Becky’s solicitors are given names also belonging to three notorious murderers of the time’.


90 *VF.*, p. 124.

91 *VF.*, p. 653.

92 This will be discussed more elaborately in chapter II, in the paragraph on ‘Love and Devotion’, p. 53.
MOTHERHOOD

Rebecca Sharp deviates in many ways from the stereotypical Victorian wife. One of the most striking differences is the fact that she has little or no maternal instinct. She does not care much for her son. She considers him as an impediment in her conquest of reputation, for how can a mother figure be attractive and successful in her capture of prominent men? It has already been said that Rebecca knew very well that she had to overpower men if she wanted to improve her situation. In Victorian society women were seen as domestic figures and if Rebecca had only directed her attempts to enter society at them, it would have brought little change.

The narrator refers to Rawdon junior’s birth in very few words, which indicates that it is not considered a very special or emotional event:

In the early spring of 1816, Galignani’s Journal contained the following announcement in an interesting corner of the paper: ‘On the 26th of March, the Lady of Lieutenant-Colonel Crawley, of the Life Guards Green, of a son and heir.’

The boy is neither loved, nor looked after by his mother. She always leaves him under the care of others. When she left Paris to make a short visit to England ‘she had placed him out at nurse in a village in the neighbourhood of Paris’ and on their return to England he was taken care of by the servants:

About the little Rawdon, if nothing has been said all this while, it is because he is hidden upstairs in a garret somewhere, or has crawled below into the kitchen for companionship. His mother scarcely ever took notice of him. He passed the days with his French bonne as long as that domestic remained in Mr Crawley’s family, and when the Frenchwoman went away, the little fellow, howling in the loneliness of the night, had compassion taken on him by a housemaid, who took him out of his solitary nursery into her bed in the garret hard by, and comforted him.

Rebecca’s neglect of her infant is the ultimate evidence of her self-centredness. She prefers the pursuit of her own ambition to the well-being of her child. The boy himself is completely estranged from his mother and lives in constant fear for her;

93 VF., p. 328.
94 VF., p. 345.
95 VF., p. 357.
She was an unearthly being in his eyes, superior to his father – to all the world; to be worshipped and admired at a distance. To drive with that lady in the carriage was an awful rite: he sat up in the back seat, and did not dare to speak; he gazed with all his eyes at the beautifully dressed princess opposite to him. (…) O thou poor lonely little benighted boy! Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children, and here was one who was worshipping a stone!96

This mean characteristic is one of the key elements in Thackeray’s attempt to portray Rebecca as someone who is unable to feel affection for somebody else. This very clearly sets her apart from Amelia, who worships her son. Harriet Blodgett remarks how Becky’s frigidity results in the narrator’s disapproval of her actions, she only acts in her own behalf;

Despite Becky’s energetic performance, the narrator knows her for a morally and socially reprehensible being incapable of warm human relationships. To Becky, he prefers Amelia; although fallible, she is warm-hearted and principled.97

It also reinforces the image of Rebecca as the adventuress, who is concerned with the worldly sphere and by contrast the image of Amelia as the traditional virtuous domestic figure.

96 VF., pp. 358-359.

CONCLUSION

In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray portrays a corrupt society which is characterized by its members’ liability to deterioration; every character in the novel displays vanities. The author deliberately creates characters that deviate from the traditional hero or heroine in order to focus on human imperfections. Rebecca’s character serves as the ultimate example of the corrupted individual.

Rebecca is the most selfish character in *Vanity Fair*; her only concern is her own ambition to become a person of distinction and in order to achieve her aim she will do anything. Throughout the novel the narrator sheds light on Becky’s vices and emphasizes her self-centredness. He describes how she manipulates and exploits people in her quest for fame and fortune. And as if these descriptions do not already suffice to establish her as an immoral person, he also suggests that it is very plausible that she had committed adultery with Lord Steyne, which reinforces the image of her as a woman of ill repute. Further, the narrator makes use of her disinterest in her son to elaborate the depiction of Rebecca as a very selfish person; it proves how she prefers the pursuit of her own happiness to the well-being of her child. But the key element in Thackeray’s depiction of Becky as malicious woman is the suggestion that she had something to do with the death of Joseph Sedley, or that she even might be his murderer. In this way, the description of Rebecca’s personality allows him to criticize the society which stimulated such immoral behaviour and ‘supplied the corrupting worldly atmosphere’.  

Nevertheless, the narrator expresses a certain degree of sympathy for her. He makes clear that she only tries to ‘survive in an unwelcoming world.’ He deliberately presents Rebecca as the underdog, which might provoke compassion and sympathy for her with some of his readers; they could understand her motivation. In a way the narrator even expresses his admiration for her cleverness and slyness by letting her achieve her aim without any form of reprisal. Yet, he clearly disapproves of her behaviour and holds her responsible for her actions.

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So Thackeray presents Rebecca Sharp as an evil, but accomplished woman. One cannot but recognize and admire her talents, but in this case the means do not justify the end. She only employs her talents to improve her own position in life, which proves that she is incredibly selfish. Nevertheless, this is what appears to be necessary for a person of her disposition to achieve her aim in this corrupt society. So Rebecca’s character serves Thackeray’s attack of humanity’s vanity and by implication his satire on the corruption of society.
II. AMELIA SEDLEY
AMelia Sedley

Introduction

Amelia Sedley is often identified as the representation of the ideal Victorian woman. However, it would be unjust to reduce her person to this prescribed and fixed ideal.

It was Thackeray’s intention to criticise humanity’s vanity in this novel. Being a convinced realist, he wanted to make clear ‘that we are for the most part an abominably foolish and selfish people ‘desperately wicked’ and all eager after vanities.’¹ Ioan Williams² explains how ‘Thackeray was attacking the ideas and patterns involved in the fiction of his time and particularly the concepts of the ideal and the heroic’ and that he ‘[insisted] on an analysis of character and motivation which revealed a degree of selfishness in almost every human action.’ His preference for a realistic depiction of life allowed him to question the credibility of the stereotypical representations of the ideal protagonist.

Thackeray’s intention to break with the tradition of the ideal and the heroic is reflected in his representation of Amelia. At first sight, her character can be interpreted as the traditional heroine, but the narrator makes clear that she displays several negative traits, which make her deviate from the prescribed ideal. This proves that Amelia is more than simply Rebecca’s moral opponent. The attentive reader might even notice how Amelia and Rebecca are presented as alternative representations of self-centred characters. They are both selfish, but each in their own way.

Ioan Williams³ claims that ‘the object of Thackeray’s strongest attack is selfishness, the only way to avoid it being the development of an ability to feel affection for other people.’ This forms the explanation for Thackeray’s ambiguous view on Amelia; on the one hand he disapproves of her self-centredness, but on the other he appreciates her as one of the few characters in the novel that are able to love.

³ Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 65.
In this chapter I will investigate how the portrayal of Amelia Sedley works to formulate critique on the traditional representation of the female protagonist in Victorian fiction. I will analyse how the combination of several facets in her personality establish her as the representation of women’s complexity in general.
THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

The phrase ‘angel in the house’ is used to refer to the notion of the ideal Victorian woman. This wording is based on Coventry Patmore’s ‘The Angel in the House’, which was first published in 1854.\(^4\) In this poem Patmore expressed his view on the ideal wife. His opinion on women reflected the ideas of his age; the ideal Victorian woman ‘was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure.’\(^5\)

Amelia Sedley exhibits all of the above mentioned qualities. Thackeray credited her with all manner of virtues that were highly appreciated in his own age and which helped characterize her as the angel in the house. Initially, this creates the impression that Amelia is going to be the classic heroine in the novel.\(^6\) Thackeray carefully constructs the image of Amelia as the exemplary Victorian lady; he describes her as a sympathetic and caring friend, a loving and virtuous daughter, and a self-sacrificing lover who develops into a submissive wife; ‘Amelia, the gentlest and sweetest of everyday mortals’.\(^7\) However, it will turn out that Thackeray creates this image only to react against it afterwards. He suggests that Amelia exhibits several flaws and that she – together with the other characters in the novel – is vain. The author wants to break with tradition; he proposes a more realistic representation of women (or characters in general) which does not reduce them to mere stock characters or types. Thackeray works up to this more realistic image through several references to Amelia’s flaws; often does he shed light on her naivety and foolishness. Obviously, the author was very careful in the formulation of his ideas; he did not want to frighten his audience.

In this paragraph the focus will be on how Thackeray’s created the image of Amelia as the classic angelical woman.

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\(^6\) This will be discussed elaborately in the paragraph on ‘The Ideal and the Heroic’, p. 64.

In the first chapter of the novel, Thackeray describes Amelia’s likeable personality. Everyone at Miss Pinkerton’s Academy is fond of her, even Rebecca displays some feelings of sympathy towards her: ‘The gentle, tenderhearted Amelia Sedley was the only person to whom she [Rebecca] could attach herself in the least; and who could help attaching herself to Amelia?’\(^8\) The narrator portrays her as a good-natured young woman with the features of a natural beauty;

But as we are to see a great deal of Amelia, there is no harm in saying, at the outset of our acquaintance, that she was a dear little creature; and a great mercy it is, both in life and in novels, which (and the latter especially) abound in villains of the most sombre sort, that we are to have for a constant companion so guileless and good-natured a person. As she is not a heroine, there is no need to describe her person; indeed I am afraid that her nose was rather short than otherwise, and her cheeks a great deal to round and red for a heroine; but her face blushed with rosy health, and her lips with the freshest of smiles, and she had a pair of eyes which sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled with tears, and that was a great deal too often; for the silly thing would cry over a dead canary-bird; or over a mouse, that the cat haply had seized upon; or over the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid; and as for saying an unkind word to her, were any person hardhearted enough to do so – why, so much the worse for them.\(^9\)

Interestingly enough, this quote also proves how Thackeray already pronounces Amelia as overemotional at the outset of his novel, thus introducing his readers to her foolishness.

The narrator continues to emphasize little Emmy’s virtues throughout the ensuing chapters, claiming that he chose her for this part because she was ‘the best - natured of all [the characters at his disposal]’.\(^10\) Amelia’s kindness is expressed best in her generous behaviour towards Rebecca during the latter’s stay at the Sedleys’. The reader is confronted with Amelia’s sincerity on the one hand, and Rebecca’s exploitation of her on the other. The contrast between Amelia’s virtues and Becky’s vices makes Amelia look even more virtuous. But the ultimate definition of Amelia as the angel in the house takes place when her adoration of George Osborne is described. Since they were children, Amelia and George were promised to each other. She adores him and does anything in her power to make him love her equally. In a way, George becomes an obsession to her; her entire world revolves around him. Little

\(^8\) VF., p. 13.
\(^9\) VF., p. 6.
\(^10\) VF., p. 11.
by little it becomes clear that Amelia is a naïve and hopelessly romantic fool because she idolizes her lover and effaces herself to please him. This self-sacrificing and submissive behaviour towards her husband is typical of the classic angel in the house.

So Thackeray made clear from the beginning that Amelia served as a representation of the stereotypical virtuous lady and he maintained this idea for the larger part of the novel. However, from chapter XXXV on the narrator also focuses on Amelia’s tendency to act egoistically and to cling to the past, which she romanticised dramatically. Gradually, he makes Amelia’s lack of intelligence known to his readers.

All these aspects of Amelia’s portrayal work to make her attractive to men; she is kind and beautiful;

It became the fashion, indeed, among all the honest young fellows of the –th, to adore and admire Mrs. Osborne. 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 print.

But all the men, like good fellows as they were, rallied round their comrade’s pretty wife, and paid her their court with soldierly gallantry. She had a little triumph, which flushed her spirits and made her eyes sparkle. George was proud of her popularity (…). She felt that he was affectionately watching her, and glowed with pleasure at his kindness. ‘I will make all his friends welcome,’ she resolved in her heart. ‘I will love all as I love him, I will always try and be gay and good-humoured and make his home happy.’

Her beauty is something which the narrator often refers to. Rather than depicting her as a very handsome femme fatale, he portrays her as a pretty, ‘fresh and comely’ girl. There is no doubt that she is beautiful, but she is not ‘extraordinarily handsome’. This comment by the narrator serves to make clear that it was not simply her appearance which makes her attractive to men. He is convinced that there is another feature which determines Amelia’s appeal; her feebleness. Most of the male characters in Vanity Fair share a hunger for power; somehow it

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12 VF., p. 245, p. 249.

13 VF., p. 336.

14 VF., p.366.
defines their masculinity. Amelia’s submissiveness confirms their sense of virility. This is again another feature which Thackeray employs in order to create this image of the angel;

For almost all men who came near her loved her; though no doubt they would be at loss (sic) to tell you why. She was not brilliant, nor witty, nor wise overmuch, nor extraordinarily handsome. But wherever she went she touched and charmed every one of the male sex, as invariably as she awakened the scorn and incredulity of her own sisterhood. 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 protection.15

Amelia’s popularity among men brought on the jealousy of the women surrounding her. The narrator takes great pleasure in this rivalry between women and elaborately discusses the topic. He admits to his readers that a woman’s beauty can pardon certain shortcomings in her personality, but for men this does not justify the envious behaviour of some women;

It is the pretty face which creates sympathy in the hearts of men, those wicked rogues. A woman may possess the wisdom and chastity of Minerva, and we give no heed to her if she has a plain face. What folly will not a pair of bright eyes make pardonable? What dullness may not red lips and sweet accents render pleasant? And so, with their usual sense of justice, ladies argue that because a woman is handsome, therefore she is a fool. O ladies, ladies! there are some of you who are neither handsome nor wise.16

More than once the author describes how Amelia was despised by female acquaintances. At one point he narrates how she was introduced to a group of women and how they all thought her to be very kind. Nevertheless they deemed it necessary to revise their opinion on her when they noticed that she was the one who received all the men’s attention;

Of this incongruous family our astonished Amelia found herself all of a sudden a member, with Mrs O’Dowd as an elder sister. She was presented to her other female relations at teatime, on whom, as she was quiet, good-natured, and not too handsome, she made rather an agreeable impression until the arrival of the gentlemen from the mess of the 150th, who all admired her so that her sisters began, of course, to find fault with her.17

15 VF., pp. 366 - 367.

16 VF., p. 368.

17 VF., p. 249.
Even her sisters-in-law and Dobbin’s sisters looked down on her because of their brother’s constant devotion to her; ‘For instance, there was scarcely any point upon which the Misses Osborne, George’s sisters, and the Mesdemoiselles Dobbin agreed so well as in their estimate of her very trifling merits, and their wonder that their brothers could find any charms in her.’

Thackeray, who spent the first half of the novel establishing Amelia’s virtuous personality, concluded that Amelia did not deserve this kind of treatment and so he was ‘tempted to think that to be despised by her sex is a very great compliment to a woman.’

Through his portrayal of Amelia, the author proves how superficial and vain society is; beauty is preferred over intelligence and morality. Thackeray also makes clear that beauty can be a burden to a woman; it does not only make her attractive to men, it separates her from her own sex as well. They consider her as a rival in the conquest of men’s attention and therefore she is to be treated as an outcast.

Interestingly enough, both Rebecca and Amelia are despised by the greater part of their female acquaintances. Both are beautiful and attractive in their own way. They each represent one half of the ideal of female beauty at that time. Dorothy Compton clarifies how ‘the Victorians admired both the strong, hearty, statuesque lady (modelled on Queen Victoria herself) and the weak, fainting beauty (…).’ If we interpret the first ideal as the description of a woman who displays inner strength and dignity, then it becomes evident that Rebecca corresponds to this type. She is a very strong woman who displays a lot of conviction and energy. She is described as a beautiful femme fatale who takes care of herself. It is her energy and briskness which makes her attractive. Amelia however, is a clear representation of the second ideal of female beauty. It is already discussed how her appeal is determined by her weakness. The references to Amelia’s beauty fit her personality; she is not described as a woman with a high sex-appeal. Her beauty is such that it expresses her naturalness and her gentle disposition; there are several references to her fresh smiles and blushing cheeks.

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18 VF., p. 99.

19 VF., p. 99.

LOVE AND DEVOTION

Amelia’s life is for the most part determined by her love for George Osborne. She does not simply love this gentleman; she worships him. Her feelings for him are so strong, that it becomes an obsession to her; ‘Poor little tender heart! and so it goes on hoping and beating, and longing and trusting. (…) Only one feeling all day – when will he come? only one thought to sleep and wake upon.’21 Even after his death, Amelia continues to be faithful to his memory. This implies that her devotion to George stands in the way of the possibility to move on and start over again. So for a very long time, Amelia lives her life in service of her lover.

Lilia Melani22 observes how this behaviour was appreciated by the conventional reader because ‘Amelia’s obsessive love for George [was] presented as admirable and natural in popular romantic fiction’. Thackeray however took a more ambiguous view on Emmy’s love for George: for one thing he considered it as the proof of her selfishness and vanity. It showed how Amelia clung to her romantic belief that her lover was prince charming, whereas reality proved her wrong:

This young person (perhaps it was very imprudent in her parents to encourage her, and abet her in such idolatry and silly romantic ideas) loved, with all her heart, the young officer in His Majesty’s service with whom we have made a brief acquaintance. She thought about him the very first moment on waking, and his was the very last name mentioned in her prayers. She had never seen a man so beautiful or so clever; such a figure on horseback, such a dancer, such a hero in general!23

The narrator even described Amelia’s love as ‘the crime of loving wrongly, too violently, against reason’.24 But for another thing, Thackeray appreciated Amelia’s capacity to love since he believed that it allowed her to overcome her negative traits;

Amelia’s is to come, when her scoundrel of a husband is well dead with a ball in his

23 VF., p. 104.
24 VF., p. 161.
odious bowels; when she has had sufferings, a child, and a religion – But she has at present a quality above most people whizz: LOVE – by wh she shall be saved.\(^{25}\)

When Emmy’s love for George is described, it often serves the narrator’s intention to describe her as a fool and a fraud. Lilia Melani\(^{26}\) explains how Amelia’s constant devotion did not rely on her unconditional love for George, but rather on her selfish reluctance to face reality. She refused to accept George’s ‘inferiority’ and kept up the appearance that he was perfect. In the chapter on Rebecca Sharp\(^{27}\), it is already mentioned that it was of great importance in this society to create the illusion of perfect happiness. Lisa Tadwin\(^{28}\) argues that ‘Victorian “femininity” required women to impersonate passivity and helplessness, and by definition prevented them from voicing discontent.’ This might explain why Amelia preferred to cling to this idealised image of her lover, instead of uttering her unhappiness.

Throughout the novel it is made clear that George is anything but the ideal husband; he is a self-centred dandy, with a weakness for fashion and reputation. He shares Rebecca’s desire to be envied by others and wants to belong to the most fashionable people in society. He does express his fondness of Amelia, but this is countered by his desire for other women;

\[
\text{I am very fond of Amelia; I adore her, and that sort of thing. Don’t look angry. She’s faultless; I know she is. But you see there’s no fun in winning a thing unless you play for it. Hang it the regiment’s just back from the West Indies; I must have a little fling, and then when I’m married I’ll reform; I will, upon my honour, now.}^{29}\]

Melani\(^{30}\) considers him a representation of a ‘corrupted gentleman’\(^{31}\), thus emphasizing his selfishness. Amelia’s constant devotion flatters George and convinces him of his own

\(^{25}\) W. M. Thackeray to his mother, on 2 July 1847, as quoted in Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 59.


\(^{27}\) ‘How to live well on nothing a year’, p. 38.


\(^{29}\) VF., p. 108.

superiority. Her submission confirms his virility and tickles his vanity. ‘This prostration and sweet unrepining obedience exquisitely touched and flattered George Osborne.’\textsuperscript{32} But despite her submissive behaviour, Amelia rightly esteemed George’s worth;

Her heart tried to persist in asserting that George Osborne was worthy and faithful to her, tough she knew otherwise. How many a thing had she said, and got no echo from him. How many suspicions of selfishness and indifference had she to encounter and obstinately overcome. To whom could the poor little martyr tell these daily struggles and tortures? Her hero himself only half understood her. She did not dare to own that the man she loved was her inferior; or to feel that she had given her heart away too soon. Given once, the pure bashful maiden was too modest, too tender, too trustful, too weak, too much woman to recall it.\textsuperscript{33}

Melani correctly notices that ‘Amelia is early aware of George's selfishness, his shallowness, and his superficial feelings for her.’\textsuperscript{34} Yet, she keeps on deluding herself and transfers the image of the true gentleman to George, thus convincing herself that she is happy. She even takes the blame for George’s ‘ennui’\textsuperscript{35} with marriage, being convinced that she is not worthy of such a noble man;

How shall I be a companion for him, she thought – so clever and so brilliant, and I such a humble, foolish creature? How noble it was of him to marry me – to give up everything, and stoop down to me! I ought to have refused him, only I had not the heart. (…) Oh! thought she, I have been very wicked and selfish – selfish in forgetting them in their sorrows – selfish in forcing George to marry me. I know I’m not worthy of him – I know he would have been happy without me – and yet – I tried, I tried to give him up.\textsuperscript{36}

Amelia for her part is adored by Sir William Dobbin, a friend and colleague of George. In a way his love for her resembles Amelia’s love for George; William loves her very strongly and sacrifices himself in order to secure her happiness. Another striking similarity is that

\textsuperscript{31} ‘The ideal and the heroic’, p. 64. Thackeray did not only adjust the female characters in 	extit{Vanity Fair} in order to attack the conventions of his time, he also corrupted the character of the traditional gentleman.

\textsuperscript{32} VF., p. 177.

\textsuperscript{33} VF., p. 158.


\textsuperscript{35} VF., p. 224.

\textsuperscript{36} VF., p. 224.
Amelia will appear to be unworthy of William’s love in the same way that George proved to be unworthy of Amelia’s devotion. So both Dobbin and Amelia are considered to be fools and each of them ‘[exemplified] the Vanity of this life, (...) longing for what he or she could not get.’

William always considered Amelia’s happiness as his priority. He knew that her well-being depended on George’s expression of his love for her, so Dobbin selflessly provoked George’s recognition of Amelia’s virtues. He was also responsible for the marriage between George and Emmy, thus sacrificing every opportunity for a future together with Amelia. The marriage of George and Amelia however, did not put an end to Dobbin’s loving cares. When fortune turned itself against Amelia and made her a widow, William looked after her in all conceivable ways. When Amelia was separated from her son, he resolved the matter by convincing Amelia’s brother to take care of his sister and his nephew; thus reuniting mother and child. So it is quite evident that Amelia owed William her gratitude; in a way she owed him her life.

Amelia knew all too well that Dobbin was in love with her. She never spoke about it nor gave him any hope of a future union. Nevertheless, Emmy allowed him to take care of her. She even grew accustomed to his admiration and took it for granted;

‘He had placed himself at her feet so long that the poor little woman had been accustomed to trample upon him. She didn’t wish to marry him, but she wished to keep him. She wished to give him nothing, but that he should give her all. It is a bargain not unfrequently levied in love.’

Amelia had become dependent on William in more ways than she was aware of; he was her loving and caring friend, her admirer, he acted as her protector and supported her financially. But this did not suffice to make her love him; she would refuse him if he should propose to her;

Not that Emmy, being made aware of the honest Major’s passion, rebuffed him in any way, or felt displeased with him. Such an attachment from so true and loyal a gentleman could make no woman angry. (…) No more would Emmy by any means encourage her

37 VF., p. 414.
38 VF., pp. 639-640.
admirer, the Major. She would give him that friendly regard which so much excellence and fidelity merited; she would treat him with perfect cordiality and frankness until he made his proposals; and then it would be time enough for her to speak, and to put an end to hopes which could never be realised.  

Rene Girard claimed that Amelia was a representation of the ‘coquette’ because she showed clear disinterest in marriage since her widowhood. He defined “coquetry” ‘as a form of mediated sexual desire in which the beloved concurrently inflames and rejects the lover’s desire.’

The coquette, who needs the desire of the lover in order to feel valued, does not merely feign indifference; she feels no desire. Were she to surrender herself, she could no longer regard herself as desirable. Thus, the coquette must continually provoke desire in a lover or lovers.

So Girard’s view of Amelia as the coquette is very acceptable if we consider that she takes William’s adoration for granted, but refuses to submit to him. Phyllis Dee is of the opinion that Amelia’s refusal to love Dobbin can be explained by her fondness of freedom; ‘It appears that Amelia has struggled not to love Dobbin better, but to love her freedom less. To enact sweet submission is one thing, to submit another.’

Lilia Melani also denotes Amelia’s desire for independence as a possible explanation of her reluctance to marry. This proves to be an acceptable explanation. However, the author subtly hints that there are other possible interpretations as well. First of all, Amelia did not feel herself physically attracted to Dobbin;

Little Amelia, it must be owned, had rather a mean opinion of her husband’s friend, Captain Dobbin. He lisped; he was very plain and homely-looking; and exceedingly

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39 VF., pp. 562-563.


awkward and ungainly.\textsuperscript{44}(220)

Furthermore, her foolish behaviour of clinging to George’s memory also forms an impediment to a possible union between Amelia and Dobbin; ‘George is my husband, here and in heaven. How could I love any other but him? I am his now as when you first saw me, dear William.’\textsuperscript{45}

Thackeray makes clear that none of these three explanations serve as a valid reason for Amelia’s denial to accept William’s proposal, in his description of the latter’s disappointment. Amelia is not worthy of Dobbin’s devotion;

I know what your heart is capable of: it can cling faithfully to a recollection, and cherish a fancy; but it can’t feel such an attachment as mine deserves to mate with, and such as I would have won from a woman more generous than you. No, you are not worthy of the love which I have devoted to you. I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too, bartering away my all of truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love. I will bargain no more; I withdraw. I find no fault with you. You are very good-natured, and have done your best; but you couldn’t – you couldn’t reach up to the height of the attachment which I bore you, and which a loftier soul than yours might have been proud to share. Goodbye, Amelia! I have watched your struggle. Let it end; we are both weary of it.’\textsuperscript{46}

Dobbin’s determination takes Amelia by surprise; yet she is too proud to admit. Soon however, she comes to realize that she is miserable without him. Becky’s disclosure of George’s unfaithfulness finally makes Amelia see the error of her ways; she realizes that she has not treated Dobbin with the respect which he deserved. Recognizing that there is nothing left which could prevent her, she determines to love him; ‘There is nothing to forbid me now,’ she thought. ‘I may love him with all my heart now. Oh, I will, I will, if he will but let me and forgive me.’\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} VF., p. 220.
\textsuperscript{45} VF., p. 568.
\textsuperscript{46} VF., p. 639.
\textsuperscript{47} VF., p. 651.
The narrator concludes this story by stating that ‘he [William] has got the prize he has been trying for all his life.’

The bird has come in at last. There it is with its head on his shoulder, billing and cooing close up to his heart, with soft outstretched wings. This is what he has asked for every day and hour for eighteen years. This is what he pined after. Here it is – the summit, the end – the last page of the third volume. Goodbye, Colonel. God bless you, honest William! – Farewell, dear Amelia. Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!

The author expresses his sympathy to both characters in this farewell. He highly appreciates William’s honesty and he forgives Amelia her foolish behaviour because she possesses the capacity to love.

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48 VF., p. 653.

49 VF., p. 653.
MOTHERHOOD

By now, it has become clear that Thackeray portrayed Amelia as someone who devoted her life to the well-being of others. Often did she make sacrifices to please the individuals surrounding her; ‘– it was, I say, her nature to sacrifice herself and to fling all that she had at the feet of the beloved object.’

Evidently, her son belonged to that group of people who could profit from her loving cares.

In contrast to Rebecca, Amelia took motherhood very seriously and she loved her child to death. She worshipped her son, who turned out to be the image of his father. For Amelia, the birth of her child came at the right moment; she was consumed by pain and grief for the loss of her beloved George and because of that she lost touch with reality, being ‘out of her mind like for six weeks or more’. The birth of little George restored her to sanity;

A day came, of almost terrified delight and wonder, when the poor widowed girl pressed a child upon her breast – a child, with the eyes of George who was gone – a little boy, as beautiful as a cherub. What a miracle it was to hear its first cry! How she laughed and wept over it! how love, and hope, and prayer woke again in her bosom as the baby nestled there! She was safe. The doctors who attended her, and had feared for her life or for her brain, had waited anxiously for this crisis before they could pronounce that either was secure.

Motherhood gave new meaning to Amelia’s life; again, she had someone whom she could adore and take care of and who was in need of her constant love and devotion. The resemblance between the little boy and his father was so strong that it intensified Amelia’s devotion to the child. She considered the boy as all that was left of George (senior), and therefore loved him more, being convinced that she should dedicate her life to him.

She perfected her act of devotion – scarcely allowing anyone to come between her and her child – because she feared that the past would repeat itself; that someone would deprive her of her love’s attention. She was afraid that someone would steal her little boy’s heart the way Rebecca stole George’s. This proves how Amelia did not settle for second place; she wanted to be everything to her son, as he was everything to her. She expressed the same kind of

50 VF., p. 542.  
51 VF., p. 334.  
52 VF., p. 338.
obsessive love and adoration towards her son as she did towards his father. Thackeray makes clear that this behaviour is one of Amelia’s flaws; it is ‘the crime of loving wrongly, too violently, [and] against reason.’\textsuperscript{53} Amelia was aware of this, but she could not muster the strength to control her own desires;

To part with him all day – to send him out to the mercy of a schoolmaster’s cane and his schoolfellows’ roughness was almost like weaning him over again to that weak mother, so tremulous and full of sensibility. He, for his part, rushed off to school with the utmost happiness. He was longing for the change. That childish gladness wounded his mother, who was herself so grieved to part with him. She would rather have had him more sorry, she thought, and then was deeply repentant within herself for daring to be so selfish as to wish her own son to be unhappy.\textsuperscript{54}

Eventually, Amelia is forced to recognize her own selfishness and to overcome her weakness when Mr. Osborne – George’s paternal grandfather – expressed the desire to raise his grandson. Initially, she refused to let go of her son, but soon she discovered that it was in everyone’s and especially George’s advantage if she gave him up to his wealthy grandfather; ‘She herself, by her own selfishness and imprudent love for him, had denied him his just rights hitherto.’\textsuperscript{55} Her own degraded family was financially unable to give the boy a proper education. Amelia’s parents even considered their grandson a financial and emotional burden; he painfully reminded them of his father, whose family had brought them nothing but misfortune. The separation with her son was yet another one of Amelia’s sacrifices made to satisfy her surroundings. I agree with Ioan Williams on his remark that ‘Amelia’s suffering is adequate compensation to the reader for her selfishness and silliness.’\textsuperscript{56}

Amelia’s main aim in her life is pleasing those she loves. This puts her at complete odds with Rebecca, who has but herself as her priority. Thackeray emphasizes the difference between the two women, concerning their maternal instinct, through elaborate descriptions of Amelia’s love for her son. He even claims that her life is reduced to a ‘maternal caress’;

\begin{quote}
How his mother nursed him, and dressed him and lived upon him; how she drove away all nurses, and would scarce allow any hand but her own to touch him; (…) This child
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} VF., p. 161.

\textsuperscript{54} VF., p. 434.

\textsuperscript{55} VF., p. 472.

\textsuperscript{56} Ioan M. Williams, \textit{Thackeray}, p. 65.
was her being. Her existence was a maternal caress. She enveloped the feeble and unconscious creature with love and worship. It was her life which the baby drank in from her bosom. Of nights, and when alone, she had stealthy and intense raptures of motherly love, such as God’s marvellous care has awarded to the female instinct – joys how far higher and lower than reason – blind, beautiful devotions which only women’s hearts know.  

This excerpt proves that Amelia possessed a maternal feeling innate to most women. Thackeray employs this description to reinforce the image of her as the virtuous Victorian angel in the house. Rebecca, by contrast, who broke free from the domestic sphere, lacked such a maternal instinct. Becky could only feign to love her child and only did so when it was profitable.

The importance of Amelia’s relationship with her child is such that it gives proof of her selfishness and weakness. It allows Thackeray to show that this ‘angel in the house’ displays negative traits as well. In a way, Thackeray attacks the stereotypical representation of ladies in his age; he carefully suggests that Amelia and other representations of the ideal lady are corrupt. That society values an image which is less ladylike than would be assumed. I agree with the idea that Thackeray might be criticising ‘the simplistic presentation of the conventional heroine’, and that by implication he would prefer to give a more realistic representation of women; describing them as complex beings.

Amelia’s behaviour towards her son does not only serve to voice the author’s criticism, it also reinforces the belief that Amelia is by nature a loving and caring person. Although Thackeray no longer allows her to fulfil the part of the ideal Victorian wife, he does appreciate her capacity to love;

Amelia’s is to come, when her scoundrel of a husband is well dead with a ball in his odious bowels; when she has had sufferings, a child, and a religion – But she has at present a quality above most people whizz: LOVE – by wh she shall be saved.

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57 VF., p. 338.
59 W. M. Thackeray to his mother, on 2 July 1847, as quoted in Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 59.
At the end of the novel the reader learns that Amelia gave birth to a second child; a little girl. The narrator makes clear that William Dobbin’s love for his daughter is as strong as Amelia’s love for her son; there is no one whom they cared for more;

She cast down her eyes demurely and smiled as they started away from her; Emmy scurrying off on the arm of George (now grown a dashing young gentleman), and the Colonel seizing up his little Janey, of whom he is fonder than of anything in the world – fonder even than of his History of the Punjaub. ‘Fonder than he is of me,’ Emmy thinks, with a sigh.⁶⁰

The narrator also points to Amelia’s envy of her own daughter, because the latter now received most of William’s attention. Thus Amelia’s self-centredness is proven once again.

⁶⁰ VF., p. 657.
THE IDEAL AND THE HEROIC

In many ways *Vanity Fair* forms a break with traditional Victorian works. The most striking aspect is Thackeray’s refusal to employ a heroine as his female protagonist. He does not restrict himself to one female principal character, but introduces two of them to his readers and both of them appear to be unsuitable to fulfil the part of the heroine.

Ioan Williams was quite right when he claimed that ‘Thackeray was attacking the ideas and patterns involved in the fiction of his time and particularly the concepts of the ideal and the heroic (in the novel writer’s sense)’. Instead, he preferred a more realistic approach in his writing, which would allow a more complex representation of his characters. William Thackeray was convinced that ‘(...) the Art of Novels *is* to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality...’ The ‘heroine’ was a stock character which exhibited certain fixed features such as beauty, virtue, dignity and grace and which was confronted with a series of events. As it was not Thackeray’s intention to describe ideal characters, he refused to portray heroes or heroines in his novel. He shattered the illusion of the heroine; in *Vanity Fair* every character displayed imperfections. The subtitle of the novel – *A Novel without a Hero* – gave the readers proper warning.

Interestingly, the author did not simply ban the heroine from *Vanity Fair*; he introduced two anti-heroines who deviated from the traditional description. Thackeray’s intention to break with the tradition of the ideal and the heroic is reflected in his representations of Amelia and Rebecca. Amelia, who comes very close to the typical heroine, proves to be a “‘heroine” (favourable figure) only in potential’. She displayed several imperfections such as selfishness and vanity, which prevented her to fulfil this part. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator literally states that she is not a heroine, thus preventing the deception of his audience; ‘As she is not a heroine, there is no need to describe her person;’ In this sentence he makes clear that there was no need to give a full description of

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64 VF., p. 6.
Amelia’s appearance, since she was not a heroine; Dorothy Compton noticed how ‘in the Victorian novel, physical appearance was a primary means of characterization.’ Despite his initial assurance that Amelia was not a representation of the ideal protagonist, the narrator refers several times to her as ‘his’ heroine;

(…) nor can it be expected that twenty-four young ladies should all be as amiable as the heroine of this work, Miss Sedley (whom we have selected for the very reason that she was the best-natured of all; otherwise what on earth was to have prevented us from putting up Miss Swartz, or Miss Crump, or Miss Hopkins, as heroine in her place?)

These are but trivial incidents to recount in the life of our heroine. Her tale does not deal in wonders, as the gentle reader has already no doubt perceived; and if a journal had been kept of her proceedings during the seven years after the birth of her son, there would have been found few incidents more remarkable in it than that of the measles, recorded in the foregoing page.

Thackeray uses irony to denounce the image of the ideal. He ironically refers to Amelia as ‘our’ heroine in order to create a contrast with the traditional one. In a way, he plays with the notion of the heroine and by implication expresses his refusal to take such a type seriously.

The narrator’s treatment of Rebecca also gives evidence of Thackeray’s tendency to deviate from the rule. In general, she is considered the moral opposite of the ideal Victorian protagonist. Nevertheless, she – and not Amelia – is the one who lives an adventurous life characterized by interesting experiences and incidents. The author even allows her to succeed in her conquest for fame and fortune, whereas the readers expect some kind of intervention or punishment. Ioan Williams observes how this affected the readers;

We cannot rest at the end of Vanity Fair with the image of any ideal relationship, or with the sense of an ideal completeness of any kind. (…) The novel-reader’s ideal is deflated even with the very last words: Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?–Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.

So Thackeray carefully expressed his disapproval of the classic heroine in *Vanity Fair* and constructed his novel around the lives of alternative protagonists. In a way, they serve as

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67 Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 66.
anti-heroines because they do not live up to the readers’ expectations; the angel in the house proves not to be a heroine and the femme fatale who should be held responsible for her actions, succeeds in life.
AMELIA’S STRUGGLE WITH REBECCA: FRIEND OR ENEMY?

No one who reads *Vanity Fair* can suppress the inclination to judge the characters according to one’s own moral standard. The readers’ opinion is guided by the narrator’s estimation of the characters and to a certain degree by the characters’ assessment of each other. We already discussed Becky’s opinion on Amelia, and now we will analyze Emmy’s estimation of Rebecca.

At the beginning of the novel Thackeray describes the two young women as friends. The description of Amelia’s generosity towards Rebecca during her stay at the Sedleys’ proves Emmy’s sympathy for Rebecca;

> She insisted upon Rebecca accepting the white carnelian and the turquoise rings, and a sweet sprigged muslin, which was too small for her now, though it would fit her friend to a nicety; and she determined in her heart to ask her mother’s permission to present her white cashmere shawl to her friend.\(^{68}\)

Amelia acknowledges that she considers Becky as her friend; ‘you know, Rebecca, I shall always be your friend, and love you as a sister – indeed I will.’\(^{69}\) Rebecca however, refuses to confirm that this feeling is reciprocal and indulges in self-pity. This could serve as a hint towards Rebecca’s true nature; she is not compassionate towards the fate of others, her only concern is her own well-being. Therefore I believe that Harriet Blodgett was correct when she assessed Rebecca as ‘incapable of warm human relationships’.\(^{70}\) Amelia nevertheless believed that they were very close friends.

After Rebecca’s departure to Queen’s Crawley, their ‘friendship’ gradually dissolved, for Amelia only had eyes for George and neglected all other (friendly) relationships. For Amelia, this neglect resulted in an uncomfortable confrontation when their paths crossed again; ‘Poor little Amelia blushed as she kissed her friend, and thought she had been guilty of something very like coldness towards her.’\(^{71}\) Amelia felt guilty for her neglect of Rebecca. Despite the fact that Becky ‘performed her part of the embrace with the most perfect briskness and

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\(^{68}\) *VF.*, pp. 15-16.

\(^{69}\) *VF.*, p. 16.


\(^{71}\) *VF.*, p. 125.
energy" and that she gave Amelia the impression that nothing had changed between them, she had established her superiority over Amelia;

Rebecca patronised her with calm superiority: she was so much the cleverer of the two, and her friend so gentle and unassuming, that she always yielded when anybody chose to command, and so took Rebecca’s orders with perfect meekness and good-humour.

The turning point in Amelia’s attitude towards Rebecca can be situated during her honeymoon. Rebecca and George were often to be found in each other’s company, thus neglecting Emmy and giving rise to her jealousy;

In their little drives and dinners, Becky, of course, quite outshone poor Emmy, who remained very mute and timid while Mrs Crawley and her husband rattled away together, and Captain Crawley (and Jos after he joined the young married people) gobbled in silence. Emmy’s mind somehow misgave her about her friend. Rebecca’s wit, spirits, and accomplishments troubled her with a rueful disquiet. They were only a week married, and here was George already suffering ennui, and eager for others’ society!

From this moment on, Amelia started to consider Rebecca as her rival and enemy. This sense of hostility reached its height at Brussels, when Rebecca made clear that Amelia had lost all control over George and that she herself was now the object of his desire;

Becky was just lecturing Mrs Osborne upon the follies which her husband was committing. ‘For God’s sake, stop him from gambling, my dear,’ she said, ‘or he will ruin himself. He and Rawdon are playing at cards every night; and you know he is very poor, and Rawdon will win every shilling from him if he does not take care. Why don’t you prevent him, you little, careless creature? Why don’t you come to us of an evening, instead of moping at home with that Captain Dobbin? I dare say he is très aimable; but how could one love a man with feet of such size? Your husband’s feet are darlings – here he comes. – Where have you been, wretch? Here is Emmy crying her eyes out for you. Are you coming to fetch me for the quadrille?’ And she left her bouquet and shawl by Amelia’s side, and tripped off with George to dance. Women only know how to wound so. There is a poison on the tips of their little shafts which stings a thousand times more than a man’s blunter weapon. Our poor Emmy, who had never hated, never sneered all her life, was powerless in the hands of her remorseless little enemy.

72 VF., p. 125.

73 VF., p. 127.

74 VF., pp. 223-224.

75 VF., p. 267.
We already discussed how Amelia refused to see the truth about George’s behaviour. The fact that her husband showed a distinct interest in Rebecca, despite his wife’s constant love and devotion, was entirely Becky’s fault, or at least this was what Emmy forced herself to believe. Her despair turned into anger and it made her burst out against Rebecca, reproaching her for her sneakiness and ingratitude;

‘When you were quite poor, who was it that befriended you? Was I not a sister to you? You saw us all in happier days before he married me. I was all in all then to him; or would he have given up his fortune, his family, as he nobly did, to make me happy? Why did you come between my love and me? Who sent you to separate those whom God joined, and take my darling’s heart from me – my own husband? Do you think you could love him as I did? His love was everything to me. You knew it, and wanted to rob me of it. For shame, Rebecca! bad and wicked woman – false friend and false wife!’  

After this encounter their paths separated and they did not see each other for many years. When they eventually did meet again, time had tempered Amelia’s anger. She even relapsed into her naïve and submissive behaviour, allowing Rebecca to act as if no quarrel had existed between them. She was introduced to Becky’s misfortunes and immediately decided to forgive her for previous mistakes;

As for Mrs Amelia, she was a woman of such a soft and foolish disposition, that when she heard of anybody unhappy her heart straightway melted towards the sufferer; and as she had never thought or done anything mortally guilty herself, she had not that abhorrence for wickedness which distinguishes moralists much more knowing. (…) – the notion that an old acquaintance was miserable was sure to soften her heart; (…) – we are obliged to confess it – she could even forget a mortal injury.

Amelia immediately took Rebecca in her house. Interestingly, this situation resembles Becky’s earlier stay at the Sedley’s; Amelia’s treatments of Becky now and then are very similar. Also Becky receives a (new) opportunity to ensnare Joseph. And last but not least, there is again a character that disapproves of Rebecca and knows what her real intentions are: in the past this was George Osborne, now it is Dobbin.

Amelia’s unchanged attitude towards Rebecca proves how Emmy assessed Becky’s personality wrongly. She wilfully refused to see fault in her, because this would mean that she should recognize the reality of George’s unfaithfulness as well. So she decided to continue

76 VF., p. 287.
77 VF., p. 625.
her self-delusion in her judgement of others. Nevertheless, she is forced to face reality when Rebecca revealed George’s proposal to elope together. Becky’s decision to reveal the truth might be considered as an act of respect towards Amelia, but we can be sure that it also served her private purpose; it provided her with time and space to swindle Jos Sedley.

Finally, Amelia was able to estimate Rebecca’s true nature. Becky – together with George – had worked to make Emmy miserable because of their egotism. Nevertheless, in a way Amelia owed Rebecca gratitude, because she allowed her to resume her life. This proves how it is very difficult to assess Rebecca’s behaviour unambiguously; despite our inclination to judge her as an immoral person, we have to recognize that she is not completely bad. She acted only out of selfishness, but this does not mean that all her actions were to be considered as crimes.
CONCLUSION

It has already been said that Thackeray’s main intention with *Vanity Fair* is to criticize humanity’s vanity. He deliberately portrays a society which is characterized by envy and selfishness. Thackeray’s belief that ‘(…) the Art of Novels *is* to represent Nature’\(^ {78} \) contributes to his realistic and disturbing description of this world; he does not deny the existence of the immoral and dark side of life. By doing so, he shatters the illusion of the ideal and provesthat the classic depiction of heroes and heroines is untenable. The character of Amelia serves this purpose.

Initially the narrator describes her as the image of the angel in the house; he emphasizes her kind and tender nature and her submissive behaviour towards her husband. All in all she is presented as the exemplary woman. But soon it becomes evident that Amelia displays certain negative traits; the narrator makes clear that he disapproves her foolish behaviour which emerges from her romantic beliefs and the idealization of her lover George. However, the key to the narrator’s disapproval of Amelia lies in her selfishness. Amelia gives evidence of self-centredness in her refusal to face the truth about her husband; she rather believes that she was happy with George than that she would acknowledge that her marriage was a failure. She is also driven by selfishness in the treatment of her son; she wants to keep him to herself and hopes that the boy will adore her the way she adores him. Nevertheless, it is her attitude towards Dobbin which forms the ultimate proof of her egoism. All these negative aspects prove that Amelia is not simply Rebecca’s moral opposite and allow the author to prove that Amelia fails to live up to the prescribed ideal. In a way, the author employs Amelia’s personality to suggest that this ideal is far from realistic and in that way untenable.

Nevertheless Thackeray tries to maintain the idea that Amelia for the most part can be considered as a loving and caring person. To achieve this he emphasizes her kind nature, her unconditional love for her son, her ability to sacrifice herself and her eventual appreciation and love for Dobbin.

All these conflicting characteristics serve to prove that a one-sided evaluation of Amelia is impossible; she is a realistic representation of a complex individual. Despite the

\(^ {78} \) W. M. Thackeray to Masson, on 6 May 1851, as quoted in Ioan M. Williams, *Thackeray*, p. 10.
fact that Amelia displays certain vices, Thackeray is inclined to forgive her because she was able to love truthfully.
III. GRAPHIC PORTRAITURE
INTRODUCTION

Frank Palmeri\textsuperscript{1} explains how the eighteenth century usually is considered as ‘the golden age of satire in Britain’, whereas the nineteenth century gave rise to ‘the realistic novel, in which satire played a most fugitive and subordinate role.’ He makes clear that this transition did not take place overnight by his claim that ‘narrative and visual satire thus persisted as possibilities for the expression of sustained cultural and political critique through the thirties and into the forties [of the nineteenth century]’. Thackeray was one of those writers who continued to use satire during this period; \textit{Vanity Fair} which was published in 1847-1848 serves as the ultimate example. For this novel the author did not only rely on ‘narrative satire’, he employed illustrations as well to underline the satirical content of his writings. On this John Tufail\textsuperscript{2} says that ‘it was not uncommon for illustrators and writers to conspire to use illustrations to either undermine or enhance textual content.’ I will prove that this is exactly what William M. Thackeray did in his \textit{Vanity Fair}.

Thackeray himself created all the illustrations to his \textit{Vanity Fair}, which was published in \textit{Punch} magazine in twenty monthly parts. \textit{Punch} was a very popular magazine that initially was known for its satiric bias. Yet, it had more to offer than the average satirical paper, as Palmeri describes;

\begin{quote}
It differed from such papers [cheap satiric papers] in its expanded list of departments, which included reports on the fine arts as well as theater and politics, in its more numerous and more polished illustrations, especially once John Leech became an illustrator, and, apparently most importantly for its success, in its avoidance of humor that could be considered coarse, vulgar, or sexual.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}


Thackeray’s graphics to *Vanity Fair* match the above mentioned features; they are numerous, polished and they do avoid the depiction of the sexual. This novel is not Thackeray’s first work which is equipped with his own illustrations. John Buchanan-Brown⁴ explains how Thackeray already provided *The National Standard* with ‘fifteen sketches reproduced as woodcuts (…) between May and August 1833’, although they were ‘mere trifles’. Even Thackeray’s first book contains illustrations: Peter Shillingsburg points out that it consists for the most part of graphics since ‘*Flore et Zéphyr*, Thackeray’s first book, has no text beyond captions to the lithographs.’⁵ Evidently Thackeray also provided several sketches to *Punch* magazine before he started writing *Vanity Fair* and he continued to illustrate his later works as well. This proves that Thackeray was aware of the importance of such graphics: illustrations in books and magazines were fashionable in the Victorian era. Patricia Anderson⁶ even claims that the popularity of magazines often was determined by the illustrations which they presented; ‘the desire of the populace for images was a central element in the popularity of these journals’.

It has already been mentioned that graphics can reinforce the implied meaning or content of a text, thus being very suitable to illustrate satiric writings. Yet they are functional in other ways as well; George Du Maurier points out that an illustration can result in the vivid recollection of the story;

> But the arrested gesture, the expression of face, the character and costume, may be as true to nature and life as the best actor can make them. Within the limits assigned, these little dumb motionless puppets may be as graceful, or grotesque, or humorous, or terrible as people in real life — indeed, more so, they may continue to haunt the memory when the letterpress they illustrate is forgotten.⁷

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Joan Stevens\(^8\) clarifies how this was of great importance to serial publications; the reader had to remember the content of the previous number if he wanted ‘to link the successive movements of part-issue.’ Since *Vanity Fair* was a serial publication, we can be sure that Thackeray’s illustrations served this purpose.

Stevens is convinced that ‘Thackeray deliberately planned his illustrations to go just where his first printer put them’\(^9\), meaning that the author did not place his graphics at random. From this we gather that the graphics in *Vanity Fair* are functional in two ways: on the one hand the position of the illustrations often serves to underline the content of the text, as is described by Christine Alfano;

(...) -- his engravings interacted with the text even at the level of the individual sentence. That is, he would often break a paragraph in half with a half-page etching designed to interrupt/complement/comment on whatever he was discussing in his prose.\(^{10}\)

Obviously, this allowed Thackeray to emphasize his satirical comments on society. I believe that Henry Kingsley\(^{11}\) is correct when he remarks that ‘he [Thackeray] used these wonderful woodcuts, as most novelists use the titles to their chapters, as a key to the text – as a means of forcing home his moral, not only on the ear but on the eye.’ On the other hand, the position of several graphics proves that he strove to make his readers recollect certain scenes more than others, which allowed him to continue on the matter the next month, thus providing the necessary link between successive numbers.

*Vanity Fair* contains different types of drawings. Lilia Melani\(^{12}\) describes how there are four kind of graphics in the novel, being ‘full-page drawings for which he wrote captions’, ‘large, but not full-page, drawings with no captions’, ‘small sketches’ and ‘drawings using the

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first letter of each chapter’. W. E. Church\textsuperscript{13} points out that Thackeray succeeded in his intention to make all those types of illustrations ‘explain the story and interpret its sentiment’, although there ‘is much that is slovenly and inartistic in the draughtsmanship’. This remark on the quality of the illustrations corresponds to Thackeray’s own opinion on his \textit{Vanity Fair} drawings; he referred to them as ‘tenth or twentieth rate performances having a meaning perhaps but a ludicrous badness of execution’.\textsuperscript{14} Stevens explains how Thackeray blamed ‘those villains of wood engravers’\textsuperscript{15} for the disappointing outcome of his illustrations.

I will now turn to the analysis of the illustrations on Rebecca and Amelia and look how they relate to the descriptions which Thackeray provides in his text. For convenience of comparison I have classified the illustrations into three categories; the first category contains illustrations that give an insight to Rebecca’s personality, the second category holds drawings that shed light on Amelia’s character and the third category contains illustrations that depict both female protagonists at the same time.

\textsuperscript{13} W. E. Church as quoted in Joan Stevens, ‘Thackeray’s ‘Vanity Fair’’, in A Review of English Literature, 6: 1, January 1965, p. 20.


GRAPHIC PORTRAYAL OF REBECCA

It is no surprise that there are quite a number of drawings of Rebecca in *Vanity Fair*, for she is the most important character in the novel. I will point out how these illustrations\(^\text{16}\) work to reinforce the image which Thackeray establishes in his text.

In the beginning of the novel the narrator presents Rebecca as a small and fair-haired young woman. These physical features\(^\text{17}\) are maintained in Thackeray’s drawings to make sure that the reader will recognize the woman in the sketches as Becky Sharp. Yet, the reader’s recognition of Rebecca relies for the most part on another aspect; the deciding factor in these drawings is the odious sneer\(^\text{18}\) on Becky’s face with which Thackeray repeatedly depicts her. This facial expression suggests that she is up to no good and reveals her scheming and vicious personality. Of course this kind of illustration is characterized by exaggeration, but it allows Thackeray to emphasize Rebecca’s wickedness.

Thackeray deliberately illustrates scenes which help establish Rebecca’s character; for instance her departure from Miss Pinkerton’s Academy\(^\text{19}\) or her imitation of Miss Pinkerton and Miss Jemima.\(^\text{20}\) These illustrations make clear that Becky was the opposite of the traditional heroine; the images clearly depict her as behaving badly, thus reinforcing the negative descriptions provided by the narrator. Thackeray also emphasizes Becky’s exploitation of men in his illustrations. The initial to chapter IV\(^\text{21}\) represents Rebecca who is ‘angling for a fat fish’.\(^\text{22}\) Lilia Melani\(^\text{23}\) points out how this image is a metaphor for Becky’s

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\(^\text{17}\) See appendix, illustration 16, p. 104.

\(^\text{18}\) See appendix, illustrations 1-3, 5, 7, 8, 15 and 17, p. 89-91, pp. 93, pp. 95-96, p. 103, p. 105.

\(^\text{19}\) See appendix, illustration 1, p. 89.

\(^\text{20}\) See appendix, illustration 2, p. 90.

\(^\text{21}\) See appendix, illustration 4, p. 92.


attempt to seduce Joseph Sedley. Another representation of Rebecca as the temptress is to be found in illustration 1524, in which she ‘entangles’ Jos in a web of green silk. This drawing comments on the description of this arrangement by the narrator; ‘But this arrangement left Mr Joseph Sedley tête-à-tête with Rebecca, at the drawing-room table, where the latter was occupied in netting a green silk purse.’25 The illustration reveals that Becky considers Jos as a man suited to become her husband, or rather her sponsor, and that she is trying to seduce him. Thackeray also illustrates the flirtation which is going on between Becky and George Osborne.26 In short, he emphasizes her search for a sponsor through these drawings. The initial to chapter XLIV27 is again an example of Becky as the temptress; this figure refers to the narrator’s description of Rebecca as a Siren;

They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twangling their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims.28

This illustration emphasizes Rebecca’s capacity to perform evil and ‘her acquisitive desire, snobbery and love of excitement [which] would always lead her into dubious relations with influential men, and shady transactions with any likely tools.’29

Illustration 730 is perhaps the most important sketch in the entire novel since it addresses the question whether Rebecca is a murderer or not. Maria Dibattista31 argues that ‘the illustration

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24 See appendix, illustration 15, p. 103.
26 See appendix, illustrations 5 and 17, p. 93, p. 105.
27 See appendix, illustration 8, p. 96.
28 VF., p. 607.
30 See appendix, illustration 7, p. 95.
presents an “interesting” (in Thackeray’s sense) explanation of Sedley’s suspicious death, for there is, in fact, no corresponding evidence in the written text to corroborate the visual testimony against Becky.’ This illustration allows Thackeray to shed light on the situation without offending any of his readers’ since ‘the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name.’

Maria Dibattista clearly understood the message which Thackeray incorporated in this illustration:

In a murderous pantomime, a terrorized Jos Sedley pleads with the “Good Samaritan,” Colonel Dobbin, to deliver him from the demonic schemer, while an inspired Becky balefully looks on from behind a curtain, seemingly awaiting the propitious moment to strike. (…) The details of the illustration – and they are designedly indistinct – alone prove incriminating. Becky is Clytemnestra primarily in her attitude, in the aggressive and threatening stance she assumes toward her potential victim. Her hand, the agent of her murderous intention, is blurred in shadow, allowing just the suggestion of a poised weapon. The caption identifies Becky with Clytemnestra; the illustration insists on dark equivocations, on a shady and shadowy reality.

So the illustration suggests that Rebecca – like a true Clytemnestra - had murdered Joseph, since it depicts her with a dagger in her hand. Interestingly, there is another drawing of Rebecca with a dagger. This illustration describes how Rebecca had performed the part of Clytemnestra during a charade at Lord Steyne’s. This can be interpreted as the precursor of the crisis; Becky’s convincing impersonation of Clytemnestra proves how she is up to the task. Yet, Thackeray deliberately blurs Becky’s depiction in the drawing, which indicates that he prefers to remain vague on the matter in order to avoid censorship. Despite his efforts to avoid an actual confirmation of Rebecca’s guilt, I agree with John Tufail who argues that this illustration is used ‘to compromise Becky Sharp’.

32 VF., p. 606.
34 Clytemnestra is a figure from Greek mythology. She murdered her husband Agamemnon.
35 See appendix, illustration 6, p. 94.
Generally speaking, the illustrations of Rebecca help to establish her as an immoral person.\textsuperscript{37} It is striking that Thackeray only employs his illustrations to underline her negative points, he does not portray her as the admirable and appealing woman who ‘only wants to live herself out to the full.’\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} See appendix, illustration 9, p. 97.

**GRAPHIC PORTRAYAL OF AMELIA**

In general Thackeray illustrates Amelia as a dark-haired, pretty girl with a kind smile on her face.\(^{39}\) This type of illustration reinforces the image of Amelia as the angel in the house. Illustration 11\(^{40}\) is as a good example of this; there is a noticeable difference between Amelia, who is presented as an innocent girl, and the people surrounding her. Emmy is the only woman in the picture who does not hold her head high in the air, which can be interpreted as the proof of her submissive attitude. Her innocence and exemplary conduct emerge from her gracious pose and her dreamy gaze puts her at odds with the others, who are characterized by their depreciatory expressions.

Amelia’s characterization is determined by her tendency to love ‘too violently, [and] against reason.’\(^{41}\) This obsessive type of love results in her unhappiness for the larger part of her life. Thackeray illustrates\(^{42}\) how the obsessive idealization of her husband and son make her miserable. Illustrations 13 and 14\(^{43}\) depict Amelia when she is waiting for respectively her husband and her son. She no longer smiles, but stares in front of her, longing for the moment when her beloved will come into view. These illustrations emphasize Emmy’s loneliness; she sits there by herself and the only aim she has is to await the other. On the one hand these illustrations rouse the reader’s compassion, but on the other hand they serve as comments on Amelia’s foolish and selfish behaviour, expressing the thought that this will not bring her happiness.

Furthermore, Thackeray also illustrates Amelia’s treatment of Dobbin. Illustration 12\(^{44}\) can serve as a metaphor for Emmy’s conduct; she allows Dobbin to come close by, but in the end she will turn her back to him and focus on her own pursuits. The sketch shows how Amelia is totally absorbed by her drawing, which results in the neglect of Dobbin. She even sits with her back to him, while he is watching her every move.

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40 See appendix, illustration 11, p. 99.

41 *VF.*, p. 161.

42 See appendix, illustrations 13, 14 and 17, pp. 101-102, p. 105.

43 See appendix, illustrations 13 and 14, pp. 101-102.

44 See appendix, illustration 12, p. 100.
It is evident that Thackeray illustrates all those different aspects which determine Amelia’s life. As with Rebecca, the illustrations serve to reinforce the image of Amelia which the narrator has established in the text. Yet, some drawings are employed to formulate critique on Emmy, thus supplying an alternative perspective on this little angel.
THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN BECKY AND AMELIA

The main purpose of the illustrations that show both female protagonists at the same time is to emphasize the contrast between the two women. Evidently, there is a difference in physical appearance; Rebecca has blond hair whereas Amelia is dark-haired. Lilia Melani even notices how the illustration of the two girls entering the Sedley drawing room reveals that Amelia is taller than Rebecca. These differences in appearance allow the reader to identify each character without difficulties. However, it has already been mentioned that the differences between these two women surpass their looks.

It is striking how Thackeray employs his illustrations to *Vanity Fair* to depict the competition between the two female protagonists. The first real confrontation between Becky and Amelia is shown in illustration 17, in which Rebecca’s flirtation with George becomes evident. The illustrator deliberately places Rebecca in front which allows her to distract attention from Amelia, who is somewhere at the back of the drawing. This implies that Amelia does not partake in what is happening between George and Rebecca, she is merely a looker-on. The sneer on Rebecca’s face contrasts sharply with Amelia’s look of concern. These facial expressions describe the tension between the two women and serve to portray Rebecca as the enterprising schemer and Amelia as the passive and powerless woman. Illustration 18 is another example of a drawing which shows the clash between the two protagonists. Becky is looking down on Amelia who is crying her heart out at the discovery of George’s proposal to elope with Rebecca. The depreciatory glance which Becky throws at Amelia proves Rebecca’s frigidity; she does not have a spark of emotion. Amelia by contrast is overwhelmed by her emotions. Again, these depictions serve to reinforce the image which the narrator establishes in the text.

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46 See appendix, illustration 16, p. 104.

47 See appendix, illustration 17, p. 105.

48 See appendix, illustration 18, p. 106.
The two illustrations discussed, are in marked contrast with the drawings in which Becky and Amelia are depicted as friends. In these drawings there is little evidence of the competition between them. Thackeray deliberately places both women together in the centre of the illustration, so that both receive equal attention from the viewer. However, the facial expressions again reveal that these two women are not alike.

Thackeray also illustrates the final encounter between Becky and Amelia. This drawing depicts how Amelia, alarmed by the confrontation with Rebecca, moves away from the latter. Rebecca, who has taken on the role of a pious woman, is depicted without the famous sneer; she is actually smiling. We can interpret this smile as the result of Becky’s success to establish herself in the world; it was no longer necessary for her to scheme in order to provide herself with money. Yet, we are best to follow Amelia’s example by being suspicious of Becky’s smile, for we cannot tell if it is a genuine one.


50 See appendix, illustration 20, p. 108.
CONCLUSION
In this dissertation I have tried to indicate that the portrayal of Rebecca and Amelia serves Thackeray’s purpose to satirize humanity’s frailty. The imperfections displayed by these two women allow the author to use them as the basic principles for his analysis of society. Rebecca for her part serves as the representation of the corrupted individual:

She is not simply the agent who enables us to enter different milieux (sic) in her wake, she sums up in herself the mentality of the society which Thackeray wishes to study. She is the mirror in which the various aspects of the fair converge into a compact picture.¹

Thackeray shows how her entire life is determined by her aim to rise into society. He describes how she exploits others to achieve this goal, thus emphasizing her selfishness and frigidity. Yet, she is presented as an accomplished woman with a zest for living who succeeds in her intentions. I agree with Henri Talon when he says that ‘she is one of the most brilliant liars in literature. A vice carried to such height, with ever renewed brio and flourish, and an unfailing wealth of invention, seems so unreal that it ceases to be obnoxious.’²

Amelia also proves to be fallible, but Thackeray rather uses her character to show that the classic depiction of the heroine which was popular in romance fiction proved to be insufficient to give a realistic representation of society. Although she comes very close to the traditional angel in the house, Thackeray refuses to reduce her to this type. He makes clear that Becky and Amelia are no moral opposites since neither of them is completely good or bad. Instead he proves his audience that both women share the same motive: their self-centredness.

So we can conclude that both women prove to be true inhabitants of Vanity Fair because of their liability to deterioration.


APPENDIX
I. Rebecca Sharp

Illustration 1: Rebecca’s Farewell
ILLUSTRATION 3: MISS SHARP IN HER SCHOOL-ROOM
ILLUSTRATION 4: CHAPTER IV (INITIAL)
ILLUSTRATION 8: CHAPTER XLIV (INITIAL)
II. Amelia Sedley

I L L U S T R A T I O N 1 0
ILLUSTRATION 11: MR. OSBORNE’S WELCOME TO AMELIA
ILLUSTRATION 12: A FINE SUMMER EVENING
III. The encounter between Becky and Amelia

ILLUSTRATION 15: MR. JOSEPH ENTANGLED
ILLUSTRATION 16
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