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AN EXPOSITION OF SATIRE ON CONTEMPORARY UPPER MIDDLE –CLASS ENGLISH SOCIETY IN VANITY FAIR

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ABSTRACT

William Makepeace Thackeray was born in Calcutta on 18 July 1811. Both his parents, Richmond Thackeray and Anne Becher were of Anglo – Indian descent. He suddenly died from the bursting of a blood vessel in the brain on 24 December 1863. He was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery on December 30, with an estimated two thousand mourners paying their respects. Only a bust does honor to his memory in Westminster Abbey. Like many big men - William Makepeace Thackeray stood six feet four inches - he had the most gentle and lovable manners, and was the idol of his children and all young people.

SUMMARY

William Makepeace Thackeray is one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian age. He found that English novel had strayed from the paths of realism. He reacted against all romanticism and led it back again to real life. In his hands, the novel is not irradiated by the glow of romance; neither is it brightened by the rose spectacles of sentiments. There are no intrigues, no hair breadth escape, no long last hairs, no mistaken identities, no haunted castles and no ghosts. Indeed the entire paraphernalia of conventional romance has been done away by him. His novels deal with the real and probable human situations, and provide an escape from the realities of life. “Thackeray is the first novelist to use the novels consciously to express a criticism of life.” (Cecil 7).

In 1847-48 William Makepeace Thackeray hit the big time with *Vanity Fair*. It is the best known of his novels. The novel had a slow start; the first chapters were rejected by several publishers, but eventually it sold in the neighborhood of 7,000 numbers in a month. Just as importantly, it was the talk of the town, and Thackeray finally had a name that gained notice and reviews in journals. *Vanity Fair* was his first great work, and was intended to express his own views of the social life about him, and a protest against the over drawn heroes of popular novels. There are many different booths in the novel, given over to the sole of “all sorts of vanities,” as cheats, rogues, juggling, games, play, fools, apes, knaves and that of every kind. But there is also another side of social life of that time in *Vanity Fair*. There are men and masculinity in the characters of Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*. He styles this work “a novel without hero”. The whole action of the story, which is without plot or development, revolves about two women who let nothing stand in the way of their selfish desire to get the most out of the fools who largely constitute the society. “Only once did the paint openly a panorama of human life and call it *Vanity Fair*.” (Cecil 64)

William Makepeace Thackeray is regarded like one of the greatest of English satirists. As a satirist, he takes his place in the long line of English satirists as Dryden, Swift, Addison, Steel, Pope, Fielding, Byron, etc. He began his literary career by writing satires as “The Irish Sketchbook” and “The Book of Snobs”. A true satirist is a critic of human manners and human institutions because he wants improvement and correction in contemporary society. Satire may be gentle and mild, so mild that it may be hard to distinguish from humor which aims merely at innocent laughter, or it may be sardonic, bitter and savage. As Swift is the most bitter and savage of English satirists and Fielding is the mildest.

Vanity Fair, a novel of Victorian upper middle class English society, was first published in serial form in 1847-48. The title of the novel shows its theme. It is satiric exposure of the materialism, false money values, snobbery and craze for social climbing of upper middle-class English society in the first half of 19th century. In this novel, Thackeray portrays the conventions and manners of genteel society realistically and effectively. This novel is a most valuable proof to show, how England was riddled with false values of manners in the Victorian era? Besides being an exposure of human wishes, it is also a satire on the corrupt and degenerate social institutions of that time like the Church, the Army and Parliament, it is also a satire on romance of love and chivalry, and the romance of war and adventure. “We’re the only three Christians in the country, my love.” (Tilak 190)

Thackeray analyses the human life in contemporary society and ridicules its vanities, ignorance, self-deceptions, affections, hypocrisy, snobbery, and craze for social climbing, false values and worship of money. A cross-section of contemporary society is presented to us and every one of its members represents someone or other folly, vanity, or affection of *Vanity Fair*.

Condition of the social institutions was not good at that time. The social institutions are represented by different characters, and it is through these characters that their degeneracy and decay is ridiculed and exposed. As M.G.Sundell says, “Personifying institutions by the men who serve them, he sets up a satiric portrait gallery of fools and knaves, whose very presence in public life constitutes a condemnation of the established order”. He shows Parliament mainly in the persons of Lord Stene and Sir Pitt Crawleys, whose names imply their moral nature. The established Church appears as the High and Dry Bute Crawley, amiable and dense, who hunts or sheeps off his wine while his wife composes his sermons. Less appealing, if anything, are the Dissenters, represented by the overbearing Lady Southdown and her daughter. General Tufto, a vain flirt, personifies the upper section of the army, for Thackeray makes clear that the competent and brave Michael O’Dowd reaches command only through unusual good luck. Embodying the colonial and foreign services are Joseph Sedley, Rawdon Crawley, the younger Pitt Crawley. In a deliciously ironic reminiscence inspired by Becky’s presentations in George IV, Thackeray satirizes even the Crown, in the person of, “the First Gentleman of Europe”. In

this way, he shows the various organizations which embody the values of society as inefficient and corrupt.

There is also a satire on romantic sentiment in *Vanity Fair*. One can observe romantic love within characters of Thackeray but there is no reality and belief. In the novel George Osborne is a parody of the conventional hero of romance. Instead of devotion, constancy, and self-sacrifice, we get nothing but inconstancy and egoism. Osborne is willing to give up his beloved Amelia when his father orders him to do so. After marriage, he thinks more of himself than of his beloved, buys presents for himself not for her, and soon after marriage, on the eve of Waterloo, is ready to elope with Rebecca. Amelia similarly is a satiric exposure of the conventional romantic heroine. She is true to the memory of her beloved husband for full fifteen years and then is disillusioned and finds that he was not worthy for her love and devotion. Dobbin ultimately discovers that Amelia is not all worthy of his life-long devotion and constancy that she is made of ordinary clay, cold, selfish and stupid. Dobbin himself, though chivalrous and devoted, is a fool in his love of Amelia and affection and friendship for George. His objects of love are unworthy, and he is awkward with large hands and feet. But he is the only true gentleman in the novel. All the characters are self-deceived pursuing phantom ambition or clinging to phantom loyalties. No one reaches full self-fulfillment and frustration in some measure is the common human fates.

Thackeray shows the reality of officers of army, war and adventure of those days in *Vanity Fair*. War is neither romantic nor heroic, it is beastly and brutal in which homes are ruined and thousands are made widows and orphans. Soldiers are not at all heroic; they go to the front merely because they must. On the eve of the battle of Waterloo; Jos Sedley flees Brussels and George Osborne is ready to elope with Becky. The Duchess of Richmond gives a ball; there are intrigues and counter-intrigues to secure an invitation to it. None cares a fig for the country or for the enemy who is close at hand. Patriotism and heroic virtues are mere names; officers of English army care more for their own flesh, for their own comfort, than for the armies which they must lead against the enemy. William Makepeace Thackeray prefaces the scene of George Osborne's death in the battlefield with certain remarks in which death is pictured "as a prettified tribal version of the immoral brutality congenital of man". Soldiers who fight and kill each other are said to carry out, "the Devil's Code of Honour". Their talk and their jokes at the expense of women in the mess and the club reveal the truth about their manners and morals with brutal realism.

There is romantic glorification of criminals in the novel, as was normal in contemporary society. Becky Sharp an adventuress, a rogue, a wolf and not at all a lamb. To speak of the compassion, gentleness and charity of criminals and adventures is a ridiculous situation. Becky and her husband think only of themselves. Limitless are the honest, innocent people, like Miss Briggs and Raggles, whom they have greedily and cruelly ruined and fleeced. Becky is even a heartless

and insensitive mother, and an unfaithful wife to a husband who has been essentially kind and innocent.

William Makepeace Thackeray satires on every aspect of contemporary society even belong to human life or to the culture of society. Many characters of the novel cherish the money of their youthful love affairs of the past. Jane Osborne recalls her brief flirtation with her drawing master, as she grows old and withered in her father's house. Miss Briggs also cherishing the memory of a youthful affair is ready to love whosoever may come her way. Even Backy remembers an early lover. All are in love either in the present or enjoy vicariously the romances of their vanished youth, and all are equally disillusioned in the long run. In the same way, the romantic glorification of the English bravery during the war with Napoleon is satirically treated.

His introduction of contemporary vanities and affections is normally mild, gentle and good natured, but occasionally he can also be bitter and savage. There is savagery and bitterness in the way in which he shows us how to people in *Vanity Fair* flatter upon the rich and kick the poor. Mrs. Sedley objects to the marriage of Backy with her son, for she is a mere Governess, and George Osborne also works against her, for he would not like to have a mere Governess as his sister-in-law. Even the servants of the Sedley joint in this hunt against Becky, and when she falls from grace, her own servants turn against her. "These aspects of life have been crystallized in the novel, as they were in Victorian life through social relationship and these centers around marriage and money" (Kettle149)

The characters in the novel either themselves moved by vanity or ruined by the vanity of others from together a brutal, sterile and fragmented world. In the background of this world there are insanity and violence. There are violent old men furious at their sons, and pitiful spinster, clutching at husbands and lusting for other women's children. The Satire on Contemporary Upper Middle –Class English Society is often cruel and vicious, but despite the occasional savagery of the picture, *Vanity Fair*, surprisingly enough, remains a great comic novel. It abounds in characters and situations which are simply funny and amusing. Thackeray has the incomparable art of making us accept even the worst in his terrible world as inevitable, sad, funny and valuable, because it is human.

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