

## *Vanity Fair*

### —The meaning of *Vanitas Vanitatum*—

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Lord David Cecil remarks “Thackeray is the first novelist to do what Tolstoy and Proust were to do more elaborately — use the novel to express a conscious, considered criticism of life. He has generalised from the particular instances of his observation to present his reader with a systematic philosophy of human nature.”<sup>1</sup> In *Vanity Fair*, to what extent does he observe human nature *systematically* and criticize human life *consciously*?

*Vanity Fair* is essentially a moral fable with human vanity, and shows the commonest view of life in his novels. In order to know his attitude toward ethical problems, it is necessary to see how he treats the relation between the characters and the society they live in. Before the story begins, Thackeray introduces his characters as puppets:

The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire: the Amelia Doll, though it has had a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest care by the artist: the Dobbin Figure, though apparently clumsy, yet dances in a very amusing and natural manner . . .<sup>2</sup>

The first chapter gives the strong contrast in the two characters, Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp, which is the basis of the double stories. One is good, kind and rich, and the other bad, ill-natured and poor. Their careers are juxtaposed in contrasting curves of development. Amelia is pretty and has “such a kindly, smiling, tender, gentle, generous heart of her own, as won the love of everybody who came near her.”<sup>3</sup> Although she is the sort of girl best described in those days as ‘a dear creature,’ Thackeray tells that “she is not a heroine, . . . her nose was rather short than otherwise, and her cheeks a great deal too round and red for a heroine,”<sup>4</sup> and he often call her ‘silly’ or ‘stupid.’ Amelia is Thackeray’s ironic caricature of the traditional heroine of fiction up to his time. Thackeray stresses her stupidity in her blind devotion to the worthless George Osborne and her attitude toward William Dobbin. She loves and believes George, who is conceited, disloyal, arrogant, a “selfish humbug,” a “low-bred, cockney-dandy,”<sup>5</sup> as Becky says. In the de-

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