

## 07. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Realists

Besides the Romantic poetry and fiction of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there flourished yet another tradition of fiction writing in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, later called “social realism” or “critical realism.” The realist novel combines a focus on the individual character with exploration of broader social issues and attention to different layers of society. The important issues of the Victorian society (the reign of Queen Victoria, 1837-1901) were particularly the following: the effects of the Industrial Revolution, the role and position of women, the implications of new science (particularly discoveries in geology and Darwin’s theory of evolution), and Britain’s position as a global superpower. The characters of Victorian novels feel their lives directly influenced by these difficult and/or controversial issues and navigate through them, and through their individual stories, these wider topics are considered and reflected on.

Regarding the “Woman Question,” the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a major change. The change didn’t come about either smoothly or quickly; rather, the role and position of women was one of the very controversial topics of Victorian society. Among the early authors who argued that women were intellectually equal to men (which was by no means a standard view, quite the contrary), were Margaret Fuller in the USA and Mary Wollstonecraft in Britain, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) was a pioneering argument for women’s equality, insisting that the reason why women seem to be inferior to men is the fact that they do not have access to education.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century society, women had very few rights. Not only were they excluded from voting, but they were not even able to own anything directly. If a single woman or a widow had any fortune, it had to be administered for her by a male relative. Among lower class people, women of course had to work, and worked very hard, in agriculture or in horrible conditions in factories, but among upper class society, women were expected not to have any professional job. Among the elites, a woman was expected to get married, support her husband, oversee the household, take care of her children and create a happy, peaceful atmosphere at home, to be the “angel in the house.” Education for ladies focused on skills such as sewing and embroidering, drawing and painting, playing a musical instrument and singing. A lady was expected to be able to converse pleasantly and to entertain guests, but women were not expected to understand business, politics or philosophy, nor to be interested in them. The male and female spheres were very strictly separated in the Victorian society. Thus, an upper class woman had very few prospects for an independent life if she remained single. Only a few respectable professions were open to her: a governess or a lady’s companion. The division of male and female roles in society was commonly accepted and believed to be so given by God or by Nature. Men were expected to have their jobs, earn a living, go out; sexual misconduct was much more tolerable in a man than in a woman. Women’s qualities were to be tenderness, innocence, affection, and various versions of submissiveness and passivity.

Upper class women were placed, as it were, on a pedestal: they were to be admired, cared for and protected from the difficulties of life. Since they could not have a job, they were limited to overseeing the household and the children, yet much of this work was done by servants. As a result, women sometimes suffered from boredom, having nothing else to pass time with than visits, walks, sewing, drawing, or reading. Again, this was absolutely not the case of poorer women, but among the middle class and upper class families, female idleness was something like a symbol of status. While

many women accepted this situation and internalized the conventions, some women challenged them, in more or less radical ways. Queen Victoria herself commented on this in a private letter to her daughter: "There is great happiness in devoting oneself to another who is worthy of one's affection; still, men are very selfish and the woman's devotion is always one of submission which makes our poor sex so very unenviable. This you will feel hereafter—I know; though it cannot be otherwise as God has willed it so."

Issues related to the Woman Question were discussed in print, in various pamphlets and magazines, and also in fiction. There were many significant female novelists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; some of them were already discussed. Beside the Brontë sisters or Mary Shelley, it is important to add at least two more.

### **Jane Austen (1775-1817)**

Austen came from a ministerial family (Anglican) in Hampshire; she was one of 8 children. Although the girls' education was restricted, their father had a good library and Jane had access to it. Jane was never married but lived with her family; after their father retired they moved to Bath and after his death the remaining women struggled financially until the remaining sisters and their mother were given a house in the countryside by one of their brothers. Jane had at least one romantic relationship in her life but her suitor decided to give up the relationship, most likely for financial reasons. In Austen's fiction, the social standing of the characters and the financial realities of upper middle class women are a very important context for courtship and marriage.

The social novels of Jane Austen, or "domestic" or "courtship novels," as they are sometimes called, stand somewhat apart from the revolutionary changes brought about by Romantic literature. Hers is a more conservative outlook; this is no call for revolutionary liberation or departure from older restricting traditions. Her focus is on the conventional upper class, who seem to be unconcerned about the great social changes going on around them, be it the French Revolution or the plight of workers caused by the Industrial Revolution. What marks Austen's fiction, however, is the penetrating insight into the psychology of the members of the upper class, the unmasking of false beliefs, of their *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and the pursuit of a desired balance between *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Austen's characters have an elaborate psychology and we watch them overcome the weaknesses which their social milieu imposes upon them and reach true personal maturity. Austen also creates characters toward whom the reader feels ambivalent, like the haughty, ambitious Emma of the novel by the same name (1816). The ironical distance provided by the narrator's comments on the characters' actions provides a comic tone, and the satirical dimension is most clearly present in Austen's response to the Gothic novel, her book *Northanger Abbey* (1818), which provides a parody or at least an ironic response to the fashionable Gothic tales.

Although Austen does not share the Romantic interest in passion and advocates a moderate, sensible balance of one's desires and social expectations, she is often considered as a proto-feminist writer, though by no means as radical as for example Mary Wollstonecraft. This is because her heroines must find their way in the complex web of social conventions and their private feelings, and we see them act and think independently. Some of the characters, like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, voice (moderate, but clear) arguments for women's abilities to think and judge for themselves, and to be, essentially, no less capable of this than their male counterparts. In Austen's novels, the ideal is to find a marriage in which the man and the woman are true companions, there is

mutual love and respect, there are shared interests, but also a marriage in which the financial aspects are solved and the woman is provided for, and in which there is social respectability in all respects, no scandal.

**Youtube:**

**Jane Austen: Gender and Morality; by British Library; 2 min**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_MHHz3RI4w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_MHHz3RI4w)

**Use of Dialogue in Jane Austen's Novels; by Oxford Academic; 3 min**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOPIL\\_spNkY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOPIL_spNkY)

*Pride and Prejudice*: the love story of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, and of Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley. The Bennets are a family with five daughters and since they are not really rich it is a great concern that the girls marry well. The eldest, Jane, falls in love with Mr Bingley and Elizabeth, the second daughter, is admired by Bingley's friend Mr Darcy (who are both much richer than the Bennets). Bingley, however, seems to be a bit irresponsible and apparently not so very serious about his relationship to Jane; Darcy, on the other hand, appears haughty and arrogant, and although he proposes to Elizabeth, she refuses him because she senses that he feels himself to be superior to her because of his status. Later she also hears rumor about Darcy being a bad person. Jane never gives up hoping for Bingley, and eventually, and despite opposition from arrogant relatives, Bingley realizes that he seriously loves Jane and they can be happily married. Elizabeth eventually gets to see a better side of Darcy: she finds out that the bad rumor about him was a lie, she is impressed with his generosity towards her family when Darcy gives a lot of money to save the youngest Bennet girl Lydia from public disgrace after she elopes with a young army officer Wickham, and she receives his letter in which he finally explains some misunderstandings that have arisen. Darcy, too, has learned a lesson from her first refusal. He proposes to her for the second time, no longer haughty, but with love and admiration for Elizabeth, and she gladly accepts his proposal.

The story is told by an outside narrator but the main focus is on Elizabeth: intelligent, witty, not afraid to stand up for herself and act out her convictions, charming and beautiful. She is able to assess the situation realistically: she realizes the faults and weaknesses of her parents and her sisters, she uncovers the hypocrisy and scheming of the rich members of the Bingley and Darcy families who are trying to oppose the two men engaging Jane and Elizabeth. The name of the novel reflects the two faults that Darcy (pride) and Elizabeth (prejudice) must overcome to be able to find true love: Elizabeth first hates Darcy for his arrogance and haughtiness and she can't see that they have a lot in common and would make a great pair; only after she overcomes her prejudice can she truly appreciate him. Darcy must learn to give up his feeling of superiority which his higher social standing initially gives him.

A similar strategy is used in Austen's other famous novel *Sense and Sensibility* where the ideal presented is that of a balance between sense (reason, reasonableness) and sensibility (emotions and passions): in another story of sisters, Marianne Dashwood must learn that powerful romantic feelings might prove to be misleading and that true love requires more than that, and her sister Elinor, who tends to put herself sacrificially in the background for the sake of others, is finally rewarded with a

happy marriage to the man whom she has loved all along and whom, she believed, she would have to give up.

Although Austen was a contemporary of the Romantic writers, her fiction is in many respects the opposite of Romantic writing: it is more restrained in ambition, a “comedy of manners” limited to the courtship of members of the country gentry. No world-changing events are tackled here—and yet there is a very sharp, and often satirical insight, into the nuances of the social conventions of the upper class, and an emphasis on a female protagonist who must learn to judge independently and to make mature decisions.

This double edge of Austen’s novels is reflected in the contrast between the ironic, amused way in which the narrator comments on the social conventions, and the moving insight into the emotional struggles of the female characters. This is the famous, ironic and hyperbolic opening of *Pride and Prejudice*:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

Here is Darcy’s first proposal to Elizabeth and her refusal:

(...) to her utter amazement, she saw Mr. Darcy walk into the room. In a hurried manner he immediately began an inquiry after her health, imputing his visit to a wish of hearing that she were better. She answered him with cold civility. He sat down for a few moments, and then getting up walked about the room. Elizabeth was surprised, but said not a word. After a silence of several minutes, he came towards her in an agitated manner, and thus began:—

“In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Elizabeth’s astonishment was beyond expression. She stared, coloured, doubted, and was silent. This he considered sufficient encouragement, and the avowal of all that he felt and had long felt for her immediately followed. He spoke well; but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority, of its being a degradation, of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit. (...) He concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which in spite of all his endeavours he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. As he said this she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He *spoke* of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security. Such a circumstance could only exasperate farther; and when he ceased the colour rose into her cheeks and she said,—

“In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could *feel* gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot—I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to anyone. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope will be of short duration. The feelings which you tell me have long prevented the acknowledgment of your regard can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.”

And this is Elizabeth realizing her mistaken judgment of Darcy after she reads his letter later in the novel in which misunderstanding is clarified and Elizabeth sees how mistaken she was:

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

“How despicably have I acted!” she cried. “I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameless distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! Yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.”

### **George Eliot (1819-1880)**

was a female author whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. She received some education in boarding schools but had to return home to help her father after the death of his second wife. She continued to study independently, learned several languages and started to translate books. After the death of her father she moved to London and lived independently as a single woman, working as a translator, editor and literary critic. This was quite unconventional, and even more unconventional was her relationship with George Henry Lewes, also an author and editor, with whom she lived as his de facto wife although he was already married (his first wife abandoned him but he was not able to get a divorce from her).

Published under the male pseudonym George Eliot, her novels focus on rural characters and tragic events related to their lives, partially inspired by local stories Evans knew from the country of her childhood in Warwickshire. *Adam Bede* (1859), set at the end of the 18th century, focuses on the morally strong character of the title hero, a simple carpenter. Hetty, the girl he loves, is seduced by an irresponsible country squire, she abandons the baby which is born out of wedlock and it dies. Hetty is helped by her cousin Dinah and instead of execution she is sent to the colonies; Dinah and Adam Bede then fall in love and live happily. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) focuses on a female protagonist, again a simple country girl who eventually gives up two romantic relationships to stay with her family, and finally dies a tragic death trying to save her brother from drowning. *Silas Marner, The Weaver of Raveloe* (1861) focuses on the negative character of Silas Marner, a weaver who has become bitter following some injustice done toward him, shuns society and is only interested in hoarding money. Silas' life is gradually transformed when he finds an orphaned little girl, Eppie, and through taking care of her finds his way back to humanity and relationships.

Eliot's most ambitious novel is *Middlemarch* (1871-2), set in a small town (the town of Middlemarch is probably Eliot's fictional version of Coventry). The plot focuses on two main protagonists but features many characters from all layers of society. Eliot goes deep in the psychological exploration of her main characters and we see their lives played out in difficult, and sometimes seriously wrong choices they make. The main heroine, Dorothea Brooke, is a young, idealistic and intelligent woman who marries an elderly scholar, Casaubon, whom she admires and

hopes to take part in his learning. Her husband turns out to be a disappointment: he is jealous and narrow-minded. Later on she falls in love with Will Ladislaw, a young man from a bohemian background, whose behavior is in sharp contrast with the expectations of the society. Dorothea and Will are attracted to each other and after the death of Casaubon, they get married, even though it means Dorothea will lose everything she inherited by her husband's death. She is happy, though, because she believes that their life together, and her life too, now has a meaning and a higher purpose. The parallel story of the second main character, Doctor Lydgate, develops slowly in the opposite direction. Lydgate comes to Middlemarch as an idealistic young doctor; he marries Rosamund Vincy, the beautiful but scheming daughter of the mayor and manufacture owner, hoping to find a true companion. Rosamund, however, marries him simply because she expects that he will have a good income. Tensions in their marriage rise, and it is Lydgate who gradually gives up his ideals and succumbs to the demands of his conventional and shallow wife. They move to London and indeed become rich but Lydgate is unhappy with his marriage and with his own life.

Eliot's fiction was unusual from most female Victorian fiction in dealing straightforwardly with difficult moral choices, ambiguities and complexities of life. Dorothea Brooke is not an example for Victorian ladies to emulate. Lydgate is a character who comes to realize that a wrong choice has brought him into a difficult situation and finds himself unable to live up to his ideals. *Middlemarch* forgoes a happy ending; instead, the novel confronts the reader with difficult questions. The psychological nuance, intertwined with the broad social scope of the novel, and the seriousness with which it probes into morally ambiguous situations and choices of the characters, are special features of Eliot's writing.

Among the 19th century realists, several other authors stand out as particularly important.

### **Charles Dickens (1812-1870)**

was an extremely popular and successful author of "social novels," focusing on the broad spectrum of society, its classes and their various social conditions. Dickens was remarkable for both the sheer scope of characters he was able to portray so convincingly and with considerable psychological depth but also for his use of humor, which first helped to make him famous in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837), a novel based on series of anecdotal episodes and comic adventures of a group of Londoners who form together the Pickwick Club, named after their leader Mr Pickwick.

Dickens, who came to London at an early age and later worked in London as a journalist, was thoroughly familiar with the city and used that knowledge in his fiction. He himself experienced poverty as a child; his father was imprisoned for debt and Dickens was forced to work in a factory (boot blacking factory) at the age of 12. Things eventually improved for him, he received some education and started to work as an office boy at a law firm, and from that position he gradually rose to a better job as a journalist, and eventually an immensely successful writer. By 1842 Dickens was such a celebrity that he toured the United States and enthusiastic crowds attended his talks. He wrote countless short stories and novels; some of the most famous are *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), or *Great Expectations* (1860-1). These novels are characterized by complex plots, numerous characters, comic commentaries, and also by great attention to the social realities: there is a penetrating satirical critique of the superficial values or vain pretenses of many upper class members and also of contemporary politics and bureaucracy, and a sympathizing depiction of the difficulties of

the poor (in *Little Dorrit*, 1855-7, for example, Dickens sets a great part of the story in a debtors' prison, no doubt inspired by the real history of his father who was also imprisoned for debt—a part of family history that Dickens never made public until his posthumous biography was published). Dickens was married and the father of many children but the marriage was in deep crisis in the mid 1850's and later he separated from his wife (divorce would have been unthinkable for someone so famous).

#### **YOUTUBE:**

**Charles Dickens's London with Simon Callow - the Guardian**

**By The Guardian; 5 min**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFAX6YkEN64>

*Great Expectations* tells the story of a poor orphaned country boy Pip (Philip Pirrip) and his aspirations to become a rich gentleman and to marry Estella, a beautiful high class young lady. Unexpectedly and by an amazing coincidence, Pip indeed becomes rich and lives like one in London but he is refused by Estella who marries another rich man. Pip faces a moral dilemma when he finds out that the secret benefactor who gave him all the money is a criminal, Magwitch; Magwitch is eventually caught by the police and Pip loses all his fortune. He becomes a businessman and returns after many years to find out that Estella is a widow. Her husband had treated her badly and through her difficult experience she became a wiser and humbler person. In the final version of the story, Dickens suggests that Pip and Estella will stay together, but in the first version of the ending he had Estella marry another man, defying a happy ending for Pip, suggesting rather that the true reconciliation of the story is the way both of these characters mature and learn from their past mistakes. The title, "great expectations," has become almost a cliché; in the novel it refers to the hopes of becoming a gentleman and having all the elements of a good life that are connected to the status. This promise falls apart for Pip: he has to learn his lesson the hard way and he returns mature, having realized that having status is not the highest goal in life.

The novel is remarkable not only for the complex plot with many episodes that together create the story of the moral development of Pip but also for the powerful descriptions and settings that Dickens creates and that serve to reinforce the effect of the events. London is a staple setting for Dickens, but he is not limited to London. For example, Pip grows up in Kent, in a misty marshy area which symbolizes his uncertainty, fumbling, and also danger (it is there, for example, when Pip for the first time encounters Magwitch, at the very beginning of the novel, who will later become his benefactor but who first threatens Pip in their first meeting, foreshadowing the dark truth that Pip will one day discover about him).

Dickens' realism and close attention to "ordinary life" is often combined with symbolic or Gothic elements. We find a wonderful, elaborate symbol in the house where Estella is being brought up by Miss Havisham, called Satis House. The Gothic appearance of the house, its decaying state and the physical decay of Miss Havisham herself not only create an atmosphere of mystery and the lure of the secret, which Pip as a poor boy associates with the life of the rich, but they also represent those members of the upper class who have remained stuck in their ideas of the past and in false beliefs in their own dignity and superiority. Miss Havisham lived through a tragedy when her bridegroom suddenly rejected her on the day of their wedding. Ever since then she has continued to wear her wedding gown, she has stopped all the clocks in her house and has never made any changes to herself

or the house, so that it is falling apart and cobwebs are hanging around everywhere. This is how Pip sees the house and Miss Havisham on his first visit:

I entered and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles. No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. It was a dressing-room, as I gathered from the furniture, though much of it was old-fashioned. But prominent in it was a draped table with a gilded looking-glass, and that I made out at first sight to be a fine lady's dressing-table.

Whether I should have made out this object so soon, if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an arm-chair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see.

She was dressed in rich materials - satins, and lace, and silks - all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. (...)

I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its brightness, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress she wore, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, that skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.

Miss Havisham is the least realistic and the most symbolic character in the book but she, too, goes through a process and her character changes from a proud, revengeful woman who has made her life into a living death into a repenting one, when she is finally able to realize the great pain her vengeance has caused to Pip: it is Miss Havisham who encourages Estella to toy with Pip's feelings and to hurt his feelings purposefully; that's her revenge for the heartbreak she herself suffered. But eventually she repents and asks Pip's forgiveness, redeemed, finally, of her self-centeredness. And that is the typical Dickensian "moral" of the novel, or the path that the characters follow: from self-centeredness to sympathy and compassion.

### **William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863)**

Dickens' contemporary, fellow novelist and rival, and a realist of a different kind, Thackeray came from a background widely different from that of Dickens. He was born in Calcutta where his family became rich serving in the East India Company. Thackeray spent only a few years in India; after the death of his father he was sent to England at the age of 5 (without his mother) to attend schools. As a young man he lived a careless life, studied at universities but never earned a degree. When he became adult he inherited a large sum of money from his father but he gradually lost that wealth. He married a poor Irish woman and became father of three children. His wife, however, became insane after the birth of the third daughter, after just four years of marriage, and Thackeray spent the following decades of his life as a de facto widower. By that time in his life he was already a diligent journalist



and writer who worked hard to support his family. He was also a gifted artist and already in his young days was well known for his drawings and caricatures; later he created illustrations for his own novels.

Thackeray, similarly to Dickens, writes to capture the experience of a broad section of English society. Both these authors use a great number of characters; unlike Dickens, however, Thackeray focuses more on the upper classes, the part of society which he himself knew well. Thackeray's writing is also funny and satirical but perhaps even bleaker than Dickens's, and in contrast to the Romantic ideals of passion and nobly tragic heroes, Thackeray is most remembered for his anti-heroes. His satire is aimed at unmasking the often ugly reality under the Victorian appearance of propriety, benevolence and morality. Thackeray, by the way, was instrumental in making the word "snob" popular in the English language; he created a funny, satirical catalog and categorization of snobs when he wrote texts for magazines and then collected those pieces into a book, *The Book of Snobs* (1848). He makes fun of literary snobs, party-giving snobs, or dining-out snobs, etc. He is, however, best known for his long novel called *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848), subtitled *A Novel without a Hero*, told by a narrator who presents himself as a "manager of the performance," a puppet master who at the same time moves the puppets but also comments on and draws lessons from their sometimes independent actions.

*Vanity Fair*, taking its title from Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, focuses on two main contrasting heroines, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, and deals directly with events related to the Napoleonic wars. Amelia's husband Osborne is an irresponsible and unfaithful man who wants to leave her for Becky Sharp; he is killed in the battle of Waterloo. Amelia has never had the courage to see Osborne for who he really was and so she mourns for him. Becky Sharp is in many ways her opposite: she is a "sharp" character, as her name suggests—selfish, pragmatic, a ruthless social climber, willing to accept any role life might bring along for her just to rise in society; she is an orphan and has no one to stand up for her except herself. She starts out as a governess, then gets married to Crawley but when he is disinherited because of his marriage to Becky, she gathers some wealth by flirting with rich men. After Crawley's death Becky deprives Amelia's brother of all his wealth and so contributes to his death. The novel ends with something that resembles a happy ending: Amelia is married to a man who had loved her even before her marriage to Osborne, and Becky has become a virtuous Christian who is greatly involved in many charitable projects.

The narrator's ironic stance is pervasive throughout the novel. The very title itself suggests the narrator's perspective: human life is nothing but vanity fair, and the happiness of the novel's ending is rather dubious. Does Amelia really deserve the love of her second husband, Colonel Dobbin, who has waited for her devotedly for many years when she herself is a rather shallow character and she has not changed very much in the course of the novel? What do we make of Becky's transformation? Can we take it seriously or is the narrator playing a trick on us?

Here is an early characterization of the two heroines when they, as young women, leave the boarding school in which they were educated. Rebecca throws away the dictionary that they were given and speaks provocatively, shocking the docile and conformist Amelia:

[Becky:] "For two years I have only had insults and outrage from [Miss Pinkerton, the teacher]. I have been treated worse than any servant in the kitchen. I have never had a friend or a kind word, except from you. I have been made to tend the little girls in the lower schoolroom, and to talk French to the Misses, until I grew sick of my mother tongue. But that talking French to Miss Pinkerton was capital fun, wasn't it? She doesn't know a word of French, and was too proud to confess it. I believe it was that which made her part with me; and so thank Heaven for French. Vive la France! Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!"

“O Rebecca, Rebecca, for shame!” cried Miss Sedley; for this was the greatest blasphemy Rebecca had as yet uttered; and in those days, in England, to say, “Long live Bonaparte!” was as much as to say, “Long live Lucifer!” “How can you—how dare you have such wicked, revengeful thoughts?”

“Revenge may be wicked, but it’s natural,” answered Miss Rebecca. “I’m no angel.” And, to say the truth, she certainly was not.

Here are the novel’s famous closing lines in which the narrator wraps up with the metaphor of the puppet theater:

(...) Rebecca, Lady Crawley [as she styles herself], chiefly hangs about Bath and Cheltenham, where a very strong party of excellent people consider her to be a most injured woman. She has her enemies. Who has not? Her life is her answer to them. She busies herself in works of piety. She goes to church, and never without a footman. Her name is in all the Charity Lists. The destitute orange-girl, the neglected washerwoman, the distressed muffin-man find in her a fast and generous friend. She is always having stalls at Fancy Fairs for the benefit of these hapless beings. Emmy [Amelia], her children, and the Colonel, coming to London some time back, found themselves suddenly before her at one of these fairs. She cast down her eyes demurely and smiled as they started away from her; Emmy scurrying off on the arm of George [her son] (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. But he never said a word to Amelia that was not kind and gentle, or thought of a want of hers that he did not try to gratify.

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.

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