Thackeray's Creative Art as a Novelist: Analytical Study

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Abstract

This paper seeks to put Thackeray in the proper perspective. The true merit of the artist is often clouded by the position of his contemporaries. This paper analyzes Thackeray's major novels, namely: Vanity Fair (1848), Pendants (1848–1850), and The History of Henry Esmond (1852). The paper highlights the merit of each of Thackeray's above mentioned work and concludes that his world is as vivid and variegated as those of his peers and his narrative power is undeniable. Hence the paper has illuminated Thackeray's creativity as a popular novelist along with his uniqueness in style, plot and character.

Introduction

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) is one of those Victorian novelists who felt the pulse of the Victorian people, where the emerging middle classes for the first time in the history of Europe needed an escape from the banal reality of the ever growing industrial society. The Victorian reader wanted to be entertained with a minimum of literary convention, a minimum 'esthetic distance.' As a professional writer who earned his living by writing, Thackeray experimented with Journalism, humor and satire in his novels and lay bare before the readers a society, the Victorian society at that, with all its psychological implications, habits, its shams and pretensions. In doing so, Thackeray employs what is often referred to as the intrusive narrator, who peeps into the psyche of the characters as a caustic observer, who moves slowly but with a certain wit and humor and objectivity that is so characteristic of Thackeray. Thus between 1837 and 1843 his writing focuses on the vices of the Victorian society just as other writers of the age did. He looks at his lower class characters in the most disparaging manner. It is in these years that he developed a talent for the burlesque and produced some of the finest satirical works ridiculing other writers of the time.

A significant change in Thackeray's technique and style of writing is quite discernable between 1843 and 1848. His writings of this period, mainly consisting of short stories, portray the injustices of the European society, its ill practices, its corrupt institutions and norms and perhaps came to believe that a reform and justice is the need of the hour. He became more involved in his works personally. However, Thackeray's first novel *Vanity Fair*, established him as a writer of some acclaim. The title which is taken from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* gives a clue to the reader of the novelist's larger vision which is not bereft of satire, realism and criticism of sham deceptions, vanities, intrigues, snobbery, hypocrisies and cruelty.

Thus, in Thackeray we meet with a more homogeneous and less varied world which is peopled by individuals differing from one another in no vital respect except their personal beings. Most of them stand for the same values - or shall we say lack of values? They represent the same common weaknesses and trickeries with which the whole of Thackeray's cosmos is so plentifully fraught. Nonetheless they play their own roles and command attention in their own right - a picturesque although circumscribed world. This has been aptly brought out by David Cecil when he says "His (Thackeray's) creative power shows itself not in transferring the facts he has observed about life, but in arranging them. Dickens' imagination is a distorting glass turning to grotesque comedy or grotesque horror the world that it reflects; Thackeray's is a kaleidoscope, shaking the colored fragments of his observation into a symmetrical order round the center of a common canon of conduct (61- 62)."

Thackeray's Most Popular Novels

Thackeray's plots usually repeat themselves, although each time in a different guise. Their motives generally are the same. The main theme always turns on the struggle between selfishness, vanity, deception and instinctive goodness, honesty and humility. By common consent *Vanity Fair, Pendants, Esmond* are Thackeray's widely read novels. *Vanity Fair* is at once the most admired as well as the most typical work of its author, which presents a survey of a section of the English society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Its two central figures, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, represent the parallel lives of two contrasting school mates. From the *Paris Sketch Book* and *The Book of Snobs* there is a natural transition to the world of his *Vanity Fair*. It is interesting to know that with the publication of *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) Thackeray shot up to a position, if not excelling, at least equaling that of Dickens who had by now risen high into the esteem of contemporary readers. This shows the power and the excellence of *Vanity Fair*. In his earlier works Thackeray had been consistently dealing blows at the snobs and the snobberies of his time. His earlier works had undoubtedly in them a ring of bitterness, and provoked certain critics into labeling him as cynic. A parallel has sometimes been drawn between Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. As one marches through the *Vanity Fair* one comes across various characters charged and saturated with all that goes by the name of sham, deceit, roguery and intrigue. Bunyan's pilgrim also met with similar situations in his long journey. But whereas he encounters these evils only through a fraction of his journey and moves on to happier and brighter goals the traveler through *Vanity Fair* has to face this evil world both as a journey and as its goal. In his book *Thackeray's Cultural Frame of Reference*, McMaster believes that all "Victorian writers, implicitly criticize the harshness and cupidity of contemporary society, and promotes charity and humility, the encompassing vision of Ecclesiastes produces an ultimate sense of ephemeracy, repetition and weariness (5). "

Why Thackeray presents such a uniformly bad picture of society unrelieved by any bright spots is best explained by the fact that he calls his *Vanity Fair* "A novel without a hero." This is significant not merely as a description of the plot of his novel but more because it gives an indication of the mood of the writer when he wrote this novel. He had seen so much of falsehood and trickery and had seen them so often that he really started doubting the existence of unalloyed goodness in this world. For him there were no heroes of the kind and in the sense conventional literature depicted them. Slyness and charlatanism appeared so overpowering to him that he became convinced of the universality of these vices. It is in this background that the vast creation of his *Vanity Fair* is best appreciated. Even though one could dispute with the novelist's vision, his exquisite rendering of it through the pages of the *Vanity Fair* can hardly evoke any adverse criticism. Here is a wonderful world bristling with life and emotion. The force behind its movement may be that of cunning and wickedness, but its momentum is great indeed. Rachel Pietka rightly pointed out that "the Novel without a Hero suggests Thackeray's determination to scrutinize gender norms. While the Victorian age sought to create labels by which people were designated as either normal or abnormal, Thackeray creates characters who move in and out of these categories (241)."

Like most of his works *Vanity Fair* also suffers from a certain looseness of construction. Up to the first half of the book the plot remains relatively well-knit; in the latter half all kinds of deviations dangle about and the structural compactness is sacrificed to a successful, and by no means, an uninteresting ending. Thackeray's critics of 1960s and 1980s like Ray, the Tillotsons, and Lester set the stage for the New Critical analyses of the 1960s and 1970s, which would refute accusations of formlessness by finding unity, coherence, or design in Thackeray's use of different literary conventions and genres, the parallels in the plot structure, and the overarching narrative discourse (80)." In this respect Thackeray further extended a tendency already begun by Fielding. The main interest in the story centers round the figure of Becky Sharp, who is by any standard one of the most powerful and exciting of literary creation. In the words of Legouis Cazamians:

Never has there been a more thorough study of the instinctive trickery, the inherent duplicity, the supple energy of a certain type of the eternal woman - the actress, the adventures, who scandalizes and conquers the world, invincible in her defeats, insecure in her triumphs (106). It should, however, be pointed out that great as this creation of Becky is, it would have been greater had Thackeray not succumbed to the demands and the moral pressure of the Victorian society. A subtle psychologist of human character, particularly of its intriguing behavior, Thackeray displayed a certain lack of consistency towards the end of the book so far as her character is concerned. Now although Becky's character naturally demanded that in the end she should be triumphant in her subterfuge, for which an end is the most approximate to reality, yielding to the moral and social considerations of his age, Thackeray sought to make her a penitent and therefore self-reformed sinner instead.

Here was an evident split in the personality of Thackeray. His sympathies drew him towards making Becky uniformly strong in her maleficent ways much in the same way as Milton's sympathies lay with his Satan; but his conscious role of a moral preacher compelled him to go against the direction of his constitutional preference and artistic propriety. But with all these defects *Vanity Fair* is a monumental achievement worthy to be placed beside some of the best of its own kind. Despite its loose construction it possesses an organic unity of a different but no mean order. Its unity is the unity of a common purpose - to expose and satirize sham, arrogance and subterfuge - which the diverse characters reveal under the all-pervading and common spell of their creator.

Thackeray's Pendennis (1848-50), was written immediately after Vanity Fair, and has a similar atmosphere of brooding disillusion, tempered by the most jovial of wits. In *Pendennis* a semi-autobiographical study of a young man's career, we have a continuation of the satire on society begun in *Vanity Fair*. The novel traces the youthful career of Arthur Pendennis: his first love affair, his experiences at "Oxbridge University," his employment as a London journalist, and so on. Its importance is partly due to the fact that it reflects more of the particulars of its author's life than all his other works. But largely it commands attention because of its central figure George Pendennis. Writing about this work W. J. Long remarks "*Pendennis* is a profound moral study, and the most powerful arrangement of well-meaning selfishness in our literature, not even excepting George Eliot's Romola which it suggests (15)". In Thackeray's own words his hero is "neither angel nor imp." *Pendenni*s has drawn by Thackeray is a young man of the world, a curious mixture of good nature and carelessness, superimposed with a strong sense of self-interest. Now it is here that defect of Thackeray's character delineation, a reference to which has already been made above - his lack of power and courage in dealing with sexual matters — is most evident. *Pendennis,* in spite of his healthful vigor and necessarily unangelic and, therefore, human character with all its failings, is forcibly painted as a person completely immune to the urge for sex gratifications in the face of all temptations which he experiences.

This state of total virginity which he keeps right up to the age of twenty-nine is only a device to suit the moralist in Thackeray against all considerations of verisimilitude. Save for this defect *Pendennis* has been adequately and impressively treated and looks quite a convincing creation. In this novel we notice a definite, although slight trend on the part of Thackeray towards greater geniality and warm-heartedness, even romance. Here he grows less objective and shows a marked tendency to weave his situations and characters out of his heart and his dreams. This establishes the contention that his initial preference for the hard and the unlovely was more in the nature of a reaction to the excesses of romanticism indulged into by writers like Scott Lytton and even Dickens, and as an attempt to meet Dickens on a ground different from his own - an attempt dictated possibly by an unconscious admission on the part of Thackeray of Dickens' unrivalled and also not-easy-to-rival superiority as a novelist, - and not owing to any constitutional inclination for the unliked and the hard in him. The following lines show the greatness of Thackeray's descriptive power is "Let the poor boy fling out his simple heart at the woman's feet, and deal gently with him. It is best to love wisely, no doubt; but to love foolishly is better than not to be able to love at all. Some of us can't: and are proud of our impotence, too (70)". In his introduction to his book *William Make peace Thackeray,* William Crary Brownell rightly points out that:

Thackeray's picture of society is the most vivid, as it is incontestably the most real, in prose fiction. The temperament of the artist and satirist combined, the preoccupation with the moral element in character,—and in logical sequence, with its human and social side,—lead naturally to the next step of viewing man in his relations, and the construction of a miniature world. And in addition to the high place in literature won for him by his insight into the human heart, Thackeray's social picture has given him a distinction that is perhaps unique (3).

In his third important novel, *Henry Esmond* (1852), there are two strands that run side by side in Thackeray's intellectual make-up, a keen penetration into the psychology of the vanity of human sentiment and a strong impulse of historical imagination. This latter side of his personality is best discernible in Hana Esmond. Although to a lesser degree of perfection, it is equally present in *The Virginians: A Tale of the Last Century* also. The two impulses are not contradictory; in fact both are generally present together. The only difference between one novel and the other is that of preponderance of the one or the other of these two. Technically *Henry Esmond* is the most perfect of Thackeray's novels. Herein is a very lucid expression of a keenly felt and almost instinctive sympathy coupled with admiration for a bygone age - the age of Queen Anne. That Thackeray undertook the writing of the historical novels is a fact important for many reasons. Apart from the technical perfection and the innate excellence of *Henry Esmond* as an individual work of art it is significant in so far as it prolongs and perfects a genre and a tradition long established. Among the types of fiction the historical novel has got a place all its own.

It will be, however, wrong to suggest that even as a species of a higher class it has not undergone various ramifications in substance and in style. On the contrary we can further sub-divide the historical novel into three broad types. First, that in which history predominates and antiquity is rediscovered almost as it is done in a bare chronicle. Second that in which romance is intermixed with history and in which the historical adventures and exploits recounted are but a salutary diversion into the past from tedium of the present. Third, that in which past is not indulged into for its own sake but only as a link with the present exemplifying the essential and enduring problems and motives running constantly through the flow of time. Joseph T. Shipley, editor of the *Dictionary of World Literature* has respectively termed these three sub-types as (l) The Period Novel, (2) The Historical Romance, and (3) The Historical Novel Proper. *Henry Esmond* belongs to the last category i.e. the historical novel proper.

To resume our examination of *Henry Esmond* we are first of all struck by the nature and method of its plot. Here is an old cavalier relating his own memoirs in the evening of his life with a daftness and skill hardly to be matched anywhere else in the whole range of English fiction. The author takes us to the courts and the inns and a wide variety of society of eighteenth century England. Thackeray had a more intimate knowledge of this past age than any other of his contemporaries and he employs his knowledge to the maximum advantage by reproducing the manners and the morals, the customs and the costumes, the tone and the tempo of Queen Anne's England vividly and exquisitely. The lore of the past coupled with the strangeness and the picturesqueness which necessarily go with its description bring Thackeray very near the romantic mood, and in *Henry Esmond* we have got the most definite and eloquent testimony to the repressed romanticism of Thackeray and his gradual return to romance.

Although technically the most perfect of Thackeray's novels *Henry Esmond* is not the most widely read. There are many reasons for this. But perhaps the most important of them is the rather unfamiliar and unconventional development of its plot. Henry Esmond after having been for ten years passionately devoted to Beatrix, the daughter of Lord Castlewood, in the end marries her mother, Lady Castlewood, who herself in the beginning is shown to favor his marriage with Beatrix. Now the average reader, too much used to the conventional endings of such stories with the ringing of the marriage bells and the exchange of nuptial rings between his popular heroes and heroines, is not likely to take kindly to such an unorthodox outcome of the plot as it happens in *Henry Esmond*. But here it should be noted that things do not always happen in the real world as we expect them and much less as we desire them. Thackeray was a realist and he found nothing unnatural in depicting an incident that is not improbable. It required a great genius to manipulate such a plot convincingly and Thackeray proved quite equal to the occasion. From the very beginning when Esmond was a boy and a part and a protégé of the family of the Castle woods he was very much devoted and serviceable to Lady Castlewood. He even admired her and was himself liked by his mistress. At that time Beatrix was a charmer of sweet sixteen and it does not require any proof for the modern reader with his up-to-date knowledge of psychology to point out that the boyish passion of heightened adolescence is much more prone to gravitate towards a sexually ripe and mature woman than towards a girl possessing but the rudiments of womanhood. Further Lady Castlewood's marriage to the lover of her daughter does not in any way revolt against even the orthodox canons of moral propriety. It was never a case of her jealousy for her daughter. Instead it was a logical and even envyless judgment on her part finally to marry Esmond whom she had loved when she became quite convinced that Beatrix was in no mood to marry and had even declared her opposition against marrying Esmond whom she considered as but an humble swain.

The fact of Lady Castlewood, at the age of fifty, deciding to be the wife of Esmond who was then forty is a triumph of Thackeray's psychology of human character. She has been angry with Esmond but also grateful to him; she has had reason to be careful over him. But she could not be unmindful of his worth for all that he was and that he had done to her. Then she has been a widow. Very naturally in the end unable to resist she melts, and her marriage with Esmond is a perfectly natural and normal outcome. Roscoe rightly points out that Thackeray's "fiction is like a net, every mesh of which has a connecting knot with actual life. Many novelists have a world of their own which they inhabit. Thackeray thrusts his characters in among the moving every-day world in which we live (270)."

In the portrayal of the character of Henry Esmond Thackeray sought to balance the general characteristics of Jos Sedley. As against the cowardice and mean selfishness of the latter, Henry Esmond embodies in himself chivalrousness of the noblest kind. Undoubtedly Esmond is the loftiest of Thackeray's characters. He is typical of a perfect gentleman of the eighteenth century.

He has got military courage and his inclination to fighting is directly in line with the demands of his age. Thackeray has declared Esmond to be 'a prig' but to be a prig at least in some respects was exactly what Thackeray wanted in him. He likes his book which is evident from what Beatrix tells him: "As for you, you want a woman to bring your slippers and cap, and to sit at your feet and cry, O Caro, Caro! O bravo! Whilst you read your Shakespeare's and Milton's and stuff (55)." Further, when he became a soldier, unlike others he could neither swear nor drink. He has a liking for fastidiousness in others; for that according to him is a necessary equipment of a gallant cavalier. His whole being is permeated with certain melancholy, an essential ingredient of priggishness. By nature he leans towards the grave and the gloomy - almost a kind of stoicism. Even when he smiles and indulges into some light pleasantry it appears as if he was at heart aware of a certain inner contradiction. He wonders his affinities prove more wholesomely natural and fruitful with age than with youth, with Lady Castlewood than with Beatrix. Thackeray seems to have organized all his faculties and skills to create in the person of Henry Esmond a perfect eighteenth century gentleman. What is most remarkable about Esmond is that he is compounded of an unadulterated raw material of all good virtues. Now all creative art is not only 'addition,' it is 'syntheses. Merely to have juxtaposed a series of fine virtues and to have thereby attempted to produce the impression of a whole should have been tantamount to addition, to lifelessness, and therefore to a denial of art. For bringing about a convincing synthesis of all good virtues so as to give the whole a look of verisimilitude, a sense of proportion, a measure of life-likeness, in other words to create a living character pulsating with emotions and vibrating with energy it was necessary to mingle a theoretical understanding of a gentleman with a high executive talent. Thackeray set himself to accomplish this difficult task and the fact that he did not merely install Esmond on the blue-print of his story but made him move and act and speak, is an eulogy for Thackeray's creative power. Where a lesser artist should have failed, he not only succeeded, he triumphed.

Henry Esmond provides an apt illustration of one of Thackeray's most important characteristics as a novelist. He has been rightly called the novelist of memory. The sense of the passage of time has best been caught in the pages of his novels. Thus for the first time in the English novel appears the impression of the general curve of life, of fleeting time and change in Thackeray's pages. Unlike the characters of other novelists, for example, Tom Jones, who are depicted by their authors as eternally young and eternally constant much as the characters of the world of art drawn by Keats - 'Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!' - Thackeray's characters run the full gamut of physical as well as emotional development. Whereas with the other writers time remains stagnant and static or at least moves with jerks and jolts, in leaps and bounds, with Thackeray's it follows an easy, smooth, natural course. "We see Esmond pass from childhood to youth, from youth to middle age, we watch his love for Beatrix wax, wane, and finally give place to that for Lady Castlewood" (Cecil 108). In fact this strong sensibility to the past so markedly present in Thackeray was a direct result of his equally powerful conviction about the vanity and the transitoriness of human ambition. There can be no better monument to the ephemeral character of the subjects of worldly vanity than the relics of the past. Time in its onward sweep spares nothing and the seemingly most glorious expressions of vain arrogance and headstrong desire prove but illusory and burst like a bubble at the touch of the feet of marching time. Viewed in this light Thackeray's novels breathe the spirit and the atmosphere of plaintive poetry of the past, fades, ironical, and sad. They are like musings of memory, recollecting and unfolding the vast panorama of a bygone age. In his *Thackeray the Novelist*, Geoffrey Tilloston quotes Mr. Chesterton who once remarked that "Thackeray's everybody's past (267)". Surely a realist by necessity he was a romanticist at heart and this disposition for the past is an integral part of his instinctive romance.

Henry Esmond is held as the best of the English historical novels. Though here he was undoubtedly under the influence of Scott, he so differently handled his historical material and recreated the age of Queen Anne with such nicety of detail and in tone and substance and style that he for out- rivalled his model and became one of the greatest masters of this type of fiction in his own right. Thus, Thackeray is among the most important of Victorian writers. He is only next to Dickens. However, he is not as widely read as in the Victorian era and is known mostly for his masterpiece *Vanity Fair*, which is still part of university syllabus almost everywhere where English Literature is taught. The novel has also been adopted for filming in both mainstream cinema and television. The picture was different in the days of Thackeray, when he was held in opinion by critics such as Antony Trollope, who considered some of Thackeray's works as the most representative works of the Victorian society, mainly its values of duty and earnestness, which so characteristic of *Henry Esmond*. This is on account of one very discernable quality of the writer viz. a. viz. his consciousness of the fact that he was writing in the realistic tradition and distancing himself from the too far - fetched sentimentality of Dickens.

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