

An Analysis of the Fate of Women in Victorian Era from Vanity Fair

Zhu Zhuo¹, Zhu Xiaodong^{2*}

School of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou 341000, Jiangxi, China

**Corresponding author e-mail: gnuzxd@163.com*

Keywords: Thackeray, Vanity fair, The fate of women, Victorian era

Abstract: Based on the detailed reading of *Vanity Fair*, this paper will delve into the fate of women in the Victorian era. William Makepeace Thackeray is one of the British prominent writers of critical realism. *Vanity Fair*, his masterpiece, has been acclaimed as a world classic. It describes two completely different women, called Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley, which is helpful to depict the Victorian British society more vividly. Through detailed description, the author finds that *Vanity Fair* satirizes the reality of worshiping money and strong class concept as well as male superiority and female inferiority, and also criticizes the backwardness and decay of Victorian marriage values, family values and money values. Based on this, this paper deeply analyzes the status and rights of women in the Victorian era.

1. Introduction

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) was a distinguished 19th-century English writer known as the Victorian era. His magnum opus is famous for satirizing social reality, peculiarly *Vanity Fair*, which is a description of Britain's pursuit of upper society. *Vanity Fair* was published in 1848 accompanied with the subtitle *A Novel without a Hero*. Many people considered Thackeray's depiction and satirical criticism to be "incisive, profound and unique". Moreover, Thackeray believed that "vanity fair is greed, deceit and the corruption of art to nature". Based on detailed description of the lives of Amelia Sedley and Rebecca Sharp, Thackeray presents the typical life of British aristocracy and bourgeoisie in the Victorian era in *Vanity Fair*

2. Introduction to Victorian Era

The Victorian era was considered the peak of the industrial revolution, and at that time the British economy and culture flourished. The Victorian period was known for its emphasis on moral cultivation and modesty. It was also a peaceful and prosperous time when science, culture and industry were greatly developed. In terms of ideology, the Victorian era experienced great changes. The significant development of science, technology and new discoveries in various fields broke people's firm religious belief in the past. Darwin's explanation about the evolution of species shook the theoretical foundations of traditional beliefs. All these ideas made the capitalists further exploit the working people cruelly without mental and moral scruples. Dickens, Kalil, Raskin, and many

other writers, who had a sense of social responsibility, had done their best to refute money-worship, which especially devalued cultural morality and indifference to human emotions. Although Victoria's critical realist novelists re-advocated realism in the 19th century, they would criticized society from the perspective of the people. Although their creative perspectives and styles were different, they shared a common concern for the lives and destinies of the general public. They were deeply indignant over inhumane social institutions, depraved social morality, the prevalence of money worship and widespread poverty and injustice.

Through Thackeray's real portrayal of society and ruthless criticism of institutions, readers has learned more about social issues and development. In the middle of the Victorian era, the industrial capacity in Britain was stronger than any other countries, but what was under the cover of prosperity and wealth was the poverty of the working class. Unfortunately, in order to make a living, women and children were employed to dirty factories. One of the most striking features of the Victorian era was its serious gap between the rich and the poor. The rich had a noble life and enjoyed expensive afternoon tea in the manor. However, the poor lived in dilapidated huts and worried about food and clothing. Capitalists enjoyed comfortable life while the poor were rushing for terrible unemployment. During this period, parents controlled their children's marriage because most of their children were dependent on family financial support. Women were considered to be less involved in social activities, and it was difficult to form a correct and rational view of marriage, thus affecting their judgement of suitable spouses. With the development of the bourgeois movement and the enlightenment of thought, great changes had taken place in people's thoughts and values. With the development of women's consciousness, the feminist movement was on the upsurge, demanding equality between men and women and protection of women's rights.

3. Comparison between Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley

Thackeray applies obvious distinction between the two different women characters. Amelia is the coexistence of the essence of goodness and the concept of decay. However, the contrast between Rebecca's appearance and her interior is stark. As is known to us all, the living background plays an essential role in one's characteristic and point of view. The education one received and his growing environment are certainly important in his life. Due to the differences in their living backgrounds, their attitudes to marriage and family and even their attitudes to fate are quite different.

3.1 Comparison on Their Living Backgrounds

Amelia was born in a rich upper-class family and received a decent education since childhood. Besides, she had extraordinary knowledge, and treated people appropriately. Amelia's school was aimed for the British upper-class society women, called Miss Pinkerton's academy. In this school, as an upper-class lady, Amelia must learn all the courses, such as music, money, geography, needlework and body-building. "Those virtues which characterize the young English gentlewoman, those accomplishments which become her birth and station.....". For upper-class families, owning these seemed like the symbol of social status and dignity. Living in a peaceful environment, Amelia's lack of living ability and keen ways of thinking were due to her father's kindness to everyone and improvidence.

Rebecca was born in poor family. Due to the unfortunate experience of being laughed at, Rebecca was hungry for money, fame and fortune in the upper-class life. Rebecca was smart, with good looks and figure. Rebecca inherited her father's talent as an artist and her mother's ability to perform and singing. Luckily she spoke perfect French in pure pronunciation. With the death of her mother, she spent her childhood with her rude, irascible father. With growing up, she met different people and saw the ugly side of society. She understood that in the male-dominated and

money-obsessed Victorian era, she had to work her way into upper-class society.

3.2 Comparison on Their Attitudes to Love and Family

Amelia was a woman who lacked independence and had to rely on others as her spiritual support. She fell in love with George wholeheartedly and believed that pure love was her sole belief. In her opinion, her husband was the cleverest man in the world. But in fact it's easy to observe that George did not love her so much, even was ashamed of the letter Amelia wrote to him. Drowning in such a blind and somewhat foolish love, Amelia thought the only problem in their marriage was money. It was her cowardice and lack of courage that made George betray her. Even after George died in the war, she still refused to remarry and regarded her son as her spiritual support. In other words, she was aware of her husband's selfishness and other shortcomings. She just didn't want to face them. Her view towards love was like a coward doll shaped by the patriarchal center. This doll was only submitted to obedience and lacked the courage and spirit to actively resist.

But as the opposite of Amelia, Rebecca had a totally different view. Rebecca believed that everyone was a tool for her to achieve her personal goals, and of course her husband and her son were not exceptions. She never cared about her love or her family. The only thing she wanted to do was to enter the upper class. Any man associated with her was only her stepping-stone. So as far as Rebecca was concerned, marriage and love were nothing at all. What she cared about was not who she was married to, but the social status which could bring to her in this marriage.

3.3 Comparison on the Social Connotation of the Two Roles

Some scholars believe that the role of Rebecca is produced by the mainstream values of fame and money. Some believe that two roles reflect the author's respect for the female audience, which embodies the feminist spirit to a certain extent. With the development of the British enlightenment and the continuous progress of the bourgeois revolution, the theory of "natural human rights" had gradually been accepted by people. At the same time, along with the advancement of Britain's industrial revolution, capitalists needed a lot of workers. Thus more and more women worked in factories, and gradually formed certain social status in society.

The image of Rebecca Sharp was born in such a social background. When Rebecca found someone useful, she tried her best to catch the chance. However, she is too crazy about fame and fortune to get what she wants through proper means. Eventually everything was destroyed. Rebecca once said: "if I had 5,000 per year, I'd be an orthodox woman." This was a true portrayal of people who were addicted to fame and wealth at that time. Fame and wealth became the only standard for judging personal value, which would only lead to unfortunate life. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray may not approve of her way to pursuing fame and wealth, but in other word, Thackeray still praised her feminist spirit and expressed helplessness, which reflected the author's respect and support for the feminist spirit.

Amelia was extremely vulnerable. She was unable to withstand the difficulties and indecisive. When faced with difficulties in life, she chose to give in and run away. The character of self-deception was her fatal flaw, which also doomed her life will not get their own happiness. At that time, many upper-class people relied on others to survive like a vine, so they could never find who they really are.

When chasing fame and wealth in a society, everyone became the slavery of them. No matter who the person was, the scheming and clever Rebecca or the gentle and cowardly Amelia, everyone had to be the victims of vanity fair, and everything turned out to be illusory in the end.

4. Comprehensive Analysis of the Changing Fate of Two Roles

In *Vanity Fair*, we can analyze the changes in the status and power of women in the Victorian era from the characters and story of these two completely different heroines. Rebecca is a cunning, treacherous, selfish and hypocritical woman. She is a typical symbol of British social snobbery at that time. But as another heroine, Amelia is “tame and docile puppet”. In the novel, Amelia is a good mother who is dutiful and considerate, a good wife who is faithful and filial, and a good woman who is kind to the poor. But Thackeray also satirizes Amelia. Because of Amelia’s character, she has to depend on others to survive. However, it’s her behavior that is entirely in line with the prevailing values of the day.

Many middle-class women are somewhere between a doll and a housewife, but because of their own weakness, traditional morality and family pressure, they have to give in or be rejected by society. In the Victorian era, Britain basically completed the process of industrialization and democratization. The industrial revolution changed British, especially middle-class women. Under the long-term environment of male superiority, women had to fight for equal status, female consciousness and the social status. Because women's activities are limited by time and space, many women need to reorient their living space. Victorian novels focus much on the awakening of female consciousness.

5. Conclusion

The essence of *Vanity Fair* is to satirize the desire of human nature and the pursuit of fame and fortune. *Vanity Fair* is a smokeless battlefield dominated by money and fame. It has been fully reflected in the capitalist countries of the western world, and *Vanity Fair* is also a true portrayal of the spiritual world of the western realistic society. At the same time, through the description of two different women with different personalities, we can analyze the awakening of the pursuit of women's status and rights in the Victorian era. With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the thought of human rights had been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, which brought a certain impact on the old thought of inferiority of women. It was the best for woman to be obedient and attached, just like Amelia in this article who pursued her love without any other thought. But now, as the new thought continues to change, more independent women will slowly go out to work to liberate themselves. Maybe it’s because of the writer’s unfortunate life that he shows sympathy to them. He supports Rebecca to rebel and appreciate her courage, self-reliance and indomitability. What’s more, the writer disagrees with Amelia’s cowardice and pessimism.

To sum up, what *Vanity Fair* expresses is not a simple social aspect, but the existence of a complex body full of contradictions. Thackeray has a thorough understanding of the social situation, so he is full of sympathy for the two women. In Victorian era, women were awakening. Consequently, women should work hard to be financially independent and be optimistic and confident about everything.

Acknowledgements: The study was supported by”Key Projects of 2018 University-level Teaching Reform in Gannan Normal University and Higher Education Teaching Reform Project of Jiangxi province(Grant No. JXJG-18-14-9) “.

References

- [1] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*[M]. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1952.
- [2] Brooke, Allen. *Sadness Balancing Wit: Thackeray’s Life and Works*[J]. *New Criterion*, 2001,(5):11-19.
- [3] Dee, Phyllis Susan. *Female Sexuality and Triangular Desire in Vanity Fair and The Mill on the Floss*[J]. *Paper on Language & Literature*, 1999,(40)391-416.
- [4] Dyhouse, Carol. *The Role of Women: From Self-Sacrifice to Self-Awareness*[M]*The Victorians :The Context of English Literature*.Ed Laurence Lerner. London:Methuen,1982.174-93.
- [5] Fitzgerald, Harris. *Nineteenth Century Literature Criticism*[M]. England: Oxford University Press, 1977.

- [6] Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteen-Century Literary Imagination*[M]. New Haven and London: Yale University Press,1979.
- [7] Harden, Edgar F. *A William Makepeace Thackeray Chronology*. London: Palgrave MacMillan,2003.
- [8] Jadwin, Lisa. *The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in Vanity Fair*[J]. *Studied in English Literature*, 1992,(4):663-682.
- [9] Kaye,RichardA. *A Good Woman on Five Thousand Pounds: Jane Eyre, Vanity Fair, and Literary Rivalry*[J].*Studied in English literature*.1995(4):723-739.
- [10] William Makepeace Thackeray. *Vanity Fair*. [M] Great Britain: Wordsworth Classics, 1994.