Title of Paper: The Puppetry and Performance of Society in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*
Author: Vittoria Rubino
Affiliation: St. John’s University
Section: Articles
Date of Publication: September, 2014
Issue: 2.3

Abstract:

From the first page of *Vanity Fair* by William Thackeray, including the initial illustrations, the reader can see the showman’s self-awareness as he introduces the novel, or story, as a performance for the reader/audience to experience. William Thackeray uses the showman as a tool to deliver his clear issue with society. Therefore, the “puppet-theatre” designed by the author, or in this case, the showman, is a created universe where the performance is meant to expose the pose and performance of society; specifically, society’s vanity is seen as it is manifested in the characters at hand. If vanity is emptiness and falseness, and our novel is aptly titled *Vanity Fair*, the performance of the characters in the novel is seen as void and artificial as well. Clearly, the narrator does not take the performance altogether seriously from the opening thrusts of the piece, as can be seen in his playful tone and his inconsistencies. Becky becomes the main vehicle for the showman to highlight society’s vain performance. The nature and significance of performance in *Vanity Fair* by William Thackeray is apparent in the showman’s ability to reflect the vanity of society in his manner and in his puppet-theatre.

Keywords: Thackeray, Vanity Fair, performance, Victorian, Victorian pose, society, vanity, British literature, Becky Sharp, narrator

Author Bio:

Vittoria Rubino is currently a doctoral fellow at St. John’s University in Queens, New York, where she teaches Freshman Composition. Her main research interests include 19th and 20th century British Literature; in particular, Vittoria explores the way tensions of the two centuries manifest in the literature of the time, and how movements such as Romanticism, the Victorian era, and Modernism reflect in literature.

Author email: vsrubino@gmail.com
“As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place” (Thackeray xv). From the first page of the novel, including the title page illustrations, the reader can see the Showman’s self awareness as he introduces the novel, or story, as a performance for the reader/audience to experience. William Thackeray uses the Showman as a tool to deliver his clear issue with society. Therefore, the “puppet-theatre” designed by the author, or in this case, the Showman, is a created universe where the performance is meant to expose the pose and performance of society; specifically, society's vanity is seen as it is manifested in the characters at hand. If vanity is emptiness and falseness, and our novel is aptly titled *Vanity Fair*, the performance of the characters in the novel is seen as void and artificial as well. Becky becomes the main vehicle for the Showman to highlight society’s vain performance. The nature and significance of performance in *Vanity Fair* by William Thackeray is apparent in the Showman's ability to reflect the vanity of society in his manner and in his puppet-theatre.

Through both the illustrative and textual mediums, the audience is introduced to the character known by many names, and many guises: the Showman, the narrator, the Manager of the Performance, and the author. The opening illustrations, designed by Thackeray himself, suggest
what is to be expected, and serve as a guide, to both the novel as performance and the novelist as showman. In the first title illustration created for *Vanity Fair*, the Showman is depicted as a story-teller, and a fool talking to fools, yet he is placed in a position above the audience. Similarly, Robert Wilkenfeld, author of “‘Before the Curtain’ and *Vanity Fair,*” states, “Only a fool would attempt to raise himself by raising his voice to describe the nature of a world uniformly populated by fools; only other fools would listen to him and believe him” (309). This image impresses upon the viewer a sense of irony, as it is clear that the presentation of the Showman as the source of all knowledge is a sham. In this image, there are no puppets, but the audience themselves become puppet-like, or at least they are portrayed as fools. The manner of their dress is rather ridiculous, closely relating to the style of the Showman’s attire—a simple clown. This suggests only a slight connection between the Showman and the audience, although, as previously stated, the Showman still resides in a position above the crowd.

In the second version of the title illustration, the Showman is drawn as a pensive and isolated clown, viewing his reflection in a cracked mirror, leaning upon a box of puppets. Here, Wilkenfeld claims, “The image of the contemplative fool on the unattended stage suggests that a man can determine what the world is (or what it looks like) only by peering at himself in a mirror”
Thackeray recognizes the world’s folly in the process of writing and reviewing the novel, and then sees that he is also a part of the faulty society he represents within Vanity Fair. In the first image, Thackeray, or the Showman, remains outside and above the fair, looking at it from a distance, or from a position of without the fair/performance. In the secondary, revisionary image, there is an admission of his position as within the fair/performance. As the performance grew more intricate, Thackeray had to consciously face his place amongst the performers.

The Showman, as seen in the second image, can aptly reflect the blunders of society because he has come to accept them in himself. Robert Lougy, author of “Vision and Satire: The Warped Looking Glass in Vanity Fair” makes an excellent point when he states:

Thackeray’s ‘friend in motley,’ regarding himself in a mirror, is both the object and the spectator of satire. By holding a mirror up to human nature, the satirists allows man to perceive his own foibles and the degree to which he falls short of that vision of man beyond his own immediate reflection. (257)

Therefore, the Showman, or Thackeray himself, is both within and without the performance of society. The issue with Lougy, though, is his heavy reliance on the image, and novel, as a vehicle of satire. Satire, though, would suggest that the novelist is openly exposing and denouncing societal issues, but as readers, we never develop this sense from the novel. Like the second image of the Showman, the reader is given more room for introspection than for direct judgment of
others—the novel unfolds as an empirical piece, rather than a moralistic work. Although the Showman may, at times, sympathize or ridicule characters, there are more gray areas than Lougy is willing to admit. He continues:

Satire affirms the belief that man, if shown himself in true light, can move from ignorance and moral blindness toward wisdom and self knowledge. Yet, as readers have pointed out, we are never quite sure of the objective of satire in *Vanity Fair*. Few of its characters move from ignorance to knowledge, and, even if they seem to, such a move does not produce any permanent change in their values or actions. Satire, no less than tragedy, implies the possibility of growth and change, and it is this possibility that seems to be missing in *Vanity Fair*. (257)

Again, Lougy lays too much emphasis on the novel as satire. The novel may have the trappings of satire initially, especially as is depicted in the first image, but the novel is more complex than this label allows. *Vanity Fair* is a realistic performance of the vanity of mankind. Lougy says satire implies a capacity for growth and change in characters, and grants readers the ability to cleanse themselves of foolishness, and that this is lacking in the novel, but would that not, then, imply that the novel is *not* a satire? Again, the novel is empirical, *not* mythical. The Showman confesses his place amongst the actors, as can be seen in his facial expression as he peers at the cracked mirror (which is, indeed, lifeless and puppet-like).
Of course, the fair is indeed a puppet-theatre, and the Showman is sure to remind the audience from time to time of this fact. The use of puppets instead of actors and the way the action is presented to the audience as a performance or story allows the reader, ironically, to remain at a distance from the action, so he/she does not have to consciously recognize his/her reflection in these created characters. In regard to the introduction of the novel-as-performance, or the chapter titled “Before the Curtain,” Wilkenfeld states:

The indeterminacy of ‘Before’ ironically renders the fact that in the special magic theatre of Vanity Fair either side of the curtain is front or back. The most immediately visible example of a world in which the actors and the audience are indistinguishable is that republic of folly portrayed in the original frontispiece. (310)

In this way, the audience and actors become one unit because there is no solid placement to distinguish between them; if no one is “in front” or “behind” the curtain, but rather “before” the curtain, neither party can be held in a higher opinion than the other. All of society becomes a part of the action of the performance. This allows the reader to feel comfortable enough to rest and enjoy the action because he or she is not consciously aware of his or her implication in the society the fair represents. It is vanity that allows the reader to turn his or her face from the performance without guilt or shame. The Showman says, “A man with a reflective turn of mind, walking through an exhibition of this sort, will not be oppressed, I take it, by his own or other people’s hilarity” (Thackeray xv). By stating this, the Showman is placing an onus on the audience to remain
open minded and separated from the performance, although the Showman believes the audience will find aspects of their own issues within the performance. The audience, though, will assume a position of superiority, or a position outside of the performance, to save face. The Showman states, “At the little Paris theatres, on the other hand, you will not only hear the people yelling out "Ah gredin! Ah monstre:" and cursing the tyrant of the play from the boxes; but the actors themselves positively refuse to play the wicked parts, such as those of infames Anglais, brutal Cossacks, and what not, and prefer to appear at a smaller salary, in their real characters as loyal Frenchmen” (Thackeray). Even here, the reader can see how self-involved and vain people are because they cannot distinguish between reality and performance, and in the case of these actors, they do not want to taint their character by participating in a particular type of performance.

If the novel is seen as a performance of reality, specifically, a performance of societal vanity, the allegation of the novel as satire fails again because the novel as a performance of reality stays truly experiential, and does not create a metaphor as to how to repair the reality it represents. In “Vanity Fair: Life in the Void,” D.H. Stewart lays the claim, “Things stand for nothing. Things remain things . . . Thackeray has dramatized, prophetically, the disintegration of all fixed value systems” (209, 213). The performance, then, is an accurate and matter-of-fact manifestation of societal ills. The puppet-theatre reproduces the performance of nothing—hence the name “Vanity Fair.” Vanity is the sin of emptiness, hollowness, and nothingness, all of society’s evils at the time
Thackeray wrote his novel, reminiscent of the Victorian pose, with emphasis on the image these characters, namely the Becky-puppet, present themselves to society. David Cecil, a critic of the novel states, “Now [the fair’s] ignorances and vanities, its self-deceptions and self-absorptions, are far from making up the whole of human nature. But they are, it must be repeated, universal to it . . . [Thackeray] use[s] the novel to express a conscious, considered criticism of life . . . It is one of *Vanity Fair*’s many claims to be his masterpiece that, in it, he does not falsify virtue” (812, 820). Cecil aptly recognizes the flaws of society, such as vanity, described in *Vanity Fair* are universal to mankind. Of Thackeray’s “criticism” of life, though, it seems uncertain in the novel. Rather, Thackeray portrays life for what it is, and leaves it up to the audience to judge, and *this* is why Thackeray does not falsify truth. Thackeray trusts his audience, and believes his readers will identify the lack of values in the novel without him having to paint a false image.

In *Vanity Fair*, performance is deceitful, and language is empty. The reader can see this reflected firstly in the character of the Showman. The Showman frequently changes masks, taking on different roles and opinions of characters, but somehow, even though he is unreliable, he manages to always stay true to reality. The Showman also utilizes Becky for the feat, though, as clearly shown in the ending of the novel. Becky is naturally a Bohemian by birth and by nature, but she attempts to establish herself in the higher ranks of society. She succeeds, but falls from grace due to her inability to be satisfied with what she has in front of her. Becky overreaches, and is reestablished as a
Bohemian, but as the novel ends, the reader finds Becky in a Ladies Charity booth, but we understand this is a sham, and we are meant to laugh.

Clearly, the narrator does not take the performance altogether seriously from the opening thrusts of the piece, as can be seen in his playful tone and his changeability. One can see this come to fruition even in small instances, like when the Showman tends to present a character in a certain light, and then catches the reader off-guard by presenting the same character in a drastically different pose. For example, Captain Dobbin is offered to the reader as a virtuous character whom “never lies,” and then a few paragraphs later, the reader witnesses Dobbin in the act of lying. Stewart defends the Showman's instability by stating:

How are we to understand these contradictions? . . . Why of course, people and our knowledge of them are in the large sense wholly untrustworthy, and we are perhaps startled that Thackeray not only sees this but renders it by continuously subverting our convictions about everything. He makes our certainties equal to the margin of our errors. Thackeray lies, cheats, dissembles, suppresses information. All right, let him. He gives us a world that reflects honestly the real world—which certainly deceives us quite often, quite as bluntly. (211)

The Showman only presents to the audience what can be seen as the most realistic tendencies in himself, his puppets, and society, but he does so in a lighthearted way because, like he states in “Before the Curtain,” we must be able
to laugh at ourselves. He presents opposing views of singular characters, frequently changes his position as a knowledgeable source, makes the audience believe in his word, and then shatters that trust. His inconsistency and instability mirror people’s own flaws, in a humorous manner, but manifested by vanity.

A sort of double vision is then proposed by this idea of performance, or the pose, and reality. There is the public sphere, as characters present themselves to the world, and where the audience has the ability to distinguish between the character’s performance against the character’s true nature, mainly seen in the domestic sphere (although performance, many times, invades the sanctity of the home). Lougy writes:

This sense of two disparate worlds also characterizes the novel itself, with the pastoral or private vision in the background, set off against the predominant world of façade, loneliness, and alienation . . . As a ‘fiendish marine cannibal,’ Becky hides her spiritual and psychological emptiness behind an alluring façade, but when she turns against others those forces of destruction within herself, she is indeed ‘haggard, weary, and terrible.’ (256, 262)

This quotation directly affirms the image of double vision, including a character’s reality (domestic sphere) and his or her performance (public sphere), and in regard to the Becky-puppet, how this double vision is manifested, and the way her vanity is truly emptiness. The Showman tends to favor the Becky-puppet for because she so readily embodies idea of double vision within the novel. Becky, when amongst society, is constantly engaging in a performance, and no one can
see her devious intentions. Becky’s domestic experience, though, paints a vastly different picture of Becky than her public show. The reader can see Becky’s tango between reality and performance in her initial scenes with Lord Steyne. Lord Steyne accuses Becky of lying after she pretends to be preparing food for him and not primping before her mirror. Becky responds, “Is it a crime to try and look my best when you come here?” (Thackeray 480). Here, the reader can see Becky’s created image, as her pose is a performance), which is starkly contrasted then by the way she treats her child when no one is watching. Becky’s ability to alter her performance based on her audience is realistic based on society's vanity as well.

This aspect of performance is visible quite literally in the game of charades. In “The Triumph of Clytemnestra: The Charades in Vanity Fair,” Maria DiBattista claims, “As a form of verbal ‘play,’ charades are designedly opaque. They attempt to communicate a hidden meaning” (828). Charades in Vanity Fair balance on the line between reality and performance. At times, the reader can see a character’s true motives through the guise of charades. In these moments, the reader is meant to interpret Vanity Fair, and specifically Becky, as a direct reflection of the darker sides of reality and to human nature. Becky, in her performance as Clytemnestra, becomes an embodiment of her own desires. Battista continues:

Thackeray retires from the stage as ‘Manager’ of his comic history and allows Becky Sharp to enact the tragic charade ‘The Triumph of Clytemnestra’. . . . The scandalous identification of Becky, the
novel’s mock-heroic adventuress, with the heroic figure of the most majestic female dissembler in the chronicles of myth and history marks the culmination of Becky’s career in the world of vanity . . . Thackeray . . . suggest[s] the essential doubleness of Becky as a figure of cultural evil, representing a Clytemnestra and a Philomele, the ravisher and the ravished, the unscrupulous avenger and the plaintive victim. (827, 832)

Through her performance as Clytemnestra, Becky’s real nature and desires are showcased to the audience. In this performance, the audience members are not entirely sure whether what they are witnessing is reality or performance because it is so well done. Lord Steyne says, “By --, she’d do it too” (Thackeray 511). Clytemnestra’s own performance was to seduce her husband and overcome him for her own means of vengeance, and this seems to be Becky’s intention as well, although her revenge is not on her husband—it is on society. Becky recognizes the falsity of the society that she has grown up in from childhood, and she plays the game along with them in an attempt to assimilate. By assimilating into the upper classes, she believes she will be achieving success as she is actually from the lowest class of society, and this will, in turn, be her revenge. In the process, Becky is taken as victim, and she never attains her goal.

Perhaps the author/Showman intends the reader’s feelings towards characters to be opaque, as the Manager often changes his opinions toward characters; again, this is seen most intensely with his views on Becky. The Manager’s vision of Becky is undecided and untrustworthy, even in the charade
scene, and similarly to our own, realistic dealings with people. Are people always what they seem? Are we so willing to trust their performance, and can we see through the performance? He says, "It is all vanity, to be sure . . . And let us make the best of Becky's aristocratic pleasures likewise—for these too, like all mortal delights, were but transitory" (Thackeray 501). The Showman himself cannot decide solidly whether or not he necessarily approves of Becky, but he surely sees her as a figure that represents many of society's flaws. Often, an individual's opinions change over the course of time, and may be obscure and unreliable based on personal experiences. "The generic imperative of the charades is to never expose reality in the direct light of complete representation. It is this imperative that shadows and perhaps explains Thackeray's reluctance as a narrator to interpret the central classical myths of the novel as to expose Becky as guilty or innocent of certain sexual or social crimes" (DiBattista 834). In general, reality is unclear, and there are many gray areas, so in this way, the Showman remains true-to-life.

When the story ends, Becky is in a Ladies Society's charity booth, in a seemingly better position, and although she can see the vanness of the life she has chosen, "Becky loved society" and practically everything she does confirms rather than rejects that civilization of which she is both symbol and victim. Becky is "within a booth representing neither compassion nor charity, but only the pretense of both, Becky as 'reformed sinner,' the benefactress of 'hapless beings' from within her stalls 'at Fancy Fairs,' plays her inevitable last role" (Lougy 267). The irony lies in the fact that even Becky's final performance is an empty, vain
gesture, and the audience knows she has no real passion for the cause she is participating within, but she must keep up appearance in order to remain a part of society. At the very conclusion of the novel itself, the Showman reminds the reader that this has, indeed, been a puppet-performance based on the concept of vanity. He states, “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” (Thackeray 689). As Manager of the Performance, he decides when and how the story will end. The story ends, though, without much resolution, as we see every character is disillusioned and unhappy in the achieving of his or her desires, and for Becky, there are no consequences for her actions. This is the Showman’s way of standing apart from the action as he narrates certain realities—not everyone receives punishment for their wrongdoings.

“Ten minutes’ steady reading is enough to teach one that Thackeray’s novels are living works of art, not dead period pieces” (Cecil 811). Thackeray fantastically depicts human folly in the raw, and discusses issues that are still relevant today. Through the guise of the Showman and the Becky-puppet, Thackeray points at society and exposes their vanity. The puppet-theatre is a created universe where the performance directly reflects societal vanity. If vanity is emptiness and falseness, and our novel is aptly titled Vanity Fair, the performance of the characters in the novel is seen as void and artificial as well. Becky becomes the main vehicle for the Showman to highlight society’s vain performance. The nature and significance of performance in Vanity Fair by William Thackeray is
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