Vanity Fair

by William Makepeace Thackeray

SUMMARY

Vanity Fair is mainly the story of one highly intelligent but lower class woman, Rebecca, or Becky. Sharp. The novel records the way she makes use of people in her efforts to get on in the world and acquire the vanities – those luxuries which the people in the novel find so essential. Becky is amoral – she does not appear to have any sense that what she does is wrong, or that she hurts people and sometimes destroys their lives as she climbs the greasy pole to social respectability. Some people are as avaricious as she is, and we feel they deserve everything they get. But others are hard-working and generous, and she takes ruthless advantage of their generosity.

First, she makes her play for Joseph Sedley, the unprepossessing but rich brother of her best friend, Amelia. Next, she ingratiates herself with the ugly and uncouth landowner, Sir Pitt Crawley, and his rich aunt, Miss Crawley. Perhaps unfortunately for her, Becky is attracted to the black sheep of the Crawley family, Rawdon, who is Miss Crawley’s favourite. Unfortunately because at this point in the story, she appears to overreach herself. She marries Rawdon secretly and alienates Sir Pitt and Miss Crawley in one false move.

Perhaps her marriage to Rawdon is a love match after all, and not part of one of Becky’s grand plans. Perhaps she is merely attracted to someone who cares as little for the feelings of other as she does. Either way, they appear to be happy together for several years, successfully living on nothing a year through Rawdon’s hustling at cards and their mutual willingness to run up huge debts and decamp from hotels without paying. Their idyll is only briefly interrupted by the world-changing Battle of Waterloo, but finally Becky decides to try again with the Crawley family when Sir Pitt dies. As usual, she succeeds in her plan and she and Rawdon are off and running again, with Becky setting her cap at the unattractive but influential Lord Steyne. It is not clear whether this time she intends to take Rawdon along with her – she certainly doesn’t hurry to get him out of debtor’s prison when one of his creditors finally catches up with him, but perhaps she really was keeping imminent preferment for Rawdon – a governorship in the West Indies – a secret until the time was right. Maybe it was a sensible precaution to hoard money and hide it from her gambling husband. Whether Becky intended to betray Rawdon or not, he sees it that way and their marriage is at an end. Becky survives somehow, until she comes full circle and, bumping into Joseph in a European spa, is finally able to ease his passage out of this world to the extent that he leaves half his money to her in his will.

The secondary plot in the story concerns Becky’s friend, Amelia. Her goodness and naivete helps to point the contrast with Becky’s selfishness and worldly-wisdom. Her ill-luck and suffering also make a clear counterpart to Becky’s ability to drift through life immune to the effects of her actions. Their experiences are almost parallel but the after-effect is completely different each time on the two women. Both have husbands who go off to war, but it is Amelia who suffers widowhood after Waterloo. Both become estranged from their rich relations, but Amelia feels deeply the separation from her husband’s family whilst Becky does not appear to care.

ABOUT WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

Thackeray was born on July 18, 1811, in Calcutta, India. His father was a wealthy merchant. At the age of 18, Thackeray entered the University of Cambridge. but he left without taking his degree. He worked first as the editor of a journal then became an art student in Paris. There he married but his wife became mentally ill. However, he was still able to produce The Paris Sketchbook and Comic Tales and Sketches.

He joined the staff of the satirical magazine Punch in 1842 and in 1847, began work on Vanity Fair. Published in three parts, it was an immediate success, and Thackeray became a major figure of the day.

Towards the end of his life, Thackeray worked as the editor of Cornhill Magazine from 1860 to 1862 and had begun work on his last novel when he died on December 24, 1863, in London.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Thackeray subtitled Vanity Fair – ‘A novel without a hero’ and he uses the novel to show that there are no heroes or heroines – each of us is brought down by one vanity or another. Self-delusion is one major vanity which is exposed. Amelia deludes herself into believing that her husband was true to her, George believes he is the handsomest man in the world, Joseph that he is the bravest. Self-righteousness is another vanity – Old Mr Osborne, for example, believes himself to be in the right and even at the end cannot bring himself to address Amelia as Mrs Osborne. Greed is, perhaps, the ultimate vanity. The main characters are all greedy for money without, in most cases, having to or being willing to work for it. Money motivates the main characters, brings people together and forces them apart.

Thackeray set his novel in an age just before his own, perhaps because that period saw the birth of the industrial revolution, which brought a new class of moneyed individual, the industrialist, to vie for power with the old class, the country landowner. Perhaps he simply wanted to counterpoint the pursuit of money with the pursuit of glory on the battlefield. Whatever his reason for the setting, he made clear the purpose of the novel, indeed, any novel, when he said ‘The art of the novel is to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality as opposed to tragedy or poem which may be heroic’.

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ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1. Put students into groups to discuss the sentences from Chapters 1–5.
2. Put students into groups to discuss these sentences from sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of the discussion and pair/group work activities, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1–5
1. Put students into groups to role play the conversation between Rebecca and Joseph Sedley from the bottom of page 4.
2. Put students into groups to discuss these sentences from Chapter 4. What do they tell you about Rebecca?
   (a) Rebecca's hopes were at an end.
   (b) As the carriage turned the corner, Rebecca immediately dried her eyes and began to think about Sir Pitt.
   (c) 'Miss Sharp gave nothing when she left the Sedley's house.'
   (d) He speaks like a farm worker.
   (e) So she decided to make friends with all those people who could help her.
   (f) I do not need to make a friend of her (Lady Crawley).
   (g) She asked him (Mr Crawley) to explain the difficult parts of French books. (But she understood them because her mother was a Frenchwoman).
   (h) Rebecca did not give them (the daughters) much to learn. As a result, they liked her very much.

Chapters 6–11
1. Put students into groups to discuss the sentences from Chapter 6. What do we learn about George Osborne from each one?
   (a) Amelia waited and waited, but George never came.
   (b) Amelia believed that he (Osborne) was the bravest and most beautiful man in the British army, in Europe, in the world. And it is possible that Lieutenant Osborne thought so too.
   (c) Don't I always do what you ask?
   (d) George Osborne changed the cheque into bank notes the next day and paid Dobbin fifty pounds.
   (e) Dear little Amelia. She likes me so much! And I have a terrible headache.
2. In Chapter 10, the author asks the question 'How can they live so well on nothing a year?' Put students into pairs to find as many answers as possible in Chapter 10.

Chapters 12–18
1. In Chapter 12, we learn another answer to the question 'How can you live on nothing a year?' Put students into pairs to find the answer.
2. Remind students that Rebecca plans everything carefully.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Ask students to role play a conversation between Rebecca and Amelia when they meet by chance many years later.

GLOSSARY

army (n) the part of a country's military force that is trained to fight on land
baronet (n) minor member of the aristocracy
captain (n) an officer who has a middle rank in an army
carriage (n) a vehicle with wheels that is pulled by a horse
collect (v) to take from different places or people
debt (n) money that you owe to someone
fashionable (adj) something that is fashionable is popular or thought to be good at a particular time
gentleman (n) a man who is polite and behaves well towards other people
hero (n) 1 a man who is admired for doing something very brave or good
2 the man who is the main character in a book, film or play
heroine (n) 1 a woman who is admired for doing something very brave or good
2 the woman who is the main character in a book, film or play
lieutenant (n) an officer who has a middle rank in the army, navy, etc.
regiment (n) a large group of soldiers
revolution (n) when the people of a country get rid of the government and change the political system completely
shawl (n) a large piece of cloth that a woman wears around her shoulders or head

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Activities before reading the book

Look up the words vain and vanity in your dictionary. Work in pairs. What can people be vain about? What sometimes happens to vain people?

Activities while reading the book

Chapters 1–5

1 Match the people (a–h) from Chapter 1 and the descriptions (i–viii).
   (a) Amelia Sedley
   (b) Rebecca Sharp
   (c) Miss Pinkerton
   (d) Rebecca’s father
   (e) Rebecca’s mother
   (f) Sir Pitt Crawley
   (g) Miss Jemima
   (h) Joseph Sedley
   (i) a dancer, French, now dead
   (ii) a teacher of drawing, now dead
   (iii) a young girl, employed to be a governess
   (iv) Amelia’s brother
   (v) the employer of Rebecca
   (vi) the kind sister of Miss Pinkerton
   (vii) the kindest young lady in the world
   (viii) the owner of a school

2 Work in pairs. Why, in Chapter 2…
   (a) did Joseph’s face become very red when the young ladies went into the sitting-room?
   (b) did he shake?
   (c) did he find the weather cold?
   (d) did Rebecca say ‘He’s very good-looking.’?
   (e) did Joseph return to England from India?
   (f) did Amelia go red when Mr Sedley talked about George Osborne?
   (g) was Joseph surprised that he could talk easily to Rebecca?
   (h) didn’t Joseph tell Rebecca the truth about killing wild animals?

3 Who, in Chapter 3, said or thought each of these things? Who/what is it about?
   (a) ‘I’ve asked him to come to dinner.’
   (b) ‘He is not an easy man.’
   (c) ‘He was the most beautiful man in the British army.’
   (d) ‘He isn’t exactly good-looking.’
   (e) ‘I think that I understand you.’
   (f) ‘Her sweet, fresh little voice has gone right into my heart.’
   (g) ‘Stop this and let’s go.’
   (h) ‘Stop my dearest, dear-dear-dear.’

4 Complete these sentences about the information in Chapter 5. Use a word from the box in each case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>brother</th>
<th>business</th>
<th>carriage</th>
<th>company</th>
<th>days</th>
<th>death</th>
<th>games</th>
<th>girl</th>
<th>heart</th>
<th>man</th>
<th>officer</th>
<th>ring</th>
<th>sister</th>
<th>son</th>
<th>university</th>
<th>voice</th>
<th>woman</th>
<th>year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (a) Miss Crawley came to visit her … .
| (b) She had seventy thousand pounds a … .
| (c) Miss Crawley disliked her brother’s elder … .
| (d) When she arrived, he soon went away on … .
| (e) Sir Pitt said his … was not a good woman .
| (f) Miss Crawley said she was beautiful in her younger … .
| (g) Miss Crawley paid for Rawdon to go to … .
| (h) Then she helped him join the army as an … .
| (i) Rawdon lived the life of a fashionable young … .
| (j) He drove a four-horse … .
| (k) He fought in the boxing … .
| (l) He played card … .
| (m) He was not afraid of … .
| (n) He spoke with a loud … .
| (o) Rebecca soon won the … of Miss Crawley.
| (p) Miss Crawley said she wanted Rawdon to run away with … .
| (q) But she said the … must be rich.
| (r) Rawdon enjoyed the … of Rebecca.

Chapters 6–11

1 Who in Chapter 7…
   (a) was ill, then got better and then got ill again?
   (b) loved Becky then hated her?
   (c) wanted Becky to marry him, then wanted her to be a friend, then hated her?
   (d) was afraid that Miss Crawley would not forgive him, then happy that Becky would make them rich?

2 Is each of these sentences about the information in Chapter 8 true or false?
   (a) Joseph gave his mother money when his father’s business was destroyed.
   (b) John Osborne wanted Mr Sedley to pay his debts immediately.
   (c) George bought the Sedley’s piano for Amelia.
   (d) Mr Osborne didn’t want George to marry Amelia but then he forgave George.
   (e) George and Amelia met Rebecca and Rawdon in Brighton.
   (f) Rawdon won money from Joseph playing cards.
   (g) Dobbin brought news of a war with Belgium.
(h) George owed Rawdon money.

3 Find at least 10 words from Chapter 9 connected with the Battle of Waterloo.

4 Find sentences in Chapter 9 which include the words in Exercise 4.

5 Are these sentences from Chapter 10 true or false?
   (a) Rawdon wrote a letter to Miss Crawley after the battle of Waterloo.
   (b) Rawdon took some things from French soldiers on the field of Waterloo.
   (c) Rebecca and Rawdon were happy in Paris because they had lots of money.
   (d) Miss Crawley was happy when she heard about Rebecca’s son.
   (e) Lady Southdown went to live in Miss Crawley’s house after Pitt Crawley’s marriage.

7 Match each verb with another word or phrase to make phrases from Chapter 11.

8 Work in pairs. Can you remember a sentence from Chapter 11 which contained each phrase from Exercise 6?

Chapters 12–18

1 Put in order these sentences from the conversation at the end of Chapter 12.
   (a) Becky: I want a dog to look after me, to keep the wild animals off me.
   (b) Becky: No. He likes playing cards too much.
   (c) Rawdon: A what?
   (d) Lord Southdown: Why do you want a sheepdog? You haven’t got any sheep.
   (e) Lord Steyne: Can’t the owner of the sheep protect his dear little sheep?
   (f) Becky: I must have a sheepdog.

2 Answer these questions about the information in Chapter 13.
   (a) Why was Joseph Sedley called Waterloo Sedley during his stay in Bengal?
   (b) What did Amelia live on?
   (c) In what way was Dobbin not honest about George?
   (d) Who gave the boy a gold watch?

3 Work in pairs. Who, in Chapter 15, is … ?
   (a) George Osborne
   (b) Mrs. George Osborne
   (c) ‘his grandfather’ (in the letter on page 41)
   (d) Mr. Sedley
   (e) Mrs. Proud
   (f) ‘my son’ (top of page 42)
   (g) ‘that woman’
   (h) Marker

4 Discuss in pairs these questions about the information in Chapter 16.
   (a) Why didn’t Becky go to the prison and get Rawdon out?
   (b) What did Rawdon think was happening between Becky and Lord Steyne?
   (c) What was happening between Becky and Lord Steyne?
   (d) Why did Becky keep saying ‘I have done nothing wrong.’
   (e) What do you think the writer means ‘When we cannot decide between good or bad, Vanity Fair decides for us’.

5 Make phrases from Chapter 18 with a word from each column.

   (a) healthy (i) bag
   (b) British (ii) carriage
   (c) great (iii) child
   (d) card (iv) dance
   (e) pretty (v) fifteen
   (f) little (vi) games
   (g) beginner’s (vii) hearted
   (h) number (viii) hotel
   (i) old (ix) lady
   (j) sister’s (x) life
   (k) elephant (xi) luck
   (l) 300 (xii) people
   (m) good (xiii) pounds
   (n) friendly (xiv) talk
   (o) soft (xv) times
   (p) little (xvi) waters

   ‘Becky didn’t do anything wrong because the people she hurt were all vain themselves.’ Work in pairs. Do you agree with this statement? Why? Why not?