

**Cleverly Voiced: The Narrators' Uncommon Perceptions and Depictions of the Bad Woman  
in *Middlemarch* and *Vanity Fair***

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the way in which William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* present a different point of view towards their "bad" women than the one usually expected in the Victorian Period. This is done through subtlety and clever intrusions by their narrators, thus avoiding the certain rejection from their Victorian readers. Victorian Novels usually depicted female characters that represented what was considered good (commonly known as "Angels of the House") and female characters that represented what was considered bad in the Victorian Period. Obviously, it was expected for the good female characters to succeed and the bad ones to fail. Nevertheless, by studying how these "bad" women are perceived and depicted by their narrators in these two novels, this thesis demonstrates how by subtle patterns in the narration and ultimate endings, the "bad" women, despite first impressions, were preferred over the Angel of the House.

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## Resumen

Esta tesis demuestra como las novelas *Vanity Fair* por William Makepeace Thackeray y *Middlemarch* por George Eliot presentan un punto de vista diferente sobre la mujer “mala” de lo esperado en la Era Victoriana. Esto es hecho mediante intrusiones sutiles e inteligentes a través de los narradores de las novelas, así evitando el rechazo de sus lectores Victorianos. Novelas Victorianas usualmente presentan dos tipos de personajes femeninos; una que representa lo que era considerado bueno (conocida comúnmente como las “Ángeles de la Casa”) y la otra que representa lo que era considerado malo en el periodo Victoriano. Obviamente, era esperado que las personajes “buenas” fueran exitosas y las “malas” fracasaran. A pesar de esto, mediante la observación de como estas personajes “malas” son percibidas y presentadas por sus narradores, esta tesis explora como ciertos patrones en la narración y el final de las novelas, demuestran que, a pesar de primeras impresiones, son preferidas sobre las “Ángeles de la Casa.”

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“I dedicate this work to *myself* since *I wrote it!*”

Since I am proud of how this work evolved from its original idea and turned into what it is today through dedication, hard work and determination.

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## Introduction

Although considered a feminist, pioneer female writer Catherine de Pizan, in her work *The City of Ladies*, wrote: “It’s true that there is nothing worse than a woman who is dissolute and depraved: she’s like a monster, a creature going against its own nature, which is to be timid, meek and pure” (10). This expression represents a belief that has affected the portrayal of women in historical and fictional texts before the fourteenth century, and it is still maintained in the twenty-first century. The “nature” of women has been a subject of great interest and debate, evidenced by the vast amount of literature produced on the matter. Regardless of the quantity, however, the ideas have been surprisingly similar through the centuries. Although Pizan’s ideals were formulated in the fourteenth century as a response to the misogyny of her day presented in literature intended for women and within female characters of fiction, these views can also be seen in the work of eighteenth-century authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, in *Émile: or, on Education*, pedantically claims that the sole purpose of woman and her education “ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make us love and esteem them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives easy and sweet—these are the duties of women at all times” (131). These writings delved meticulously into the “supposed duties of women” and the idea of what appropriate behavior a woman should have, which in précis is to become submissive and pleasing to men from early childhood. Alongside these behavioral lessons, eighteenth-century male authors like James Fordyce in his *Sermons to Young Women* and Rousseau himself in his writings, instructed women on how to seduce men, both suggesting that beauty is the greatest asset a young woman could possess, and therefore she should use this beauty in order to gain, keep, and please a husband. Due to the dogmatic nature

of this type of philosophy, if women were to dissent they would be derogatorily labeled as “masculine” (according to Rousseau), “bad” (as Fordyce calls them) and “monsters” (as Pizan declares); these terms, used solely to denote women who did not fit into their ideals, have only increased with the passing of time.

Curiously enough, however, the most vilified of all of these shunned acts of rebellion, which have prompted paroxysms of reproach, consists of women’s use of coquetry (the same techniques suggested to them) for other reasons than to please their husband. For writer Mary Wollstonecraft, retaliation by women was inevitable due to the despotic character of these teachings:

this exertion of cunning is only an instinct of nature to enable them to obtain indirectly a little of that power of which they are unjustly denied a share: for, if women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious, to obtain illicit privileges. (27)

The concept of retaliation presented, discussed extensively in Wollstonecraft’s renowned work *A Vindications of the Right of Woman*, is found to be “very excusable,” since women have been given limited means of obtaining power. Wollstonecraft goes on to question the then male-dominated perceived notions of the female role and the negative reception towards cunning women, or as they were derogatorily called “masculine women”:

I am aware of an obvious inference:—from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? ... if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind... wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine. (33)

It is clear that Wollstonecraft was against the binary categorization of women: if they were not pure and delicate they were considered masculine. She notes throughout her book that

categorization only creates both intellectually and physically weak, dependent women, and even though being a “masculine” woman is considered to be negative, it is preferable to the alternative. However, this binary categorization has endured thanks to its enforcement equally by both men and women. Pizan, as seen in the lines quoted above, exemplifies the fact that women have been perceived and represented as either “pure” or “monsters” historically and within literature by both sexes.

Either by male or female authors when these “bad” characters were depicted in literature it was expected that they receive the anticipated chastisement for their behavior. The “bad woman” was supposed to be despised and ultimately reach the “appropriate” end, eventually serving as a figure of warning to the readers. In the Victorian Era, for example, there is a vast variety of literary works by both male and female authors containing these qualities towards their female characters, especially those who express and act on sexual beliefs and behaviors contradictory to the time. Some examples are the novels *Madame Bovary*, by Gustave Flaubert where the “bad” female protagonist’s behavior throughout her life not only causes her suicide but destroys the life of her husband and possibly her daughter’s; Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* where Tess’ lost virginity (either by seduction or rape) before marriage at the beginning of the novel dictates the misery and misfortune that follow throughout her life till the very end; and Christina Rossetti’s poem “Goblin Market” where Laura faces death for succumbing to temptation and is saved only when her righteous and determined sister manages to resist it. As Rossetti depicted, following the beliefs of the time where there was a “bad” female character negatively depicted, there was a “good” female character positively depicted, who was later known as “the Angel in the House,” (in reference to Patmore’s poem by the same name) who usually was followed with a “happy ending” as seen in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

Jane the “angel” and “pure” character justly receives her happy ending where the “monster” Bertha dies. Bram Stoker’s seductive character Lucy from *Dracula* dies while Mina, the devoted wife does not; George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* whose strong-minded character Maggie Tulliver, who loses her reputation in a sex scandal, is able to regain it only after her death, while “the Angel in the House” Lucy Deane not only lives, but gains a husband. These are only a few examples of literary works presenting these types of women. These characters fall into what Nina Auerbach in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* suggests are the four types in Victorian literature: angel, demon, old maid, and fallen woman. Authors placed female characters within such categories and, as shown, followed the formula expected for them.

There were cases in which novels caused uproars upon reception due to their apparent lack of reprimand towards “bad” behavior, as seen with Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* which was publicly burnt in protest because of Jude and Sue living together unmarried, despite the fact the characters suffered greatly in the end. Therefore it was not sufficient for the novel to end in tragedy; it also had to portray a shunned depiction of these acts throughout the entire work.

However, some authors managed to incorporate narrators who, although they do ostensibly shun their “bad” characters, at times seem to celebrate them. Moreover, their “demons” do not have an unfortunate ending but have a content if not a happy one, without any repentance on their part, challenging the pre-established formula. Furthermore, instead of criticizing the character’s actions directly the authors may use them to criticize the actions of those around them, implying that they are not completely to blame. Nevertheless, curiously and intelligently enough this is done in a discreet manner which is revealed by the patterns in the narration the authors use to depict such characters. This ambiguity in judgment and narrative

patterns are clearly seen in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* with the character of Becky Sharp and in Rosamond Vincy of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

*Vanity Fair* was first published in 1847-48, and is generally considered Thackeray's "greatest effort and... his greatest success" (Lewes 753). It satirizes the society of early nineteenth-century England by following the lives of many in fictitious Victorian socialites, especially Becky Sharp. Becky is presented by the narrator as a cold, calculating, and seductive woman constantly trying to climb up social and economic ladders. One of her most disapproved behaviors by both the narrator and the society within *Vanity Fair* is the use of coquetry to achieve her means (which works as an example of real life judgments imparted on women, as described by Rousseau's writings). Worthy of mention is Becky's intellect; she sees the truth behind the hypocritical society she resides in and uses this knowledge to her advantage. However, it is this same wit that sabotages her plans. Self-interested actions and loose morals aside, the fact that Becky helps Amelia Sedley, despite unclear intentions and her reception as a character, still causes debate among scholars concerning her categorization. Many, like Frank W. Chandler, declare her a "rogue" or "bad" woman, while others like M. Corona Sharp argue that she is merely doing what had to be done in her situation, and is therefore a survivor, an argument supported by the narrator's own justification of her actions, "I don't think, ladies, we have any right to blame her" (Thackeray 19). Others simply consider her to be both.

Even *Vanity Fair*'s narrator is not completely decided on his true opinion of Becky since, although he does describe her as a "siren" or "monster" (637), at times he shows admiration and preference for her. The narrator's view of her, at the same time that it places her under the "bad" woman archetype prevents her from fitting into any one category. For instance, true to the binary system that these archetypes create, she is the counterpart of Amelia, the "angel" of the novel.

However, it is of curious note that this “angel” is portrayed as less interesting than the “superior bad angel,” Becky (454); Amelia is described as a “little pink-faced chit” (93) and is often ridiculed by the narrator. For example: unlike Becky, Amelia is comically presented as a weak emotional character possessing only the ability to “laugh and cry” (5). The novel being a satire, by ridiculing Amelia shows the narrator’s disregard for the traits this character represents, therefore displaying a slight preference to Becky. Edward Wagenknecht in his article “The Selfish Heroine: Thackeray and Galsworthy” argues that Thackeray

never quite got his head and his heart together, never quite reconciled the artist with the chivalrous male. When he talks about his female characters, he speaks as a Victorian gentleman should; but when it comes to describing their actions and reporting their speech his demon drives him and he tells the truth. (294)

This ambivalence raises the following questions: Is this character a complete villain? Or is she just depicted as so because Victorian society expected to feel this way about all ambitious and seductive females according to Victorian values?

According to Ben Wilson, in *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain: 1789-1837*, Victorian ideas on manners were “censorious and moralistic, hypocritical and vindictive... insist[ing] on a rigid code of manners where it would persecute those who dissented” (30). Likewise, E.A. Smith argues that the nobility “sought to out do one another in any way...extravagance, pomp, and circumstance, albeit of a shallow nature” (22). Consequently, although not all Victorian values were negative, as presented in Gertrude Himmelfrab’s *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, many Victorians believed that the focus on manners was sometimes prioritized over other greater issues. Many early Victorians reacted to this imposition of manner and values with rebellion, which in turn, created a double standard in their values, where out of social necessity they would

subdue to the “self righteous cant,” (Wilson 32) but inwardly they would yearn for the freer time they had experienced in the British Regency, thus detesting the state of hypocrisy that was the prevailing moral taste. Perhaps it can be inferred that Thackeray was also a victim of these ambivalent values; creating a character that as it was supposed to be done, is criticized, but in reality is the narrator’s favorite.

In *The Buried Life: A Study of the Relation between Thackeray's Fiction and His Personal History* Gordon N. Ray analyzes various fictional and nonfictional works regarding Thackeray’s life concluding that Thackeray emerges as a “restless, insecure man, who despite his outer poise and polish was permanently uneasy, permanently in need of reassurance” (122); meaning that although he was living in “the age of marble, because it was cold and polished,” (Wilson 26) Thackeray at heart, was still a member of the Regency era and its values.

This ambivalence in his values surely affected his perceptions and representations of his characters, especially those that should be shunned by Victorian society, but whom Thackeray secretly admired. Like Wagenknecht, Gordon Ray concludes that exactly this indecisive mindset,

made it impossible for him [Thackeray] to judge these characters with detachment and impartiality. He did not fail to tell the truth about such characters, but he constantly sought to apologize for them and to explain away their shortcomings. Hence the ambiguity in his presentation of them, the sharp discrepancy between what they say and do and Thackeray's estimate of them. (124)

This “discrepancy between what they say and do and Thackeray's estimate” is illuminating when it comes to analyzing the character of Becky Sharp. Becky then becomes unique in the sense that although an example of a “bad” female, who allures most of the men she encounters, manages to allure the narrator as well, thereby challenging the formula prescribed for her type of female characters.

Similar to Becky, there is the character Rosamond Vincy of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Rosamond although not as obviously preferred by the narrator over the "angel," like Becky (since *Middlemarch*'s narrator is not as blatant as Thackeray's) has her actions although shocking most times sometimes justified by the narrator, and Rosamond has an even happier ending than Becky Sharp does.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* was published in serial form in 1871-72. It has a wide variety of characters, plots, and themes such as the idea of marriage, the role of women, self-interest, idealism, medical science and education. As for the characters, the two most noticeable female characters are Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy. Dorothea is the heroine of the novel presented to possess strict virtues, education and ideals. In contrast to Dorothea there is Rosamond, who although she does not possess any ill wishes is manipulative and calculative in her actions to a point that her natural reactions and emotions are scarce, as seen when the narrator declares: "at this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old," when she is crying due to Lydgate's (her future husband) neglect of her during their courtship (Eliot 317). Furthermore, she knows that she is extremely good looking and uses it to her advantage. Her every action is preplanned in some way and she is determined to join a higher society than her own, especially in manners. In order to do so she subtly manipulates the emotions of her targeted future spouse, Dr. Lydgate, and is able to influence his actions in order to gain more social status enough to lead him away from his desires, which were to become a researcher in the field of medicine, in order to fulfill her own, to such a point where he calls her his "basil plant" referring to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (885).

As in Becky's case, there are contradictory points of views concerning her as a female "bad" character or not. Henry James said of Rosamond that she deserves to be "a study of a

gracefully vicious or at least of a practical baleful nature” (85) while V.S. Pritchett on the other hand considers her to possess “the most distinguished ideals” (210). Although Rosamond does possess many negative qualities and depictions she is sometimes presented as a much more clever character than Dorothea, who also idealizes her own beliefs and fails to see the reality in front of her. As a result of this, the narrator shows some incongruity in the opinion of her, where the reader questions “whether she is going to exemplify the harsh or tender side of tragic interest...the Dorothea element or the Rosamond element is to prevail (Haight 92-3). This incongruity by the narrator is further amplified since Rosamond manages to achieve the marriage she wants and lives her life happily in fortune.

Although Eliot is in no way as clear or direct as Thackeray is when it comes to imparting judgment, the narrator still does so however subtly and, like Thackeray, it is her plot and the fate of the characters that shows the imparted judgment. Furthermore, any incongruity by George Eliot is likely since as a narrator/author it has been said that she “explicitly carries the reader through the arc of induction and deduction, deduction and induction that gives generalities weight and substance” (Gallagher 63). Because of this, the reader can trust that the narrator is imparting judgment or is leading the reader to impart it whichever it may be. To facilitate this, however, as Thackeray did with *Vanity Fair*, with *Middlemarch* she seeks to present “a desire to be real”; therefore she tries to portray characters as types recognizable to society where it is known “that the type may be ideational but it has fed on life” (Gallagher 63). This practice results in the reader’s being capable of believing the actions the characters make since it is common in those types of individuals. However, Eliot also strayed from this convention and where characters may start as a type, or resemble a certain type of individual, they would deviate and resemble another and lack one categorization. This fact is important to when devising a

character study and a study of the relationship between the narrator and such a character, especially if the character typically belongs to the “bad” female category, as Rosamond does.

It was expected that the narrator and the author would sympathize with the Dorothea type or “angel” and condemn the “demon” type, in this case Rosamond. However, in some cases, where the narrator is harsh with Dorothea she seems to be obliging and understanding with Rosamond, which in turn challenges the conventions of the time. Moreover, it can be seen that although Rosamond’s actions are considered negative, the narrator seems to present an exception to this character and in the end is gentler on her than on any other female character in the book.

There certainly are other novels that, like *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch*, share similar characteristics when it come to their female “bad” character, such as Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*. But in the case of *Moll Flanders* the narration is participant or first-person, therefore not appropriate if one seeks to study how the narrator imparts ambivalent judgments on these characters according to the values of their era and, most significantly, Moll reaches a “happy ending” because she repents her actions; something that neither Becky nor Rosamond do.

Feminist theories on gender representation, Readers-Response Theory and New Historicism provide an illuminating theoretical framework to illustrate how the gender ideologies and the values of the Victorian Era affected the authors’ judgment when creating these characters, resulting in the narrators’ ambivalence towards them. New Historicism, by basing itself on a synthetic methodology, allows the “ability to understand a text’s reflection of multiple, coexistent systems of meaning, thereby emphasizing textual and historical complexity to a greater degree” (Hall 300). In contrast to traditional forms of historical analysis, New Historicism evaluates other concepts such as narration, literary theory, and analysis as sources for research. Historical-based literary analysis is known to provide great insight into the past

(while not definitive due to its fictitious elements) by providing an interpretation of the beliefs or events of the time the literary work takes place and it is written in. This is crucial if one attempts to look at how the authors' society influenced their verdict over the characters.

This theoretical approach for literary analysis received its momentum in 1980 with the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Greenblatt's work studies the concept of self-hood of major literary figures of the English Renaissance by using both historical documents and the authors' literary creations as well. In *Renaissance*, Greenblatt addresses "the implications of artistic representations as a distinct human activity" (5). He justifies his use of literature for his analysis by asserting that these two fields are embedded. Literature in turn serves as a way to manifest the social actions that are the heart of "systems of public signification" (5). Thus, according to Greenblatt, for any New Historical study it is necessary to investigate "both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (5). This interdisciplinary research "drew new attention to the ways in which literature reflects not only the intentions of its creators as self-conscious respondents to their time period but also the ways in which a variety of systems of power and responses to power are reflected in a given text" (Hall 301).

Historian and literary critic Hayden White has also worked extensively with the concept of narration and emplotment of history with literature, arguing that "the transformation of events into stories endows them with cognitive meaning" (White 795). His work is mainly a junction of historiography and literary theory with significant impact on both areas of study. White's approach to history is from,

the perspective of language, suggesting that historical truth is always constructed through the narratives crafted by historians. Historical knowledge...is not simply the

apprehension of an external reality, the truth of the past, but is a product of the historian's discourse. ("Hayden White")

The discourse then, is the one that imparts judgment and can ultimately affect the view of the narrated event.

In terms of a female figure's being judged and categorized as a "bad" female, it is usually a result of a male-dominated view towards female empowerment, a view that has persisted throughout time by means of its narration. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar approach this concept in *The Madwoman in the Attic* by explaining how this perception affects female characters, and how it affects female writers as well, in this case Eliot. A female writer, due to the "anxiety of authorship," may feel that she needs to speak in a male voice, therefore willingly or unwillingly supporting the patriarchy found in literary authority. Adding this feminist approach to new historicism makes it possible not only to see how the reality of the authors affected their judgments in their writing, but how it affected specifically the female characters.

Judith Newton in "History as Usual?: Feminism and the 'New Historicism'" claims that "one way in which this 'New Women's History,' in conjunction with social history, began to change what "history" was going to mean, lay in making the construction of subjectivity, representation, role prescription, ideas, values, and psychology a point of focus" (101). Feminist history's focus on "subjectivity" and "representations" allows deep character analyses that explore the "multiplicity of women's roles and identities imposed by race, sex and class" (102). Therefore, New Women's History, defined by Newton as "versions of history which overlap with those currently attributed to 'new historicism,'" (103) provides a supple methodological base where, not only are its sources analyzed from various literary and historical perspectives, it also adds a feminist approach to these perspectives.

Reader-Response Theory helps establish the connection between the narrator and the reader. For Eliot and Thackeray it was a literary convention to address the reader with “you” and it was expected that the readers sympathize with the story and not distance themselves from the theme at any time. Furthermore, considering that these novels were originally printed through serialization they needed to make sure that the reader would still be there when the other serial came out. Because of this, the reader was almost a character in the book. Wolfgang Iser in his work *The Implied Reader*, echoing Wayne C. Booth’s argument presented in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, considers that this type of narration creates “implied readers” who eventually had to adopt the persona the narrative required in order to enjoy and relate to the story. Of course, in order to do so the author had to be conscious of what type of persona to allude to; it could not be too far off from the “actual” readers as the success of the work would have been jeopardized. Therefore, these two authors made sure to have the typical Victorian reader in mind since they would sympathize and agree with the imparted judgment.

Therefore, although both Thackeray and Eliot alluded to a specific reader with specific values one can see throughout the remarks of the narrator that there is some ambivalence when it comes to judging the “bad” female characters, an ambivalence that will eventually be present in the reader as well. The ambiguity that the reader develops concerning the general opinion of the character is due to the narrator’s own ambiguity, an ambiguity which is perceivable when compared to their depiction of the heroines or “Angel” figures. It is a well-known fact that women have suffered extremely chauvinistic misconceptions of “ideal behavior” and “female nature,” and failure to comply with these would construct a “bad” woman in place of the ideal “angel,” or, “good” woman. In opposition of this, countless studies as Gilbert’s and Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Hélène Cixous’ “*Sorties*: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” and

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* show that the binary system of classifying women as either "Angels" or "Monsters" holds no tangible positive consequences; it only creates a binary system of female archetypes, where if one doesn't follow the prescribed set of behavior will be immediately negatively branded.

However, although both Becky Sharp and Rosamond Vincy indeed show questionable actions and morals, and ultimately are considered the "bad" women in the novel (especially when compared to the "angel of the house"), they hold within the narrator either a discreet preference, as the case with Thackeray and Becky, or an obvious exception to the norm, as with Rosamond and Eliot, which ultimately leads to their happy endings without any form of repentance for their actions, an element that was not necessarily seen happening for this type of female character in most Victorian fiction. This demonstrates that although the authors wrote in accordance to the values of the time, possibly out of necessity, they still opposed if ever so slightly the prescribed roles of women and managed ever so slightly to admire the qualities found in their ambitious female characters either for their cunning or self-reliance.

**Chapter I**  
**“Everything depends upon the narrator's attitude”<sup>1</sup>: The Importance of the Narrator in  
*Vanity Fair and Middlemarch***

And, as we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them: if they are good and kindly, to love them and shake them by the hand: if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve: if they are wicked and heartless, to abuse them in the strongest terms which politeness admits of.

--William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

The narrator in nineteenth century fiction carries a lot of weight and influence in their novels. Not only do they lead the plot they also lead the judgment of the reader. They are able to highlight, diffuse, distract and judge as they wish in the novel and the reader is either conscious or unconscious about it. This is done by explicit commentaries or intrusions from the narrator into the plot. Carl D. Malmgren divides these commentaries into three main groups: personal, ideological, and metalingual. The personal are the “speaker’s own opinions, beliefs, judgments or attitudes concerning the characters” (473); the ideological is when the speaker assumes that the reader shares the same community and value systems as them and the metalingual, when the narrators feel the need to explain their actions in storytelling. Furthermore, according to Robyn R. Warhol, in “Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator” these common narrative conventions of the Victorian author-- of using the narrator to express commentaries on the text--resulted in either an engaging narrator or a distancing one when the “you” was used to address the recipients of the text. Drawing from Gerald Prince’s critical works on narration, Warhol explains that the distancing narrator is one that specifies so intently on the characteristics of the narratee that it is likely that the actual recipient will not share many of those specific characteristics. On the other hand, the engaging narrator is the one that allows some flexibility in the “you” addressed. Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Sharp Corona, M. “Sympathetic Mockery: A Study of the Narrator's Character in *Vanity Fair*.” *ELH*. 29.3 (1962) 324-336. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Feb. 2011

for Warhol, when the engaging narrator uses the “you” they could be “refer[ing] to experiences I could conceivably have while I am reading” (“The Engaging Narrator” 352). Like Warhol, contemporary research by Garret Stewart in *Dear Reader: the Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*, also addresses these differences in narrators which for him, result in interpolated audiences (or readers) and extrapolated audiences, either in the story as a character themselves or addressed to as an outside reader of the story respectively. According to Reader-Response Theory, this in turns creates the “actual readers” and the “implied readers.”

Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* reaffirms Wayne C. Booth’s argument presented in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that there are two types of readers in every literary experience: the implied and the actual reader. According to Wolfgang Iser, the implied reader examines the role the “real reader is offered...to play,” meanwhile the actual reader “reflects the way in which a literary work has been received by a specific reading public” (18) For Robyn R. Warhol, then, the implied reader is a product of the distancing narrator, while with the engaging narrator the reader can still remain “real.” The engaging narrator assumes that “their narratees are in perfect sympathy with them” (812) while the distancing narrator might want to evoke laughter and amusement and does not necessarily seek reader-identification with the text. However, Iser called the dialectic between reader and narrator a “wandering viewpoint” where:

every moment of reading is a dialectic of pretension and retention, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoints carves its passage through both at the same time and leaves them to merge together in its wake. (112)

Therefore, considering Iser’s portrayal of the relationship between reader and narrator it is possible for a “distancing narrator” to achieve reader-identification with the text especially since it is such a strong interaction between them. Moreover, further developing Iser argument, Iser’s

contemporary Walter Slatoff in *With Respect to Readers*, points out the “inevitable and valid imaginative filling in and fleshing out which we perform as we read” (17) which entails that the reader will eventually “move beyond the text,” allowing the reader to “fully realize” the events and characters in the novel despite the type of narrator the work has (18).

These opposing points of views on the type of relationship between the narrator and the readers if nothing else show the importance a narrator has in the text, and the literary conventions used in the nineteenth century, which Garret Stewart describes as a “relentless micromanagement of reaction” (21). For instance, Warhol classifies the narrator in *Vanity Fair* as distancing but the narrator in *Middlemarch* as engaging, claiming that since Thackeray’s narrator is so specific about his ideal readers, identification with the text is near impossible. However, in Thackeray’s defense, Stewart claims that since the readers are already being addressed (even created), “whether addressed in second person or ascribed in third, marks the site of an implicated response, however minimal” (27). Furthermore, Michael Lund argues, in *Reading Thackeray*, a study of the effects the Victorian reader underwent while reading *Vanity Fair*, that by “considering the text within the context of Thackeray’s original audience” (10) a reader can see how “reading Thackeray meant revising and refining essential cultural values” where the “audience moves toward new understandings of important values in their world” (61). Therefore not only did the readers form reader-identification with the text, the readers had to evaluate their own “cultural values.” Lund’s and Stewart’s point of views echo older works on the matter such as Harriet Blodgett’s “Necessary Presence: The Narrator in *Vanity Fair*” in which she claims that “the reader himself is a performer in the larger *Vanity Fair* which the story gives but a sample: he must never be permitted smugly to distance himself from the tale. Hence

the narrator addresses all manners of readers in turn, keeping them involved with the theme” (212).

As seen, it is of note that the narrator in *Vanity Fair* has received the extreme of both positive and negative criticism from both contemporary and earlier sources. For instance some critics and novelists such as, Ford Maddox Ford, and Carl Grabo among many others, consider a novel a success in spite of him, while some such as Harriet Blodgett, Wolfgang Iser, Michael Lund, and Garret Stewart, among others, defend that it is *because* of him, proposing that the narrator is Thackeray’s “major rhetorical device” (Blodgett 212) and, as Richard Wash asserts, an “inherent feature of narrative” (485) Despite the differences in criticism it is clear that Thackeray’s narrator-author has great influence over *Vanity Fair*’s readers. He has multiple roles in the novel, and all are of equal importance. For instance, he is capable of leading readers to the direction he wants them to concerning judgment, as there are numerous times where a snide remark such as the one used to describe Mr. Pitt, “yet he failed somehow, in spite of a mediocrity which ought to have insured any man a success” (87), make it impossible to the reader to judge the character any other way than the one desired. Also, he ultimately is the one that will impart the necessary importance an event might have in the story and attempts to present it as plausible scenes of real life, as seen in Chapter VI “Vauxhall”, where concerning the seeming irrelevance of it as a chapter, the narrator asks the reader: “Are not there little chapters in everybody’s life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of the history?” (52). Furthermore, he also serves as a window to the ideologies of the early to mid-Victorian era concerning propriety and social status, not only by the fiction presented, but by the remarks of the narrator concerning what is being depicted, and most importantly he shows the readers what the author’s views are of these beliefs.

Many different points of views exist concerning the relationship between Thackeray and *Vanity Fair*'s narrator. Out of literary custom many scholars used to always differentiate between the man and the creation as entirely different, claiming that "the tie scarcely matters" (Blodgett 222). However, contemporary studies such as Richard Wash's "Who is the Narrator?" claim that the narrator "functions primarily to establish a representational frame within which the narrative discourse may be read as report rather than invention" (496). Furthermore in accordance with this mindset Gordon N. Ray, Thackeray's most notable researcher and biographer, claims that the line between novelist and creation is extremely thin. Percy Lubbock goes further claiming that "Thackeray *cannot* be the nameless abstraction that the dramatist is naturally" (Lubbock 109) and that *Vanity Fair* is "the reflections of somebody's mind"; that mind being Thackeray's (Lubbock 110). This has resulted in numerous critical works on *Vanity Fair* that make no distinction between the narrator and the author and where some agreement has been settled on how Thackeray's personal life and views are significantly present in the novel, as seen in *The Buried Life: A Study of the Relation between Thackeray's Fiction and His Personal History* by Gordon N. Ray.

In *The Buried Life*, Ray claims that through researching Thackeray's life he became even more aware of the "extent to which his imaginative life was dependent for sustenance on the persons who figure most intimately in his personal history" (v). Thanks to personal correspondence and unpublished documents Ray manages to find the models of three of *Vanity Fair*'s characters: Jos Sedley, Amelia Sedley and Miss Crawley. Discovering the models for these characters reveals the personal connection Thackeray had in his writing, plus, and most importantly, how the narrator serves as Thackeray's voice since the opinions of the narrator towards some of these characters equal Thackeray's. An example of this is Miss Crawley.

Miss Crawley was modeled after Thackeray's maternal grandmother Harriet Cowper later known as Louisa Matilda Butler. She being an economically independent woman and, as Miss Crawley does with Rawdon, helped Thackeray monetarily, plus like Rawdon and Miss Crawley, Thackeray and his grandmother lived together for some time to the displeasure of other members of the family. Also like Miss Crawley, Mrs. Butler was an eccentric, "most imperious, crotchety and perverse lady" (Ray 38), yet an advocate for tradition within her close family circle always insisting that Thackeray introduces himself to high society. According to letters to his mother, Thackeray expresses fondness for his grandmother, but is not blind to her faults or uncertain temper, claiming that "a wonderful eloquence and ingenuity [of "bad words"] are wrung into my ears by G. M." (Ray 39) yet the quarrels seemed to be made up quickly and once he moved out, he would "walked stoutly up three times a week to be scolded" by her (Ray 39). This lively relationship is depicted at some point in the relationship between Miss Crawley and Rawdon, where their personalities is what eventually brings them together and, of course, Miss Crawley's fortune. Finally, as evidence of her relationship to Miss Crawley and how the narrator serves as Thackeray's voice, is his farewell of her in *Vanity Fair*: "Peace to thee, kind and selfish, vain and generous old heathen!"; a depiction also fitting of Mrs. Butler (351).

Though *Vanity Fair* is in no way an autobiographical work of literature, it does include some elements and incidents of the author's life. Knowing this relationship is important not only to understand some characters better and, as John Carey declares, to seek the answer to many of the novel's mysteries which are "to be sought in his private life," (xi) but, for the purpose of this chapter, to see how powerful is the narrator in this Victorian novel.

The fact that the character of the narrator in *Vanity Fair* had a close relationship with Thackeray's personal life adds to the importance and the significance of the judgment imparted

by this narrator towards his characters. The narrator is aware of his characters' faults and guides the reader when to judge and when not to, as he also does. The narrator is sometimes compassionate to his characters' faults and other times highly critical. Yet what makes him even more interesting and adds to the realism in the novel is the fact that the narrator does not exclude himself from the faults found within *Vanity Fair* declaring:

Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions. And while the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover ... professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed: yet, look you, one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cap and bells or a shovel hat; and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking. (83)

This statement not only works to establish the sort of characters the reader will meet, but has two other important purposes: first, it establishes a realistic and not over-preaching narrator who has faults like a real person, therefore facilitating a sort of reader-identification with the narrator, and second, once this identification is created the narrator gains credibility among its readers; a credibility fortified by statements such as "to speak the truth as far as one knows it" (83). He assures the reader that they won't be misled due to fancy or trends towards the sympathetic as seen in the beginning of Chapter VI "Vauxhall" where the narrator creates a romantic and exotic scene as an example of what some readers may prefer to the "homely" chapter that will follow:

we might have treated this subject in the genteel, or in the romantic, or in the facetious manner... But my readers must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarce deserves to be called a chapter at all. (52)

With these statements the narrator is not only criticizing the romance genre and the ideals that over sympathizing brings upon an individual, but he is also establishing the reality of the novel. Furthermore, to convince the reader of its importance, and to establish that in real life small

events are important as well, the passage is followed with: “And yet it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody's life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of the history?” (52). Here, again, the narrator is not only criticizing the ideas of sentimental fiction and romance, but he is also appealing to the readers to think and, consequently, relate to the story.

Thackeray was also renowned for his displeasure with sentimental fiction. He valued real people with real faults and believed that it was an author's responsibility to produce such in writing as seen in a letter written to Scottish writer David Masson:

the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality—in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically; but in a drawing room drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics. (qtd. in Blodgett 212)

This mentality of “a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else” is clearly seen in many passages in the novel. At times we see that Thackeray seems to indulge the sympathetic reader somewhat but when it comes to depicting “real life” he would avoid the adornments. The strongest example of this is the passage narrating George Osborne's death. Of it John Carey in his introduction to *Vanity Fair* argues: “nothing has prepared us for this. To remove a major character so casually, in a mere subordinate clause, was unprecedented—sudden, callous, unreasonable, and shocking, like real death” (xiii). This is one of the reasons why Thackeray's realism and narrative is worthy of study: it follows the stipulations of realism and by its complexity it manages to convince the reader of the credibility of the events happening.

*Vanity Fair* belongs to the movement of European realism that took place around the nineteenth century and lasted to the late nineteenth or early twentieth as a reaction against Romanticism. European realism sought to depict the everyday life and its trials despite its

commonness, a trait seen throughout this novel. The novel in turn was considered as Garret Stewart in *Dear Reader: the Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* defines it, “the book of the world” instead of the traditional focus of “the world of the book” (275). As a result, Thackeray’s realism considered a “mix of theatrical masquerade and journalistic ephemera” is especially noted for his psychological realism (Stewart 278). Gordon Ray asserts that Thackeray was on “constant lookout for traits of snobbery, meanness and humbug” which ultimately helped him create realistic characters such as the ones in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray, thanks to his study and observations of English society, managed to depict accurate types of people in his characters, types of people that the readers (especially when it was first published) could recognize. The fact that the reader can believe that the characters in the novel would act the way that they do is one of the qualities that make this novel so alluring.

Because the reader can trust and conceive the depictions to be accurate it is easy to accept the narrator’s judgment on the characters. However, not all critics agree that the narrator’s judgment is to be trusted. For instance Russell A. Fraser in “Pernicious Casuistry: A Study of Character in *Vanity Fair*” claims that “if Thackeray, like his master Fielding, is to take upon himself the role of a Chorus, he must speak with fixed purpose from a single point of view. It will not do to deride a fool's piety one moment and to applaud it sentimentously the next” (138). In his article Fraser is against the narrator’s contradictory point of view toward the characters’ actions, claiming that “it is a flaw in Thackeray's handling of character. And the flaw persists” (138). However, in defense of the narrator, and as a reaction to Fraser, M. Corona Sharp writes “Sympathetic Mockery: A Study of the Narrator's Character in *Vanity Fair*,” where she asserts that the narrator is indeed consistent because from the beginning:

he shows himself as a human being recognizing genuine human values and repudiating false ones... His penetration of human weakness and the responsibility of society for the

straying individual shows his fundamental seriousness and forestalls the novel's being merely a jest at the reader's expense. The narrator did not change his mind midway through the novel, as Spilka and Fraser believe; but his paradoxical attitude can be traced from the very beginning, and it forms the enveloping state of mind of an ironical, yet consistent, narrator. (336)

Sharp is keeping in mind the narrator's claim to be a real human with flaws and changing opinions, as seen when the narrator comments, "And while the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover ... professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed" (Thackeray 83). From the beginning the narrator establishes his position within the novel and is aware of his faults as the faults of his characters. His claiming to be a real person enables him to grow and learn as his characters do. As an example, one of the most contradictory points of view that has caused vast amounts of criticism, is the narrator's opinion of Amelia. With Amelia at times he seems to praise her then reprimands her, however if the readers are to believe that the characters are real and the judgment fair the narrator cannot have, as Fraser comments, only a "single point of view," since real points of view change as the person is better understood and the true scheme behind their actions or mentality is revealed, which is one of the traits that make his psychological realism so successful within the genre and creates in turn a trustworthy narrator.

However, despite the fact that Thackeray's writing is true and appropriate to the Realist genre, the fact that his realism is also moral cannot be discarded. For instance, "it sees through people's hypocrisy to their true motives, it watches them scheming and scrambling for life's prizes, and it shows how ephemeral and worthless those prizes are in the long run" (Carey xviii). It is in no way over-preaching since Thackeray was against pious preaching in novels proven by his statement: "We like to hear sermons from his reverence at church,--not from our story books" (Ray, *Thackeray's Contributions* 71). However, it was expected that the reader learn from the

characters' mistakes and assimilate the narrator's judgment, but by examples of folly, not sermons. Moreover, if it is established that Thackeray's narrator is closely linked to Thackeray himself, then it cannot be without comment that many of the judgments made are in accordance to the values of his time, this being the early Victorian Era

In early nineteenth and late eighteenth century England, due mostly to public disapproval of the current monarchy, there was a shift in values and what was considered appropriate social conduct. Preceding the Victorian Era is the Georgian Era, renowned for its achievements in fine arts and architecture, largely attributed to the contributions by King George IV. Culturally wise, the society flourished and, generally merited to George IV's personality, it became a more frivolous and flamboyant one, as a possible rebellion to the pious and reserved society that was the pride of his father, King George III. The frivolity was seen especially in the nobility who "sought to outdo one another in any way...extravagance, pomp, and circumstance, albeit of a shallow nature" (Smith 22). However, when the expenses of King George IV started to negatively affect the treasury, people labeled him as "symbol of the age of aristocratic decadence" (Smith ix) and many of the previously enjoyed customs such as heavy drinking, and frequent festivities for examples, were again considered licentious. In a way, the people started to turn to George III's past proclamation for the "Encouragement of Piety and Virtue and for the Preventing and Punishing of Vice, Profaneness and Immorality" as a role model once again (Himmelfarb 6). Proclamations like this one and the ones that followed gave the responsibility to the society itself and its members to carry out the directives. This is mostly because, as David Wayne Thomas in *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* presents, during Victorian times it was believed that the "fate of a nation is directly to be read from the qualities of its individuals" (2), therefore "national decay [was the sum] of individual idleness, selfishness

and vice” (qtd. in Thomas 2). Ideas like these inevitably resulted in a shift of the previous more ostentatious values to the search for self and social improvement.

This shift and its effects are seen taking place especially at the start of the nineteenth century. By approximately 1810, “people were encouraged to talk the talk of virtue and to judge each other by outward appearances of respectability and public rectitude, which had nothing to do with inner morality” (Wilson 6). However, the shift did not come without public demonstrations against these new imposed manners (for example bathing naked and within view instead of using the “bathing machines” at Brighton Beach, something that was allowed before the strict laws took place. [Gay 235]) However, they failed and the new oppressive “values” took place in society. These values originated from Puritan beliefs and pretty much censored everything from speech to manner of dress. It is also noteworthy that during this transition the majority of men and women became extremely uneasy towards sexuality and the naked body. Steven Marcus claims that “sex has always been a problem in human civilization, but not until sometime in the nineteenth century...did there emerge as part of the general educated consciousness the formulation that it might in fact be problematical” (2) In fear of the promiscuity of Georgian Era’s values, considered for some as the “reign of the flesh,” works of art previously celebrated, such as the Venus de Medici, were considered vulgar and offensive (Gay 394). Men and women had to reform their speech to a degree where even naming the thigh of a chicken at a dinner table was highly offensive if ladies were present.

However, even if the Victorian Era is mostly known for its prudery, in reality it was full of contradictions. For instance, Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians* studies what was considered the official views of sexuality held by the Victorian society and the “other” which was the one of pornography and sexual fantasies. On the one hand, there was the widespread

cultivation of values and outward appearance, at the same time its production of pornography and erotica greatly increased to the point where it became an industry. Nevertheless, despite the fact that pornography and erotica were becoming an industry in the nineteenth century, openly the society vouched for propriety and refinement, even if it meant at a superficial level (Marcus xix). This in turn contributes to the negativity many Victorians had towards their values. Still, as Gertrude Himmelfarb presents in *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, not everything was negative in Victorian society since thanks to their values they eradicated many cruel punishment practices, such as flogging, and provided literacy for the lower classes. Yet, since some of the societal values were considered too oppressive, the majority of the discontent was directed to them and the “falseness” that was considered to result from the desire of refinement and its sometimes too strong focus on manners instead on greater issues (Himmelfarb 22).

Thackeray’s narrator can be seen to detest the importance given to manners and false delicacies and verbal decorum and criticizes it in the characters depicted. One of the most shunned and mocked ideals in *Vanity Fair* is that of over sensibility, which before the period of Realism began “people who did not weep on the right occasion were judged to be failures of humanity, [and] this demand that people prove their sensibility encouraged a competitive spirit: he who cried the loudest was the most refined” (Wilson 13). Thackeray saw through this and constantly addresses it in his novels and letters, maintaining that truth no matter how ugly must be presented and not adorned; clearly showing that he was against hypocrisy. Moreover of *Vanity Fair*, Joseph Litvak points out that it would “offer itself as massive testimony that the author has reached an even more advanced stage in the process of decathecting the whole orally fixated social order, of extricating himself from the parasitic chain of brown-noses, suck-ups, and

ass-kissers that just about *is* the world according to Thackeray” (234) Because of this, Thackeray mocks the manner in which due to Victorian Values people managed to cleverly, if not morally, achieve their means by playing into those prescribed roles. Nevertheless, regardless of the author’s dislike for these values, he just could not openly rebel from the norm (especially if he was looking to form part of society) since the society was a strict one that did not tolerate any dissenters and, because of so, many of these values are naturally still favored or encouraged in the novel. As a result, Thackeray has been commended for his choice of narrator, since it allows him to say what he wants but not necessarily getting the responsibility of doing so:

the advantage of using such a mouthpiece, if it be an advantage, is this, that it gives an opportunity of saying things more vulgar, biting, and personal, than a man's self-respect or shame would allow him to say out of his own mouth. It is a quasi-shifting of the responsibility. (Roscoe 276)

This advantage is particularly apparent when it comes to judging Becky, and in turn Amelia; revealing that, although for the society he belonged to characters like Becky were heavily criticized, the narrator seems to be delighted and amused by Becky, developing in turn some form of respect for her as a character even though she is reprimanded for her actions. If the author had not gone so out of his way to create so realistic a narrator with human traits and faults this ambivalence would not have been perceived, however, since as established, Thackeray’s used him as a medium to his own voice and social criticism, it can be perceived that there is more than the stated and expected dislike for this character, which results in partly breaking away from the prescribed formula for these type of female characters.

Similar to Thackeray’s breaking away from the formula for traditionally negative female characters, this trait is also seen in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* with the character of Rosamond

Vincy. Rosamond Vincy is not a good female character; her self-absorbent and one-track mind frustrates the reader extensively. However, much to the reader's surprise, she doesn't have an unhappy ending as expected and the narrator takes it easy on her when imparting judgment; unexpected since critics, either in favor or not, find that *Middlemarch* follows many, if not all, of the literary conventions of a Victorian novel. For example, Quentin Anderson celebrates this novel as "truly 'Victorian'" with its depictions and judgments (314). Even more, feminist critics, such as Cynthia Griffin Wolf and Susan Koppelman, "accuse her of supporting the prevailing values of Victorian culture" and believe that she "should have turned the mirror to reflect herself rather than the world out there" (Austen 549). Therefore, if Eliot is both praised and criticized for upholding Victorian beliefs and conventions in her novels it is surprising and of note that she diverted from her norm with the presentation of Rosamond, an obviously despicable female character.

Feminist critics wish George Eliot had reflected herself in her work since she did not lead a life a typical Victorian woman led, therefore they would have wished to see this in her female characters. Born Mary Ann Evans, she led a life of what was considered scandal due to her living with a married man, George Henry Lewes, for over 20 years. Lewes' wife had an affair with a married man and had decided to remain with him despite Lewes' pleadings, and they couldn't get a divorce due to a situation concerning parenting rights with her illegitimate children. Therefore, if Mary Ann Evans and Lewes wanted to live a life together the law did not offer any other way than the one they took. It is no surprise that the couple received condemnation from the Victorian society to an extent that they had to move five times because of it. Yet, despite the ostracism they received, the couple was devoted to each other and for many their relationship "was sacred and binding as any legal marriage could be" (Sprague 123).

Although she led a “scandalous” life she was looked upon as an “upholder of honor and integrity, that she had always prided herself at being—attributes very, very important to the world at large in 1854” (Sprague 113). Because these attributes were so important and she already had much against her, in her novels she seeks to portray these values and virtues, especially with her female characters. As a result, many critics believe her writing to be too philosophical and distant; known “to judge things by too exclusively moral a standard” (Cecil 206). This portrayal of values is present in her novels not only in the plot, but by the statements of the narrator, where though not as obviously as Thackeray, she also digresses from the plot to impart a decree on the characters.

The narrator in *Middlemarch* is classified as an “engaging narrator” by Robyn R. Warhol, who claims that it seeks to “inspire belief in the situation their novels describe...to move actual readers to sympathize... [and] to encourage actual readers to identify with the “you” in the text” (811) and unlike Thackeray the reader is not given a mock identity, therefore the actual readers manage to see “themselves reflected in the pronoun” (814). Warhol claims that this is done by the narrator’s assumption that the reader is in accord with what they as narrators sympathize with. Warhol concludes by asserting that the engaging narrator’s function is “ideally to induce tears and at least to stir up sentiment” (817).

Although Warhol may be correct in her claim that the narrator in *Middlemarch* desires readers to identify with the “you” in the text and induce sentiment, many critics disagree whether Eliot managed it and whether narrators who only use such literary convention are the only ones who result in engaged readers. As discussed, although Thackeray used humor and sometimes gave identity to his readers, the reader manages to identify with the story. However, concerning Eliot, critics like Lord David Cecil and Quentin Anderson, among others more contemporary,

such as Catherine Gallagher, claim that there is some distance between the narrator and her readers due to Eliot's strict point of view on life and narrative style.

The distancing that may exist between Eliot's narrator and the reader for Catherine Gallagher in "Eliot: the Immanent Victorian" is a result of the way in which "Eliot explicitly carries the reader through the arc of induction and deduction, deduction and induction that gives generalities weight and substance" (63). Gallagher echoes the views of older scholars like Lord David Cecil who claims that the reader has to strain themselves to "acquiesce in her point of view" (206) and that although she is a great novelist, what gets in her way is basically her intellect and analytical mindset. He proclaims that "her plots seem too neat and symmetrical to be true," that although logical, the development does not seem inevitable, claiming that in her works the reader can often find the use of poetic justice imposed by the "arbitrary will of the creator"(207). He further argues that her characters:

are bodies laid out in the dissecting room, not moving flesh-and-blood human beings. They never seem, as the greatest figures in fiction do, to have got free of their creators, and to be acting and speaking on their own volition. Behind the puppets we always see the shadow of the puppet master manipulating the strings. (209)

Although Cecil's assessment of Eliot's work and narrative voice seems completely disapproving he argues that while her intellect may get in the way, "in it is engendered that penetration into the moral nature of man, which is her peculiar contribution to our literature" and that although her judgments may be too one-dimensional she is able to show the reader how she "traced these expressions of virtue and weakness to their original source in the character" (201). Therefore, her characters may not be "flesh-and-blood human beings," but there is logic in their follies, which is presented to the reader through her narrative voice.

Similarly, Quentin Anderson in “George Eliot in *Middlemarch*” refers to Eliot’s narrative voice as “the voice of the wise woman” and points out that when some readers shy away from her careful planning of plots and characters, they are missing out on this voice, which for Anderson is “often found heard speaking directly with an authority which makes use of the Victorian reader’s involvement with the characters to make him look up and look about...to see the whole of what the wise woman surveys” (317). Anderson points out that what she surveys is a “landscape of opinion” and these same opinions in turn weaken the characters, but fortify the presence of the narrator since for Anderson,

the only thing which can possibly balance, possibly support *Middlemarch*, is the image of the writer which the novel creates in the reader...those who like *Middlemarch* take pleasure in the author’s judiciousness. They are far more tempted to invest themselves with her sensibility than they are to identify themselves with that of any character. (321)

Anderson explains why this occurs by agreeing with what F.R. Leavis and Henry James also noted in their criticism of Eliot: that is due to a “disjunction between an “intellectual” George Eliot and a George Eliot who has the novelist’s sympathetic comprehension of human beings” (323). Furthermore, and of utmost importance, Anderson claims that the split can be traced to a biographical origin, where the reasons for her strict judgments on propriety and virtue “are not merely tributes to the Victorian taste for moral exaltation. They are attempts on the part of the writer to give herself a recognizable moral status” (324).

Therefore, like Thackeray, Eliot also took into consideration the wishes of the Victorian audience in order to rise in their respective society. Eliot through her writing clearly needed to change the mind of her readers when it came to judging her as a woman. Consequently, her aim as a novelist was to have an effect on the reader where they would learn to be more understanding of the follies of others, as seen in one of her letters:

if art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that *opinions* are a poor cement between human souls: and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures. (qtd. in Willey 267)

Although Eliot might have wanted to show instead of telling her opinions, the result is more or less the same since the reader is able to perceive what her beliefs are and how strongly they affect the novel, crucial when one wishes to study the effect her narrator, and the judgment imparted by it, has on the novels. As a result, the effect of the narrator is inevitably interrelated to any analysis of Eliot's work, especially *Middlemarch*, which is considered simultaneously one of the strongest and weakest of her works for the same reasons as above: her too pedantic nature to portray what is "right" and "wrong" and her inability to create a connection between the characters and the readers. Henry James argues that the problem with the book is that most situations are "treated with too much refinement and too little breadth. It revolves too constantly on the same pivot" (83). Generally speaking, as Anderson, Zelda Austen and Judith Mitchell indicated of Eliot, Eliot through the narrator in *Middlemarch* was directly trying to show her Victorian readers that she was a moral and virtuous woman although, for them, her life showed otherwise.

Because of this, the fact that she breaks away from her so much valued literary convention of punishing those without virtues with the character of Rosamond not only raises many questions, but it also shows that there is something more to this character than simply the stereotype of "bad" woman. Why does Rosamond not suffer as Dorothea did? Why does she sometimes seem more interesting than the Dorothea who is an allusion to a saint? Why does she get a happy ending, despite the fact that she was considered by her husband his "basil plant"

(with reference to Boccaccio's Decameron)? Or like Zelda Austen who questions the reason why "Rosamond Lydgate thrashes out a comfortable tyranny over her husband...but Dorothea must suffer mockery of her ambitions, a dreadful marriage, and a dark night of the soul" (551). These are just some of the questions that the reader may ask themselves, since by literary conventions of the nineteenth century, including Eliot's, that according to Judith Mitchell in "George Eliot and the Problematic of Female Beauty" would either portray extremely negatively the female characters she was in disagreement with and/or gave them and unfortunate endings or punishments as she did with Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* and even with well-wishing, but ambitious, Maggie Tulliver. Ideally, following this practice, Rosamond should have had an unfortunate ending and the reader was more than willing to accept it due to the nature of this character.

As seen, the narrator in nineteenth century could carry plenty of power and influence over the text in Victorian fiction. Their intrusions would either make them engaging or distancing, judging on the manner in which they would intrude, but regardless of the category they usually managed to convey their desired message to its readers; ultimately becoming a key character in the novel itself. Both Thackeray and Eliot used their narrators to challenge, shock, and amuse their readers of their time with their constant intrusions into the text. With George Eliot the reader cannot fail to notice how the narrator wants the readers to judge; she is quite clear and direct since she generally follows the Victorian mindset of the amount of responsibility an individual has towards society, and, as a result, she regularly follows the Victorian virtues of good and bad in her characters and their actions, especially in her female characters. Still, due to personal interest, in *Middlemarch* she shows exceptions to Rosamond, a typically "bad" character who never regrets or realizes her mistakes, and as a character would have received the

traditional punishment at the end of the novel, but did not.. Thackeray, however, is more complicated. He is loud and opinionated but this can be a spectacle sometimes used to deter the reader from his real opinions, key when analyzing the nature and origin of the imparted judgment to a character. Furthermore, his narrator's judgment and opinion of his characters is in no way static, as it changes and varies as a real person's does; and where it was expected to criticize, he did, but he also justified and praised. Consequently, both of these authors created memorable narrators. It is somewhat irrelevant whether the reader can identify with the characters or not, since the narrator himself/herself turns out to be the most important character in the novel. If it were not for the narrators, both *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch* would not be possible. *Vanity Fair* would not make sense or come together as beautifully as it did if it were not for Thackeray's constant intrusions and in *Middlemarch*, if the reader were not so interested in what the narrator believes in and wishes to portray, it would simply be an extremely plain and tedious novel. In the end, their importance as narrators results, not only from these positive effects on the text, but from the effect they have on the reader. Walter Slatoff in *With Respect to Readers* pointed out that "one cannot escape the fact that literary works are experienced by individual living readers and that it is this experience that makes it valuable" (21) Taking this into consideration these narrators provide for the readers an opportunity to be part of the world they portray, where they want to trigger a close reader-identification where the reader is able to learn and think on the subjects presented. And to do so the authors have expectations of their readers where the reader has the responsibility of being both an implied reader and an actual reader, and by playing with these two roles, as Slatoff argues, the reader reaches a full realization of the novel.

## Chapter II

## **“A Good Woman on Five Thousand Pounds a Year”<sup>2</sup>: Becky Sharp through the Eyes of the Narrator**

“If Becky had had 5000 a year I have no doubt in my mind that she would have been respectable” ~ William Makepeace Thackeray in *Letters II*.

Even before she makes an appearance, the reader’s first impression of Becky Sharp at Chiswick Mall is that she is the complete opposite to Miss Pinkerton’s favorite pupil, Amelia. While the reader faces pages of praises and descriptions of Miss Sedley, Becky is not described, even after she has been mentioned by the Pinkerton sisters. However, this obvious disregard for her creates in the reader a curiosity of the nature of this character; her actual appearance increments that curiosity

Becky’s first appearance shows her to be defiant, by refusing the “proffered honour” of shaking Miss Pinkerton’s finger (7) and later on when she flings the so venerated “Johnson’s Dictionaries” (3) out of the carriage, and even more defiant and shocking is that while doing so she exalts Napoleon, which was considered an atrocity in eighteenth century England. However, considering how negatively Miss Pinkerton is described (“she no more comprehended sensibility than she did Algebra” 5), Becky’s action could be commended even if her nature isn’t yet entirely revealed. It is not until after she throws the dictionary and describes how badly she was treated (the only reason given is her poor background), that she gains some esteem from the reader, both Victorian and contemporary, since although her actions are harsh she is portrayed as a defiant victim.

However, the narrator does not let the reader assume a completely sympathetic attitude towards Becky; he does admit that she has not been treated nicely, but she has not treated anyone nicely either:

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<sup>2</sup> Thackeray, W.M. *Vanity Fair*. Ed. Peter L. Shillingsburg. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994. 422

all the world used her ill, said this young misanthropist, and we may be pretty certain that persons whom all the world treats ill, deserve entirely the treatment they get... This is certain, that if the world neglected Miss Sharp, she never was known to have done a good action in behalf of anybody; nor can it be expected that twenty-four young ladies should all be as amiable as the heroine of this work, Miss Sedley. (10-11)

Although this seems like a harsh rebuke by the narrator, before the reader can completely change the previous opinion of Becky, as somewhat of a victim, the narrator presents Becky's difficult past which displays her as a child who had to continuously work and fight for her meals. While most of the young ladies that Becky encountered at Chiswick Mall had everything provided for them, Becky was raised by her father who when "drunk he used to beat his wife and daughter" (11) and after her mother's death while she was still young, she had to mature and be a woman capable of dealing with her surroundings:

Rebecca Sharp looked like a child. But she had the dismal precocity of poverty. Many a dun had she talked to, and turned away from her father's door; many a tradesman had she coaxed and wheedled into good-humour, and into the granting of one meal more. She sate commonly with her father, who was very proud of her wit, and heard the talk of many of his wild companions—often but ill-suited for a girl to hear. But she never had been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old (12)

Therefore, from early on the narrator lets know how Becky's past made her into the character that she is up to that point in the novel. As professed, she had not been among socially respectable company and she had grown up in a place where manners and propriety were not necessarily the priority as she later found they were at Chiswick Mall:

the rigid formality of the place suffocated her: the prayers and the meals, the lessons and the walks, which were arranged with a conventual regularity, oppressed her almost beyond endurance; and she looked back to the freedom and the beggary of the old studio in Soho with so much regret, that everybody, herself included, fancied she was consumed with grief for her father. (14)

This description of Becky's encounter with Chiswick Mall is crucial for analyzing the position the narrator and author have for this character. First, it is seen as one of the first times the narrator uses her to criticize the society and values of the time; and second, it directly resembles Thackeray's own experience in the boarding school he attended also at Chiswick Mall, therefore quite possibly his own feelings as well.

As a small child Thackeray hated the two boarding schools he attended; his first one was in Southampton and the second at Chiswick Mall. Of them he would later write that they were "dreadful places," Southampton being governed by a "horrible little tyrant" and the latter, although it was governed by a distant relative, he actually tried to escape from (Melville 19-20). Therefore, it is not far off to assume that Becky represents what he felt of the two unpleasant boarding schools he attended. On this note, the reader can perceive that it also serves as a criticism for the Victorian idea of decorum and its hypocrisy:

she had not been much of a dissembler, until now her loneliness taught her to feign. She had never mingled in the society of women: her father, reprobate as he was, was a man of talent; his conversation was a thousand times more agreeable to her than the talk of such of her own sex as she now encountered. The pompous vanity of the old schoolmistress, the foolish good-humour of her sister, the silly chat and scandal of the elder girls, and the frigid correctness of the governesses equally annoyed her (Thackeray 14).

It is made evident that it wasn't until Becky came to Chiswick Mall and encountered the "pompous vanity," the "frigid correctness" and the "silly chat and scandal" that she had to become a "dissembler." Of Victorian manners, Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The De-moralization Of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* affirms that manners were of "great concern" because early Victorians "saw them as them as the harbingers of morals writ large, the civilities of private life that were the corollaries of civilized social life" (22). However, Thackeray was against these beliefs and the hypocrisy it produced as seen when he protested: "It is not learning,

it is not virtue, about which people inquire in society; it is manners” (qtd. in Himmelfarb 22). Becky then represents this objecting mindset.

Consequently, Becky’s introduction is prophetic of what is going to happen along the book concerning her actions. Becky is going to act unconventionally, but on many occasions (definitely not all of them) she will be exempted since she will be either reacting in opposition to an injustice against her background, a necessity in order to “fit in” with the current social etiquette or considering the fact that she has no one to help her. The first example that includes all of these qualities is when she attempts to seduce Jos Sedley.

With the seduction of Jos the reader is able to see deeper into the character of Becky and what ultimately she will face in front of high society. The importance of this seduction is further enhanced by the narrator’s comments on her actions:

if Miss Rebecca Sharp had determined in her heart upon making the conquest of this big beau, I don't think, ladies, we have any right to blame her; for though the task of husband-hunting is generally, and with becoming modesty, entrusted by young persons to their mammas, recollect that Miss Sharp had no kind parent to arrange these delicate matters for her, and that if she did not get a husband for herself, there was no one else in the wide world who would take the trouble off her hands. (19)

The narrator feels that he needs to justify her actions by reminding the reader that she “had no kind parent to arrange these delicate matters for her,” therefore, her unconventional actions are based on survival.

Lisa Jadwin in “The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in *Vanity Fair*” argues that women during this time in order to survive in a completely male dominated world would use “double discourse” in order to achieve their means: “Ambitious women thus have little choice but to refashion "virtuous" discourse by reinflecting and exaggerating its rhetoric and concealing

their unacceptable ideas beneath an acceptable surface” (664). This double discourse gave them a certain advantage over men since first it was expected and accepted:

British women found themselves increasingly defined as avatars of silence, submission, and domestic servitude. Victorian "femininity" required women to impersonate passivity and helplessness, and by definition prevented them from voicing discontent. Consequently female double-discourse became the *lingua franca* of Victorian women. (667)

When Becky attempts to seduce Jos she is required “to impersonate passivity and helplessness” and does so by manipulating her gestures:

she gave him ever so gentle a pressure with her little hand, and drew it back quite frightened, and looked first for one instant in his face, and then down at the carpet rods; and I am not prepared to say that Joe's heart did not thump at this little involuntary, timid, gentle motion of regard on the part of the simple girl. (27)

In this passage Becky is using double discourse to trap Jos. However, this was a common practice among women. Sharing Jadwin’s point of view, Peter J. Capuano in “At the Hands of Becky Sharp: (In)Visible Manipulation and Vanity Fair” affirms that:

under these circumstances, Becky has few verbal options and even fewer physical ones with which to display romantic interests. The conversation is politely limited to remarks about food and family while the opportunities for proper physical contact between genders occur only in fleeting salutations...socially acceptable because it is simultaneously aggressive and indecipherable. (169)

Even Thackeray does not feel the need to criticize this “socially acceptable” double discourse in women, but admires it and recognizes it instead, as seen when he states: “A woman with fair opportunities, and without an absolute hump, may marry WHOM SHE LIKES” (27).

However, what the other characters of *Vanity Fair* find offensive is not her use of double discourse, but her attempts to marry someone above her station. Amelia’s mother liked Becky

well enough until she found out that she was seducing Joseph, and George Osborne sabotaged her attempts to win over Jos since he “was not over well pleased that a member of a family into which he, George Osborne, of the —th, was going to marry, should make a mésalliance with a little nobody—a little upstart governess” (60). Of this Elizabeth Langland in “Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel” argues that the general belief was that “a lower-class wife, a working girl, would not be sufficiently conversant with the signifiers of middle-class and upper-class life to guarantee her husband's place in society” (291). As a result, as Langland points out, the Victorian lady had more responsibilities than is stereotypically attributed to the “Angel of the House”; she not only had to keep a household that had to include at least one servant, she also had “the important task of administering the funds to acquire or maintain social and political status” (291) Langland affirms that because the women had such duties it was believed that a lower-class or even a middle class woman would not be able to fulfill these responsibilities, due to the type of education she had received or lack thereof. Moreover, as Langland points out, upper class ladies’ pride did not tolerate if indeed, she was able; which is what in due course happened to Becky, as seen with the upper-class ladies’ reaction to her. Becky faced discrimination and acquired the reputation of being a social climber, simply because she was not from the upper class, since, as Langland shows, all ladies were responsible in keeping or improving their social status. What was not taken into consideration is that Becky had received training for such an endeavor since childhood, her father being an artist and her mother a French Opera-girl. As stated she had learned the art of seducing, lying and pretending in order to survive as a child. Therefore, if the “domestic sanctuary overseen by its attending angel can be decoded as a theater for the staging of a family's social position, a staging that depends on prescribed practices” (Langland 291) Becky was more than qualified for it.

Nevertheless, Becky was unsuccessful in her attempts with Jos but her failure also brings forth the important scene where she confronts George when he tries to humiliate her further, which highlights another of her important qualities and equally important reaction from the narrator. When George tries to make fun of her failed attempt with Jos, in the words of the narrator, he gets “utterly routed” (149). In this scene George, a guest of Miss Crawley, walks up to Becky i to be “nice” to her and offer the honor of shaking his hand; Becky refuses and offers her right forefinger instead. When George realizes her attitude he unsuccessfully tries to humble her by reminding her of her failed attempt at seducing Jos. However, with his failure the reader gets a chance to see the extent of Becky’s wit. She immediately turns the tables on him and humiliates and humbles him without stepping out of her “place.” She achieves this humiliation by using sarcasm as seen when she says: “What an honour to have had you for a brother-in-law, you are thinking?...George Osborne, Esquire, son of John Osborne, Esquire, son of—what was your grandpapa, Mr. Osborne? Well, don't be angry. You can't help your pedigree...,” (148-149) By uttering these words in the manner that she does, Becky is presented as capable of using her double discourse to confront any adversary as skillfully as she uses it to please and seduce. Therefore, “though George hears the hostility in her speech, he cannot criticize the ostensibly deferential surface of her utterance” hence, the reason why he can’t confront or call her upon it (Jadwin 665). Moreover, even the narrator is amazed at her success whether or not she was right. Also, it must be noted, that since the incident at Vauxhall, where Jos got drunk and made a fool of himself, (which George uses to steer him away from Becky) George has been shown as an insensitive snob towards Becky (as seen in how amused he was the day after the Vauxhall incident), further strengthened by the fact that even after a year had passed he still tried to

patronize Becky, but she being a superior speaker and thinker, managed to show him *his* place. Because of this, the reader can only feel supportive of Becky's actions towards him.

Although Becky's first attempt at marriage failed, the reader is quickly surprised to find out that she all of a sudden is married. With this incident the concept of marriage is extremely revised and criticized by the narrator. Between chapters XV and XXII the narrator goes in depth into the idea of marriage, and it seems to question the criticism Becky receives for marrying for money (or the prospects of money) when all women in the society did so as well. Again it may be noted here that the only difference is class status; as seen in how the characters constantly refer to Becky as "that odious governess," "little Governess" and by Miss Crawley herself "Rebecca—governess—nobod—" (168) when her marriage is revealed.

When it is made apparent to the reader that Becky is married to Rawdon Crawley it is no mystery that she is interested in the possibility of Miss Crawley's leaving Rawdon her money. Even before the reader can assume it or point their fingers at her, she herself says this to Rawdon in a letter "and we shall all live in Park Lane, and ma tante shall leave us all her money" (160). The fact that she says it places her in a better light than most of the characters in the novel who although they think and desire the same thing, by the rules of propriety do not express it. For instance, ever since the appearance of Miss Crawley and the reaction to her by all her relatives, it is made clear to the reader that she is hypocritically doted upon only to secure some inheritance money, therefore the questions seem to be why is Becky worse for being the same? Second, looking at the character of Mrs. Bute Crawley Thackeray manages to show Becky in a much better light in contrast to her. For example, both are interested in Matilda Crawley's money, but while Becky is open about it, to her husband and to herself, Mrs. Bute manages to even fool herself into thinking that she only wants the best for Matilda and even risks the old woman's

health in order to get it. This honesty in Becky is one of her most admirable qualities in comparison to characters such as Mrs. Bute Crawley; it cannot be denied that she was a liar and a hypocrite when she needed to be, but to herself she was honest about it. In this sense, in "The Selfish Heroine: Thackeray and Galsworthy," Edward Wagenknecht observes that "nobody could be more clear-sighted than Becky. But she is, as it were, all on one plane. She is satisfied with herself as she is. Never, even imaginatively, does she move out and away from herself to look back and achieve a dispassionate judgment" (294). Hence, by presenting how hypocritical the society alongside Becky is, especially in their dislike for her, it is also implied that readers are also hypocritical if they judge her negatively considering that in nineteenth-century England marriages consisted a lot on how profitably well-endowed either member of the duo was. Maria DiBattista claims that:

Thackeray perceives, but cannot totally disavow, the same corrupt and corrupting sexual ideology, the wholesale "selling" and emotional victimization of women to ensure the traditional primacy and the economic power of an imperiled social caste. Marriage thus becomes the instrument of social and political ambitions, and all sexual attitudes serve to rationalize even as they dissimulate this fundamental, sexually "politic" economy. (833)

Thus, taking into consideration the views on marriage presented in the novel by the narrator, his disapproval of the hypocrisy behind judging Becky for her ambition is quite clear, since she was merely following the custom. As seen in the scene after Sir Pitt's proposal, where the narrator sympathizes with her disappointment:

well, then, in the first place, Rebecca gave way to some very sincere and touching regrets that a piece of marvellous good fortune should have been so near her, and she actually obliged to decline it. In this natural emotion every properly regulated mind will certainly share...What well-bred young person is there in all Vanity Fair, who will not feel for a hard-working, ingenious, meritorious girl, who gets such an honourable, advantageous,

provoking offer, just at the very moment when it is out of her power to accept it? I am sure our friend Becky's disappointment deserves and will command every sympathy. (158)

The narrator's rhetoric makes sure that she is sympathized with by using adjectives as "honourable," "advantageous," "provoking" at the same time that he describes her as "meritorious," "hard working" and "ingenious." He goes on to make sure that there is no negative appraisal of Becky's disappointment in losing "the town-house newly furnished and decorated...the handsomest carriage in London, and a box at the opera" (158) by then presenting it as a common incident in society since he as the narrator has also had the chance to see it in his society with Miss Toady and Mrs. Briefless, the latter who although poor, the possibility of becoming a baronet's daughter made her welcome in any house.

With these events the narrator takes the opportunity to criticize the institution of marriage and how it was led by status and money (as also seen when John Osborne wants George to marry Miss Swartz for her money, and disregard her color and simple-mindedness). This attitude towards money and title, as the only valuable asset in a person, is highly criticized in the novel and it is mostly done thorough the character of Becky, not as one might expect by showing negatively all that she does to get both, but by showing that she had little options to what she did since she did not want to remain a governess.

As stated, Becky received most of her condemnation due to the fact that she had a humble past but still dreamed of rising up the social ladder. If she were born of a respectable name she would have been able to fit in in society perfectly since she had all the knowledge and talents to do so. However, since she was not from a respectable family she was branded and thrust aside and all her attempts to move up the social ladder are considered vulgar and out of place. This is confirmed in Chapter XLI: In Which Becky Revisits the Halls of Her Ancestors.

This chapter is mostly the narrator showing the person Becky could have been without *Vanity Fair*, therefore the person she is, if she had not had to survive as she has had to do in the Fair. Almost everywhere else in *Vanity Fair* Becky is presented as conniving, false and without real emotions, however, in chapter XLI as the reader is apprised of her thoughts and actions, she takes on a completely different view of sincerity and longing and even the narrator shows some attachment this character.

As Becky and Rawdon make their way to Queen's Crawley they start remembering simpler days and to Becky "these recognitions were inexpressibly pleasant to her" (414). She is shown to shake the hand of the people she used to know and be nice to them, not that Becky is ever blatantly impolite in society, but the noted difference is that she was sincere about it. When doing this the narrator expresses an important observation: "it seemed as if she was not an imposter any more, and was coming to the home of her ancestors" (414), which in turn judges the society she currently belongs to, in which she constantly has to act, entertain and be on the defensive in order to belong (as seen in chapter LI). Also surprising is the fact that Becky shed tears when greeted by Lady Jane: "the embrace somehow brought tears into the eyes of the little adventuress—which ornaments, as we know, she wore very seldom" (415). When Becky sheds an insincere tear, the narrator does not delay in pointing it out to the reader, as happened at the end of Chapter VI with Amelia and Becky's parting where it is revealed to the reader that "one person was in earnest and the other a perfect performer" (64). It is not to say that Becky was completely sincere during her stay, but she did not have the negativity that constantly follows her, in the manner of narration or her thoughts.

Her thoughts are what reveal her feelings about status, money, and happiness, which in turn reveal Thackeray's views on the matter; confirmed by her statement: "I think I could be a

good woman if I had five thousand a year” (422). What in turn reveals the criticism of society is the list of leisurely and philanthropic activities she conjures up, the reader would have assumed more selfish reasons as they were when she was proposed to by the deceased, Sir Pitt. She goes even further to criticize the society she is currently a member of for their hypocrisy and elitism:

I could pay everybody, if I had but the money. This is what the conjurers here pride themselves upon doing. They look down with pity upon us miserable sinners who have none. They think themselves generous if they give our children a five-pound note, and us contemptible if we are without one. (422)

After this observation, the narrator expresses his understanding of her situation and considers her argument:

and who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations—and that it was only a question of money and fortune which made the difference between her and an honest woman? If you take temptations into account, who is to say that he is better than his neighbour? A comfortable career of prosperity, if it does not make people honest, at least keeps them so. An alderman coming from a turtle feast will not step out of his carriage to steal a leg of mutton; but put him to starve, and see if he will not purloin a loaf. (422)

Thus, when the narrator utters “a comfortable career of prosperity, if it does not make people honest, at least keeps them so,” it seems that he agrees with Becky’s notion of a good woman on five thousand pounds a year. On this note, Richard Kaye in “A Good Woman on Five Thousand Pounds: *Jane Eyre*, *Vanity Fair*” argues that Thackeray “no doubt considered moral behavior’s economic foundations his special field of expertise” and is using the character of Becky to express his beliefs in the same manner (727). Thackeray had first-hand experience as well with money-loss and money-gain as a youth and experienced both roles before he managed to secure his wealth later in life: the carefree and honest young man with substantial income and the hard-working ambitious one with very little income to survive. Thackeray knew of both worlds (if only for a short time) and, like Becky, had been exposed to the snobbish behavior of the upper

class society, facing discrimination for his lack of fortune but having managed some acceptance by using his “agreeable qualities of humour, amiability...considerable talent for satirical sketches... [and] a power of observation unusually acute for a young man” (Melville 69) Not only are these qualities exactly the same ones that Becky has to use as well, but the fact that he had experience in the matter validates his and consequently Becky’s opinion. Furthermore, he was criticized for Becky’s appraisal on virtue and wealth by George Henry Lewes and he in a private letter defended his character by claiming that “I have no doubt in my mind that she would have been respectable” and that those “in the possession of luxuries and riding through life respectably in a gig, should be very chary of despising poor Lazarus on foot, & look very humbly and leniently upon the faults of his less fortunate brethren” (qtd. in Kaye 730). This social criticism directed at the self-serving dominant classes and not to the “moral scarcity” of the lower classes, shows him to identify and esteem Becky since in this chapter he is revealing that she is partly a victim, which will be confirmed as well in Chapter LI. Thackeray by ventriloquizing through Becky does attest that although this character has numerous flaws he did not perceive her as negatively as expected or as he led his readers to believe. Also, his opinion of her could be improving since she is starting to see the hypocrisy and the vanity of her social circle as she contemplates:

but am I much better to do now in the world than I was when I was the poor painter's daughter and wheedled the grocer round the corner for sugar and tea? Suppose I had married Francis who was so fond of me—I couldn't have been much poorer than I am now. Heigho! I wish I could exchange my position in society, and all my relations for a snug sum in the Three Per Cent. Consols. (423)

This is a surprisingly profound view into Becky’s thoughts that the reader has not experienced before and which Thackeray seems delighted to find in his heroine even though “she was

accustomed to walk round them [her thoughts] and not look in,” and although, she “eluded them and despised them” he points out that some people “remorse...is never awakened at all” (423).

Therefore, this social criticism becomes key to analyzing the narrator’s opinion of Becky, since although criticized, she is mostly criticized of doing actions that her society really gave her no other option but to do if she wasn’t happy staying in her social class. Ambitious women really had no other option, although he didn’t excuse all of Becky’s deeds, as M. Corona Sharp claims, what “he is really condemning the morality which judges avarice and is avaricious, which brands Rebecca and then accepts her which preaches piety and makes it grotesque” (333).

This depraved morality is presented to the reader especially in the beginning of Chapter LI: “In Which a Charade Is Acted Which May or May Not Puzzle the Reader” where the reader is given a detailed explanation of all the hypocrisy and attacks that Becky receives for being a “little upstart governess” by the “chiefs of the English society” (350). First of all, in order to establish that he sympathizes with Becky the narrator asks the reader not to judge her too severely since although her aristocratic pleasures are “all vanity to be sure, but who will not own to liking a little of it?” like all other “mortal delights” (501). Once he provides justification for Becky’s vanity, he reveals how she constantly had to be acting, pretending and defending herself against attempts to humiliate her. By doing so, he presents the deplorable morality of this society which “deplored the fatal leveling tendencies of the age, which admitted persons of all classes into the society of their superiors” (505). The major characteristic perceived by the readers from these characters’ actions is the hypocrisy not only towards Becky but also among themselves. Most of the female characters who were members of high society hated Becky, but hardly attempted any direct confrontation since it was not in fashion to do so as she had established good connections and they could lose their own social standing if they attempted to discredit her

in public. Mr. Wagg becomes an example of this; sent by the ladies to attack Becky, he was humiliated and shunned from society for six weeks. It was not until he apologized incessantly and even wrote and published a poem exalting Becky that he was not able to attend. Of note is that once he failed in his attempt, the ladies who sent him “disowned him” completely (506), whereas Becky after she had properly riposted him, “took compassion upon him” and was “always good to him, always amused, never angry” (506).

Because of these attacks Becky could never be “without arms” which Thackeray’s narrator uses to claim even more sympathy for her. As a result, Chapter LI is extremely sympathetic to Becky. The sympathetic nature of this chapter can be a result of how much Thackeray detested hypocrisy, as a letter his contemporary, Charlotte Brontë demonstrates: “He seems terribly in earnest in his war against the falsehood and follies of ‘the world’” (qtd. in Kaye 731). And as Becky is realizing this vanity, Thackeray is warming up to her. Where he used to refer to her by slightly negative terms such as “little adventuress” (415), in this chapter he refers to her as “my dear Becky,” “poor Becky,” “little Becky” and “dear innocent friend” and although it might seem that the narrator is being ironic, as he usually is, he seems to be in earnest since he says: “I protest it is quite shameful in the world to abuse a simple creature, as people of her time abuse Becky, and I warn the public against believing one-tenth of the stories against her” (507). His sympathies might have been aroused considering the fact that, as in chapter XLI where he showed her musings on her past and the unpleasant changes of her present, this chapter still shows Becky realizing that becoming a member of high society is a nuisance compared to the simplicity of being from the middle class. Furthermore, whereas in chapter XLI she “walked around” her thoughts (415), in this chapter she dwells on them and even admits them to Lord Steyne: “‘I wish I were out of it,’ she said ‘I would rather be a parson's wife and teach a Sunday

school than this; or a sergeant's lady and ride in the regimental waggon; or, oh, how much gayer it would be to wear spangles and trousers and dance before a booth at a fair” (504). Becky gives the impression to be longing to be an honest woman, even if it meant being poor, than be surrounded by the oppressive and false values that encompass the Fair. Furthermore, in Chapter XLI, the narrator comments that if Becky “had had all the money which she was said to have begged or borrowed or stolen, she might have capitalized and *been honest for life*, whereas—” (507 my italics) representing how her need influenced a lot of her actions. Consequently, the narrator uses this to exemplify that even in the “very inmost circles, they are no happier than the poor wanderers outside the zone; and Becky, who penetrated into the very centre of fashion and saw the great George IV face to face, has owned since that there too was Vanity” (503).

Thackeray was criticized extensively for his representations of the hypocrisy of the upper-class. However, in a letter he declares that he was "quite aware of the dismal roguery [which] goes all through the Vanity Fair story—and God forbid that the world should be like it altogether: though I fear it is more like it than we like to own" (qtd in Kaye 730). Because of this, these presentations of Becky’s thoughts and of the obvious social criticism reveal Thackeray’s, and in turn, the narrator’s fondness towards Becky. He seems to understand that she was corrupted by ambition and temptation within Vanity Fair. However, since Thackeray strove to present realistic characters, he does not imply that Becky was an angel and therefore corrupted or that she did not have any other choice to her actions; he does not victimize her so blatantly. He does present her with flaws and shows that eventually her flaws were augmented by the vanity in the Fair leading her to commit some shocking deeds. Consequently, after careful reading his favoritism to her is apparent by the manner in which he presents her flaws and the way in which he describes and chides her, at first glance giving the appearance that he considers

her the “monster” of the novel and thus the reader also considers her as one. Ultimately, this is the root of his ambivalence towards her, although he may like her and sympathize with her, or even because he *did* like and sympathize with her, he was so disappointed in the actions she partook that he reprimanded her severely.

One of the most severe and shocking descriptions of Becky is when the narrator with the utmost detail calls her a “siren”:

in describing this Siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the waterline. (637)

At first glance this description, helped by words such as “diabolically,” “hideous” and “monster,” creates an image in the reader of total dislike for this character. However, the passage that follows shows that indeed Becky was a victim, not an innocent victim since she brought upon herself many of her comeuppances, but a victim nonetheless of the hypocritical branding and rejection from her social circle where even the narrator comments, “I am inclined to think that there was a period in Mrs. Becky's life when she was seized, not by remorse, but by a kind of despair, and absolutely neglected her person and did not even care for her reputation” (637); this sad representation of Becky tones down any harsh judgment the reader develops towards her from the previous passage, which is further strengthened by the revelation of what she endured next:

this abatement and degradation did not take place all at once; it was brought about by degrees, after her calamity, and after many struggles to keep up—as a man who goes overboard hangs on to a spar whilst any hope is left, and then flings it away and goes

down, when he finds that struggling is in vain. She lingered about London whilst her husband was making preparations for his departure. (638)

Becky had no one to turn to. It was thought that she was going to beg or write to Sir Pitt, but this once witty and clear minded character now “could have written had she a mind...did not try to see or write to Pitt” (638). In reality it would have been useless since, thanks to the nature of the society to which she used to belong, who relished in the fall of anyone,

Pitt's mind had been poisoned against her...Wenham had been with the Baronet and given him such a biography of Mrs. Becky as had astonished the member for Queen's Crawley...as I have no doubt that the greater part of the story was false and dictated by interested malevolence...But Becky was left with a sad sad reputation in the esteem of a country gentleman and relative who had been once rather partial to her. (639)

Because of this “sad sad reputation” Becky was marginalized from society. She traveled to France in order to escape, and still there she received extremely harsh treatment. The narrator comments on how alone she felt, which makes it impossible not to empathize with her and despise the cruelty she is being treated with when she was innocently partaking in leisurely activities such as walking down the boardwalk. One of the severest examples was when she unfairly got kicked out of a hotel where she was staying due to the intervention of some women who knew her in London:

it was after this visit that Becky, who had paid her weekly bills, Becky who had made herself agreeable to everybody in the house, who smiled at the landlady, called the waiters "monsieur," and paid the chambermaids in politeness and apologies, what far more than compensated for a little niggardliness in point of money (of which Becky never was free), that Becky, we say, received a notice to quit from the landlord, who had been told by some one that she was quite an unfit person to have at his hotel, where English ladies would not sit down with her. And she was forced to fly into lodgings of which the dullness and solitude were most wearisome to her. (641)

Thackeray does this often with Becky: he represents her in an extremely negative manner, but then he presents a justification or a strong reason to feel for her that prohibits any real dislike of this character (as the above passage). However, interestingly enough Thackeray does not present her as a tragic victim. She is a victim, but Becky never succumbs to grief as many romantic characters do, always preserving some of her strong persona.

It is not surprising that she is not presented as a tragic victim or that she does not succumb to grief, since throughout the novel she has been shown to be fearless in the face of adversity, so much so that if she had been presented as a tragic victim it would have seemed out of character. However, by showing her as a victim, the narrator not only makes it a believable outcome of her actions, it also serves as a strong example of the negative effects the Fair can have on a person. Furthermore, in order to keep with his pattern of presenting Becky, by victimizing her it results in sincere empathy from the reader, because although she did many negative and shocking things that led her to her sad state, their consequences are presented by the narrator as a bit harsh (such as the hotel incident). Moreover, to strengthen that empathy from the reader, the narrator had never directly appealed for sympathy towards Rebecca before, but by presenting really sympathetic scenes.

Furthermore, another possible reason why she is presented as a somewhat strong victim is that unlike romantic victims, Becky is extremely smart, therefore not blind to the nature of her actions. She was warned by Lord Steyne when he had said, “gare aux femmes, look out and hold your own! How the women will bully you!” (480) when she was asking to be invited to his dinner parties, yet she ignores his warnings and decides to go through with everything. She understood that she was playing a game and risking a lot while trying to achieve “a position in society” (445). Not only does this understanding permit her to rationalize situations, as she did in

Chapter XLI in her musings about being a good woman, but to a certain extent she understands her part in her undoing. However, although she gains empathy from the reader for her suffering, her actions that led her to that state carry substantial amount of weight which leads the reader and the narrator to pass judgment on her regardless, for instance in her relationship with Rawdon and his discovery of her relationship with Lord Steyne, which ultimately led to their separation.

As previously stated, it is clear that Becky married Rawdon for the possibility of inheritance, and although it is also made clear by the narrator that money went hand in hand in marriage transactions, the marriage is still portrayed negatively by the narrator because of Becky's actions and comments. For instance, the narrator calls Becky "Delilah" three times throughout the marriage, referring to Samson's treacherous wife. Another incident which, although small, smears negative light on the marriage is when Becky ponders, "'If he had but a little more brains,' she thought to herself, 'I might make something of him'" (175). However, it wouldn't be fair to attribute this mentality only to Becky since a similar comment was uttered by Mrs. Bute Crawley about her own husband: "'If that poor man of mine had a head on his shoulders,' Mrs. Bute Crawley thought to herself, 'how useful he might be, under present circumstances, to this unhappy old lady!'" (190). About this type of mentality, from part of the wife, the narrator comments that:

the best of women (I have heard my grandmother say) are hypocrites. We don't know how much they hide from us: how watchful they are when they seem most artless and confidential: how often those frank smiles which they wear so easily, are traps to cajole or elude or disarm—I don't mean in your mere coquettes, but your domestic models, and paragons of female virtue. Who has not seen a woman hide the dullness of a stupid husband, or coax the fury of a savage one? We accept this amiable slavishness, and praise a woman for it: we call this pretty treachery truth. (175)

However, this form of “hypocrisy” was the accepted “double-discourse” of Victorian women which was socially sanctioned and ordinary, “so commonplace that male writers began to laugh admiringly at its resourceful charm” including Thackeray in this and other literary works (Jadwin 667). Therefore, the narrator is not really criticizing Becky since her action was fairly standard practice among the women.

However, despite some moments in which Becky applies “double-discourse” to her husband, their relationship seems more honest than others in the novel. For instance, in Becky’s first letter to him she is honest about her desire for Miss Crawley’s money. Furthermore, he knows her plans and her ways about it and admires her for it. Moreover, when Becky is speaking to Lord Steyne about how her life would be if she left everything and danced at the fair, in her musings she does include her husband, showing some form of emotional bond. Although their union was because of money, this pair are similar to each other and share some form of trust (albeit only a little) between them; it is the offence to this honesty and trust that broke them apart.

Although it has been an on-going debate for years, it still has not been a consensus among scholars about whether Becky was indeed “innocent” concerning the implication that she slept or was about to with Lord Steyne, as seen in analyses such as like 1960s critic Andrew von Hendy’s “Misunderstandings About Becky's Characterization in *Vanity Fair*” who defends her character, versus contemporary critics Patrick Brantlinger, and William Thesing who in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* classify all female characters that “dabble in bigamy, adultery or murder on the side...as direct descendants of Thackeray’s Becky Sharp” (262). However, the answer may lie in the fact that Rawdon focuses on her hidden banknotes, the fact that she kept them from him and that she did not even try to get him out of jail:

I gave up everything I had to her. I'm a beggar because I would marry her. By Jove, sir, I've pawned my own watch in order to get her anything she fancied; and she she's been making a purse for herself all the time, and grudged me a hundred pound to get me out of quod" ... he told Macmurdo the circumstances of the story. "She may be innocent, after all," he said. "She says so. Steyne has been a hundred times alone with her in the house before." ... "It may be so," Rawdon answered sadly, "but this don't look very innocent": and he showed the Captain the thousand-pound note which he had found in Becky's pocket-book. "This is what he gave her, Mac, and she kep it unknown to me; and with this money in the house, she refused to stand by me when I was locked up." The Captain could not but own that the secreting of the money had a very ugly look. (542)

This and the fact that she would not spare any money to get him out of jail are what seem to hurt him. If he had any conviction of adultery he would not have only focused on the money, and if he had not found any he might not have left. However, Becky broke the trust they shared (or the one he thought they shared) and because of this she suffers terrible consequences. Her reaction to these consequences is also of note since she seems to be completely distraught at that moment and afterwards. One could expect that she would immediately bounce back on her feet, but in Chapter LXIV: A Vagabond Chapter, Thackeray presents a still very sad and lonely Becky. Furthermore, as evidence of her emotional attachment to Rawdon when she is in France and is constantly being abused by those who know her, she sadly wishes that Rawdon was with her: "If HE'D been here," she said, "those cowards would never have dared to insult me." She thought about 'him' with great sadness and perhaps longing—about his honest, stupid, constant kindness and fidelity... his good humour; his bravery and courage. Very likely she cried" (641). This display of sentimentality on her part does not excuse her actions, but the reader cannot help but sympathize with her.

Of the incident with Lord Steyne the narrator only says: "What had happened? Was she guilty or not? She said not, but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips, or if

that corrupt heart was in this case pure?" (535). The word *corrupt* here carries a lot of weight since as in previous chapters (XLI and LI), Thackeray shows that Becky was indeed corrupted by the society she lived in. If she was disloyal to her husband, the vanity and hypocrisy of the society she lived in had tremendous influence on it.

As discussed, when the narrator's portrayal of Becky's actions is analyzed the pattern he creates with her is clear: at the same time the narrator criticizes Becky for her actions; he may show or say something afterwards that may alter the negative opinion of her. Becky lied, cheated, and was extremely selfish, but Thackeray wanted real characters who would be affected by the hypocrisy of society, and since Becky was "no angel" to begin with, the effects that it had on her were certain. Nonetheless, for most, after reading *Vanity Fair* Becky is considered the "bad" woman, the "rogue" of the novel: one reason for this might be an inconsistency in the pattern Thackeray used to depict her actions, which appears when she is suspected of killing Jos. Ultimately Becky ends the novel as a murderer, admittedly uncharacteristic of her, but nevertheless that is how she seems. It is not stated directly by the narrator, but there are too many hints for the reader to ignore, especially in the illustration headed "Becky's second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra," which leads the judgment only in one direction. However, taking into consideration how Becky ends up after the accusations, and even the last illustration in the novel, where two girls are putting away the character puppets in a trunk, it is revealed that the pattern is still there.

This pattern is seen by the description of Rebecca's life after Jos, instead of giving her a murderer's punishment the narrator shows her leading a life where:

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, 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. (689)

Therefore, it would seem that her claim of “I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year” came true. She seems to be a charitable and nice lady; having the threat of poverty behind her, she can finally become the woman that she could have been, an idea that is confirmed by the illustration headed “Virtue rewarded. A booth in Vanity Fair,” where Becky’s expression portrays kindness instead of the usual scorn that she wears in *all* the other illustrations. Thackeray with this ending manages to prove the corruptive nature of Vanity Fair and shows how the presence of wealth will keep a person honest. If he had wanted to portray her in a negative image he would have implied that what she was doing was insincere as in the past, even drawn her with a malevolent expression, yet there is no such comment or expression, proving thus that although possibly a murderer, not everything was her fault due to the capitalist nature of the Fair. Here then again he manages to deviate the usual negativity towards Becky by showing her in a positive light. And to further attest the narrator’s and author’s preference for her, in the last illustration of the book while he suggests to “shut up the box and the puppets” (689) of Dobbin and Amelia, the Becky-doll remains outside, as if she is not meant to be locked up and forgotten.

### Chapter III

#### **Rosamond Vincy: Not a Result of an Individual Character Flaw but of a Collective Societal Flaw**

As to the airs of superiority, no woman ever had them in consequence of true culture, but only because her culture was shallow and unreal –George Eliot, “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft”

Rosamond Vincy is not a very likeable character. Her actions at first glance are shocking, with an extreme selfishness that knows no end; she “thrashes out a comfortable tyranny over her husband” (Austen 551) where at the end he calls her his “basil plant” because she grew out of a “murdered man's brains” (885). Since the time *Middlemarch* was published she as a character has received extremely negative criticism. For example, author Henry James termed her to be a “study of a gracefully vicious, or at least of a practically baleful nature” (84). Meanwhile, more contemporary criticism usually terms her as the cause that “lead[s] her husband so far toward economic and social ruin” (Harris 449). However, despite her criticism and her flaws, curiously enough George Eliot as an author is lenient to her fate and unlike most of the other characters in the novel, gives Rosamond all the opportunities for her to reach her goals albeit the self-centeredness behind them. This is noteworthy, since it strays from George Eliot’s common practice where in her previous works the “bad” female character usually gets punished in the end in some way or the other; meanwhile the “good” characters get rewarded. Since the opposite is the case in *Middlemarch* with Rosamond, it illustrates that Rosamond is a peculiar and worthy case of study since she is challenging the prescribed formula and mindset of the “bad” woman. This ultimately leads to how Rosamond is presented to the reader; it cannot be said that the narrator completely likes this character, but although the narrator does not applaud her actions, she does excuse her for many of them, with an indirect claim that it was either thanks to naiveté gained from her education that focused only on achieving public admiration, and her comfortable

life, which only focused on entertainment and other of life's simplicities. Because of this, it is noticed that the narrator presents this character as a result of these trivial mindsets, therefore not particularly a villain, since her faults are common among her society.

Even before Rosamond actually makes an appearance the reader learns that she is admired by male characters, specifically by Mr. Chinchely, as the ideal woman. The reason behind it is that Mr. Chinchely believes that an ideal woman is one that "lays herself out a little more to please us. There should be a little filigree about a woman— something of the coquette. A man likes a sort of challenge. The more of a dead set she makes of you the better" (89). Similar to Mr. Chinchely, Lydgate also believes that Rosamond is his ideal woman. Still before she makes an appearance she is being described by him as "grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music" (94). Later on the reader sees that Rosamond fits the description quite perfectly. She knows how to act properly on every occasion and knows that she possesses the beauty and talent to attract men, and uses this talent and beauty to her advantage as seen with Tertius Lydgate.

The fact that Rosamond is extensively described by male characters before she makes an appearance encourages the reader to create judgments, either favorable or unfavorable, before getting to know the character. They could be favorable, since she is only being praised, however they could be unfavorable since a touch of irony can be perceived when the narrator comments on Rosamond's education. Although the narrator comments that she was the star pupil of Mrs. Lemon's school the fact that one of the considered attributes "demanded in the accomplished female" is getting out of a carriage alongside with music, and "propriety of speech" (97) makes the reader question the truthfulness behind the narrator's positive view of her. Lynda

Mugglestone argues that “Eliot's irony here reveals female education as a litany of the trivial, in which accomplishments replace the acquisition of knowledge, and in which the superficial is elevated into a symbol of superiority” (21). Therefore, this ironical allusion to finishing schools becomes pivotal in the narrator’s view of Rosamond and her faults, were not completely excused, but understood at least. Furthermore, similar to the way in which Thackeray presented Becky, the narrator throughout the novel after presenting a negative image of Rosamond, most of the time she tries to somewhat dispel the negativity. For example, in the previous incident in which the narrator uses irony to describe Rosamond’s education and how she is described, she forewarns possible negative judgment when she comments “we cannot help the way in which people speak of us” and that “the first vision of Rosamond would have been enough with most judges to dispel any prejudice excited by Mrs. Lemon's praise” (97), therefore, leading the reader in a different direction than the one previously questioned.

Rosamond as a vision of beauty alongside her sense of propriety are always somehow present with her every appearance and mention. The very first time she actually appears in the novel she is being admired by her mother for her beauty and when Rosamond speaks she is very aware of the rules of propriety, stating that “you never hear me speak in an unladylike way” (99). Furthermore, she corrects her mother not to speak in what she terms slang and argues with her brother Fred Vincy about the correct use of speech, seen when she argues, “there is correct English: that is not slang,” (100) among other un-gentlemanly behaviors she believes he possesses. Historically, during the nineteenth century books on etiquette would instruct both males and females on how they should behave and speak. At the time speech was given the importance that Rosamond gives it by many, Mugglestone in “Grammatical Fair Ones” claims that:

the prevailing prescriptive ethos, moreover, placed the stress firmly upon notions of linguistic correctness, whether in terms of accent, grammar, or lexis, a development which itself ensured that judgments about linguistic acceptability were increasingly to be aligned with judgments about social, and even intellectual, acceptability. (12-13)

Therefore, Rosamond is a character that represents how speech is “aligned with judgments about social, and even intellectual, acceptability” since she uses it to judge the men of Middlemarch to the point where she deems them unworthy of her affections, as seen when the narrator comments “she was tired of the faces and figures she had always been used to—the various irregular profiles and gaits and *turns of phrase* distinguishing those Middlemarch young men whom she had known as boys” (my italics 98). This mentality is what drives Rosamond to desperately yearn for an outsider with higher positions and acquaintances, which in turn is what makes her target Dr. Lydgate as her future husband. Consequently, early on this character is established as the representation of some Victorian ideas on speech and its connection to rank and propriety. In her case she represents those that reject the familiar and desires the new and (what she considers) refined. What Rosamond learned at Mrs. Lemon’s is a testament of how she acts throughout the novel, especially since all the things that Rosamond learns at school have to do with performing for other people. Her finishing school teaches her to be an actress in her everyday life, and in turn only concentrate on superficial qualities that an individual may have. However, as Fred argues with her, the problem Rosamond seems to have is that she does not realize in its entirety that the world is not as taught at Mrs. Lemon’s, which ultimately seems to be what causes her all of her difficulties. This situation then can be seen as a social critique where Eliot is trying to raise awareness on the shallowness of female education and its consequences as seen in Eliot’s statement in a personal letter:

as to the airs of superiority, no woman ever had them in consequence of true culture, but only because her culture was shallow and unreal...mere acquisitions carried about, and not knowledge fully assimilated so as to enter into the growth of character. (qtd in Mugglestone 25)

Rosamond is an obvious victim of having a “shallow and unreal” culture and her thoughts and actions show the consequences of it. However, she is not an innocent victim since she refuses to see things as they are when they are presented to her by either Lydgate or any other character in the novel. She is just unable to understand and leave behind the “mere acquisitions” she learned at Mrs. Lemon’s. Yet, although Rosamond’s “airs of superiority” targeted Lydgate as a suitor by superficial standards their eventually disastrous union cannot be completely blamed on her since he also used superficial standards in choosing her. Therefore, not only is Eliot criticizing the result of a shallow education, but the superficiality in society that feeds that mentality.

As discussed, when first Lydgate described Rosamond he believed her to be the ideal woman only because she possessed all of the qualities needed for his “reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven” (95). Because he admires Rosamond’s beauty and refinement so much, their interactions resemble playacting on both parts; she always premeditatedly and trained to say the right thing, and he expecting the right answer as well, in order to admire her even more. This is something that the narrator also highlights. For instance, in an early conversation they have, he inquires of her visit to London and the sights she saw there: “‘Tell me what you saw in London.’” where she replies “‘Very little.’ (A more naive girl would have said, ‘Oh, everything!’ But Rosamond *knew better.*)” (my italics 165). The importance of this comment (“But Rosamond knew better”) by the narrator is that again and again she emphasizes Rosamond’s training and its results. Earlier on the narrator notes that

Rosamond had no idea how to lose this training or stop the acting when she deemed it a necessity:

every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own. (120)

When the narrator comments “so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own” the reader cannot help feeling it cannot be helped to feel either sorry for her or a tad frustrated with the result of her education since she then is unable to act differently from what she is doing. She is vain and manipulative, but not entirely conscious of the negativity this entails, since as the narrator affirms: “she was a sylph caught young and educated at Mrs. Lemon's” (165).

Lydgate's and Rosamond's interactions show how different their mentalities are from each other. Lydgate, not entirely conscious of how binding his flirting was, believed that Rosamond “took everything as lightly as he intended it” (315). This, however, was not the case and it is mostly due to the fact that neither of them had any real idea of the interests of the other. As the narrator observes: “Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing” (172). For example, the narrator comments that Lydgate should have thought that Rosamond would not want to postpone marriage as he wanted since she didn't have any reason to do so:

it had not occurred to Lydgate that he had been a subject of eager meditation to Rosamond, who had neither any reason for throwing her marriage into distant perspective, nor any pathological studies to divert her mind from that ruminating habit, that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases, which makes a large part in the lives of most girls. (172)

So Eliot not only makes sure to point out that Rosamond is not completely to blame, but at the same time criticizes the shallow focus that “makes a large part in the lives of most girls.”

However, by making the criticism not only about Rosamond but “most girls,” it stops being a single character flaw, but instead social criticism on women’s lives and their education. For instance, to make sure that the reader does not blame Rosamond for her assumptions about Lydgate the narrator comments: “and it was excusable in a girl who was accustomed to hear that all young men might, could, would be, or actually were in love with her, to believe at once that Lydgate could be no exception.” (173). Also it is of note that male and female ambitions varied greatly. While Lydgate was searching for glory in the field of medicine Rosamond desired the same in her only available field: the household and society. Consequently, Rosamond cannot really be blamed for being ambitious in that nature, although she is, by both male and female characters in the novel. For example, this idea is even further discussed by characters like Mrs. Bulstrode, who comments: “She is so pretty, and has been brought up in such thoughtlessness” (310) and Mrs. Plymdale who “thought that Rosamond had been educated to a ridiculous pitch, for what was the use of accomplishments which would be all laid aside as soon as she was married?” (173).

Moreover, focusing on Mrs. Plymdale’s comment it can be discerned that Rosamond’s “accomplishments” are only useful for conquering a husband, not for being an actual wife in her situation. This will be a crucial problem when Rosamond and Lydgate do marry, because both have unrealistic expectations of each other since they really are oblivious to the other’s interests beyond courtship. Due to the superficial focus that occurred during their courtship, all Lydgate did was please her and all Rosamond did was act pleasing as well, and worthy of admiration. This superficiality eventually brought most of their marital problems. For instance, the biggest problem Lydgate has with Rosamond when they marry is that he feels that she does not support him through the difficulties, as seen when he first discussed their economic difficulties with her:

“Now we have been united, Rosy, you should not leave me to myself in the first trouble that has come” (633). The reader throughout the beginning of their economic difficulties is able to sympathize with Lydgate because the obvious stress he carries is apparent and Rosamond seems only to be obtuse and difficult. She does not understand why he is always serious and not as pleasant as he was before they were married, showing that her view of a relationship did not go beyond the courtship. For her everything was about pleasure and being pleased, music, company, art--the things they did and discussed before their marriage. However, the narrator in a manner explains that Rosamond cannot be really blamed for her obstinacy since she was accustomed to being pleased and admired:

perhaps it was not possible for Lydgate, under the double stress of outward material difficulty and of his own proud resistance to humiliating consequences, to imagine fully what this sudden trial was to a young creature who had known nothing but indulgence, and whose dreams had all been of new indulgence, more exactly to her taste. (630)

By this comment the narrator is diverting the blame from Rosamond to her upbringing, an important theme in the novel where the narrator continuously shows the relationship between the individual and his/her environment. Also in order to avoid any accusations of Rosamond's being interested only in wealth, the narrator had previously explained that Rosamond was never one to think about acquiring money, “she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide,” (281) therefore, when economic difficulties occur in her marriage she finds herself unable to understand. It is also worth mentioning that Lydgate had also fed this mentality before they were married and also was keen on buying exquisite things for their house, not for the sake of showing off (as Rosamond mostly was) but because he deemed them ordinary: “but it had never occurred to him that he should live in any other than what he would have called an ordinary way, with green glasses for hock, and excellent waiting at table”

(367). In turn, this mentality is similar to Rosamond's view of things, and it therefore eases the blame on Rosamond. Also, while Lydgate was busy out of the house, Rosamond only had her house and her husband to focus on. Most women in the nineteenth century had little else to focus on except their household, therefore although it may seem trivial that Rosamond is so focused on the furniture,--as Lydgate asks: "what can a woman care about so much as house and furniture?," (696)--it has to be understood that her house was her only world. Similarly, there is an incident where after Lydgate's social scandal due to money lent by Mr. Bulstrode, Rosamond, ignorant of any the scandal had invited company over, since she was feeling very much alone because Lydgate had a "new gloom...entirely reserved towards her" where he would basically "keep out of her way" (801). However, when the invitations are declined and Lydgate finds out, he yells at her and commands that she not invite anyone to the house without his consent. This just shows his total ignorance of the female world since as a wife she was in her right to invite company to her house and his lack of consideration for Rosamond who, unlike him had worked, had to "wonder what she should do next" (841).

Nevertheless, blaming Rosamond for their failed marriage (although they do not separate they are unhappy with each other) is something that must also be reviewed. If it is obvious that Lydgate shares the blame in their disastrous marriage, why then is Rosamond usually blamed for flourishing wonderfully on a "murdered man's brains" (885)? A possible answer to this is that Lydgate is an obviously sympathetic character whereas Rosamond is not at first glance. The narrator goes more in-depth into what Lydgate is thinking, his dreams and aspirations so that it is unavoidable to empathize and feel sorry for him when he starts to fall; especially since the biggest cause seems to be thanks to Rosamond and her obstinacy. Many critics do blame Rosamond as pointed out by William Deresiewicz in "Heroism and Organicism in the Case of

Lydgate”: “The more interesting of recent approaches have it that Lydgate fails simply because he allows himself to become entangled with the concerns of the town, particularly through his marriage to Rosamond” (725). However, Deresiewicz disagrees since, as also discussed above, Lydgate had his fair share of faults to begin with, plus his involvement with the town was unavoidable. Moreover, there is fault in his unrealistic dreams, as Deresiewicz points out:

Lydgate's profession makes engagement with the affairs of the town unavoidable, whether or not he marries one of its daughters. Furthermore, while the concept of vocation in this secular, Weberian sense is adequate for some of the book's lesser figures, Lydgate aspires to something much higher, nothing less than a place among the "heroes of science." (724)

Therefore, even if he had married another woman than Rosamond the outcome would have probably been similar, in terms of his career, since he was aspiring to be grandiose in a town where change is viewed with apprehension, and failed to challenge it appropriately. Furthermore, Deresiewicz concludes that:

Lydgate, however, consistently fails to make use of this freedom. He refuses to choose between Tyke and Farebrother...He doesn't even choose to marry Rosamond, again leaving the event to circumstance and impulse—a sudden tear, a sudden rush of tenderness. Faced with the need to retrench his finances, he dithers for months rather than displeasing his wife. Finally, he seals his damning association with Bulstrode out of a feeling that he has no choice ("What could he do?")... Lydgate does indeed face a great challenge in arraying himself against the "petty medium of Middlemarch," but he becomes its victim only because he surrenders to it. (736)

Deresiewicz's conclusion shows that although Rosamond was indeed a hindrance in his rise to glory, his refusal to actually choose and suffer whatever consequences resulted from his decisions instead of going with the current is what brings his downfall.

Yet, although Lydgate is mostly responsible for his own downfall, it cannot be denied that Rosamond and the community influenced negatively. Moreover, taking into consideration

how apprehensive to change Middlemarch is, it helps further to understand why Rosamond is the way she is. However, although it can be taken for granted that Rosamond's upbringing and education resulted in her being naïve to all matters concerning change, it cannot be said that she is completely excused or that the narrator believes her to be so. The narrator seems to excuse her at the same time that she criticizes her since, as with the comment "she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide," (281) she explains Rosamond's nature at the same time that she criticizes it because the explanation itself shows how naïve and spoiled she is. Also, the text shows that while Rosamond may be unable to understand many things, she is also unwilling to do so, which then results in her biggest character flaw: her unwillingness to learn and grow despite her upbringing and previous beliefs.

This unwillingness to change also brings out in her the terrible trait of being extremely manipulative, which, when placed next to Lydgate's worries makes her seem calculative and cruel. Rosamond has always been manipulative, since she was always acting for an expected response; however, when she does it to get her way with Lydgate, the reader, sympathizing with his pain, finds it despicable. It must be understood that her being naïve and accustomed to indulgence results in this manipulation, but it is done to such an extent that it is easy to forget the reason behind it and just find her horrid. For example, there is a particular incident when Lydgate and Rosamond are at Mr. Vincy's house for dinner, where Lydgate seems miserable and Rosamond seems to be completely unaware of her husband, yet the narrator explains that:

in reality, however, she was intensely aware of Lydgate's voice and movements; and her pretty good-tempered air of unconsciousness was a studied negation by which she satisfied her inward opposition to him without compromise of propriety. (680)

This is only one of the many examples where Rosamond behaves a certain way or says a certain thing to achieve a desired response from Lydgate, “without compromise of propriety.” Further on, it is revealed what had happened between them to result in this behavior. Lydgate had told Rosamond that he was going to try and sell the house, in order to pay off some of their debts. Rosamond succeeds in deterring the process behind his back, which the reader may find terribly devious of her, since full details of Lydgate’s feelings are always presented as previously discussed, for example: “He had begun to have an alarmed foresight of her irrevocable loss of love for him, and the consequent dreariness of their life” (707). However, the narrator here also extensively explains how hard this situation is for Rosamond which somewhat alleviates and excuses her meddling actions:

poor Rosamond for months had begun to associate her husband with feelings of disappointment, and the *terribly inflexible relation of marriage had lost its charm of encouraging delightful dreams*. It had freed her from the disagreeables of her father's house, but it had not given her everything that she had wished and hoped. The Lydgate with whom *she had been in love had been a group of airy conditions for her*, most of which had disappeared, while their place had been taken by *every-day details* which must be lived through slowly from hour to hour, not floated through with a rapid selection of favorable aspects. The habits of Lydgate's profession, his home preoccupation with scientific subjects, which seemed to her almost like a morbid vampire's taste, his peculiar views of things *which had never entered into the dialogue of courtship*. (my italics 701)

Here the narrator goes to the root of the problem: “things which had never entered into the dialogue of courtship.” The narrator’s comment about how these two knew nothing about each other’s worlds resurfaces once again. Rosamond is finally realizing the difference between her ideas of marriage and the reality full of “every-day details” where the “favorable aspects” are seldom. Moreover, to further understand Rosamond we see that her mother, Mrs. Vincy, also fomented this idea:

"it is dreadfully dull for her when there is no company," said Mrs. Vincy, who was seated at the old lady's side ... You know, Mrs. Farebrother, ours is a cheerful house. I am of a cheerful disposition myself, and Mr. Vincy always likes something to be going on. That is what Rosamond has been used to. Very different from a husband out at odd hours, and never knowing when he will come home, and of a close, proud disposition, *I think*" (681).

Although Rosamond did not truly appreciate her father's house she, as Mrs. Vincy says, "had been used to" having constant entertainment and just as her mother does she believes that the fault is because Lydgate is not of the entertaining disposition. Because Rosamond shares this mentality is what ultimately makes her start to fall in love with Will Ladislaw.

The reason she desires Will Ladislaw is that he takes on the role of a suitor; he sits daily with her, they play music and talk about trivial things similar to those usually discussed during a courtship, and this is what makes her desire him as seen in:

with Rosamond, on the other hand, he [Will] pouted and was wayward—nay, often uncomplimentary, much to her inward surprise; nevertheless he was gradually becoming necessary to her entertainment by his companionship in her music, his varied talk, and his freedom from the grave preoccupation which, with all her husband's tenderness and indulgence, often made his manners unsatisfactory to her, and confirmed her dislike of the medical profession. (491)

Will, although neither romantically interested in Rosamond nor giving the illusion of being so, provides the type of company she is used to. It may come as a surprise, judging from Rosamond's vanity, but she falls in love with him not for his praises of her, but for the familiarity, his lightness, and the companionship he brings. In contrast to Lydgate and his "grave preoccupation[s]," Will seems to be the ideal husband for her, in a way mirroring her mother's comment on how Lydgate's "close and proud disposition" is unsatisfactory to what she is used

to. As a result, returning to Mrs. Plymsdale's comment, Rosamond's "accomplishments" were useful once again in Ladislav's company.

However, in Rosamond's defense her romantic interest in Ladislav occurred gradually. When she first started to spend time with Will, she noticed that he was in love with Dorothea, which for her was surprising since she never had imagined a married woman to have suitors: "Rosamond felt herself beginning to know a great deal of the world, especially in discovering what when she was in her unmarried girlhood had been inconceivable to her...that women, even after marriage, might make conquests and enslave men" (461). Yet, at the time she never considered herself interested in any other suitor than her husband: "But Rosamond's romance turned at present chiefly on her crown-prince, and it was enough to enjoy his assured subjection" (461). This section shows two very important things apart from her idea that women are to be adored by men: first of all, that she started her marriage devoted to her husband's attention, and the narrator's recurrent allusions to Rosamond's naiveté about the world. It seems as if Rosamond only thought in extremes, for example, only in right and wrong, finding it "inconceivable" for an area in between to exist. Because of this mindset, when she sees that she was not happy with Lydgate she assumes that the problem lies in him as a husband and his chosen profession and that another would have been better. However, the narrator extensively explains otherwise:

no notion could have been falsier than this, for Rosamond's discontent in her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance, and not to the nature of her husband; but the easy conception of an unreal Better had a sentimental charm which diverted her ennui. She constructed a little romance which was to vary the flatness of her life ... Since then the troubles of her married life had deepened, and the absence of other relief encouraged her regretful rumination over that thin romance which she had once fed on. Men and women make sad mistakes about their own

symptoms, taking their vague uneasy longings, sometimes for genius, sometimes for religion, and oftener still for a mighty love. (800)

The most important trait that is seen from this explanation is how the narrator understands Rosamond's way of thinking. Although not applauding it, she finds that it is more common than not. This is crucial in understanding the narrator's positions towards Rosamond. She does not seem to blame her for her mistakes since her way of thinking was learned, taught, and common in the society of the time. Moreover, the narrator also presents the reason why Rosamond is romantically interested in Ladislaw— "to vary the flatness of her life"— and understands that this sad state of mind is what led her to mistake her "vague uneasy longings" for "mighty love." Therefore, although Rosamond does not seem to be a sympathetic character, in moments like this one the narrator makes her so because although she is in the wrong, the reader can understand why, since as the narrator suggests, problems like these are not unique to Rosamond.

Another scene where the reader might sympathize with Rosamond is when she has an emotional breakdown. Slowly, Rosamond has been getting sadder as she notices that her ideas of what life and marriage are keep getting shattered; however it does not completely affect her until Will, her last hope for happiness, shatters the illusion she had of them.

When Dorothea walks into the room where Rosamond and Will were alone talking in a seemingly compromising manner, Will immediately, upon Dorothea's departure, lashes out at Rosamond. Rosamond is completely unused to being treated so and does not take it:

Rosamond, while these poisoned weapons were being hurled at her, was almost losing the sense of her identity, and seemed to be waking into some new terrible existence. She had no sense of chill resolute repulsion, of reticent self-justification such as she had known under Lydgate's most stormy displeasure: all her sensibility was turned into a bewildering novelty of pain; she felt a new terrified recoil under a lash never experienced before. What another nature felt in opposition to her own was being burnt and bitten into

her consciousness. When Will had ceased to speak she had become an image of sickened misery: her lips were pale, and her eyes had a tearless dismay in them. (828)

However, this scene does not necessarily cause sympathy towards Rosamond since one can feel that it was about time someone was real with Rosamond and immune to her manipulations. But it can be seen that she is finally coming to the realization that she could be opposed. Furthermore, knowing that her vanity and “airs of superiority” were fed by almost everyone around her, it seems unfair to expect that she on her own should have come to the realization that the world was different, therefore, taking this into consideration, the reader may still feel sorry for this character whose world just got shattered by reality.

Nevertheless, it is not until Dorothea manages to talk to her that the reader can see subtle changes in Rosamond and that she is slowly maturing. For instance when Dorothea goes again to visit she immediately assumes that she is there to humiliate her in some way and “wrapped herself in cold reserve” (842). However, once she notices Dorothea’s demeanor, for the very first time in the novel, “she ceased thinking how anything would turn out—merely wondering what would come” (843). This shows a positive change in Rosamond since she was not so preoccupied with manner and acting superior. About the result of this visit the narrator comments that Rosamond:

was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her. (845-6)

Here the reader cannot but expect some improvement in Rosamond and her relationship with Lydgate since her “dream-world” is finally shattered. However, as before, the narrator directs

the reader's sympathy towards Lydgate at the end of this scene instead of towards Rosamond, which renews the initial dislike for this character:

poor Rosamond's vagrant fancy had come back terribly scourged—meek enough to nestle under the old despised shelter. And the shelter was still there: Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully. (850)

By directing so much attention to Lydgate's "burthen" the reader cannot help but feel sorry for him, and by prioritizing his "burthen" over Rosamond's, the narrator reinforces the negative image that Rosamond has been emitting throughout most of the novel. This continues until the "Finale" where the narrator further directs the readers' sympathy towards Lydgate by concentrating on his sad fate and early death and his seemingly horrible life next to Rosamond, who "simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem" (885). This revelation of such an unhappy ending to their marriage shocks any reader who would have liked to see a happy ending for this couple, resulting in further blame towards Rosamond. However, considering how the narrator also took pains to express Rosamond's frustration and unhappiness, as well as to excuse her actions by showing that much of it was a direct result of shallow education and over indulgence, the careful reader cannot but see that not everything is as one-sided as it may seem. Furthermore, it would have been unrealistic for Rosamond to have made a complete change and in her defense she never deceived Tertius about who she was during the courtship. As the narrator comments, both of them had only ideas of who the other was, judging mostly on their desires, and they never discussed serious topics such as the ones that later came up during their marriage.

It is clear that Rosamond is not an ideal woman for the narrator, but her narrator does not seem to blame her for who she is; she does refer to her quite condescendingly as “fragile” and “infantile,” but she seems to be implying that this is not just a character flaw but a community flaw. Further evidenced by the fact that Rosamond gets “her reward” in the end and achieves the life she always wanted. If she were such a bad character one would expect her to suffer as many of George Eliot’s other female characters who are not considered the ideal suffer. Examples may be *The Mill on the Floss*’ strong-minded character Maggie Tulliver, who loses her reputation in a sex scandal and is able to regain it only after her death; *Adam Bede*’s Hetty Sorrel, who is considered an amazing beauty, but being terribly vain brings shame to the family after murdering her bastard child and is sentenced to penal transportation; *Silas Marner*’s Molly Farrem, a vindictive secret wife and opium addict who dies alone and unclaimed; and finally *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen Harleth who, a bit similar to Rosamond, is vain and self-centered, marries for money and suffers terribly in her loveless marriage. This character does not die, but suffers greatly throughout the novel and does not achieve her happy ending with the man she loved. Because the pattern is surprisingly strong in Eliot’s major works it is even more curious that Rosamond does not reach any tragic fate, possibly due to understanding from the narrator who might see her as an inferior character, but not completely guilty of it either, nor guilty of any major crime. Critics such as Andrew Dowling in “‘The Other Side of Silence’: Matrimonial Conflict and the Divorce Court in George Eliot’s Fiction” have argued that the reason that Eliot decided to show such a marriage where silence between the two “operates as one of the most powerful signs of alienation in the incompatible marriages that structure this novel” (323) because at the time the novel was written marital conflicts became a Victorian interest since by the mid-Victorian times, “incompatibility” was no longer dismissed as an unworthy reason for

divorce. Therefore, Eliot wanted to show a possible result of an unwise and rushed marriage, where neither party is at fault, since they are simply incompatible. Because of this, it can be discerned that Rosamond is a character that shows the consequences of upholding and desiring an act of gentility and submission in a woman by both sexes, since, as it is eventually shown with Rosamond, once the act is over both the male and female are left in completely unknown territory that might not be to their pleasure. And although in this case Rosamond may be the main conspirator, she cannot be completely blamed especially since, as Henry James wrote “Rosamond represents, in a measure, the fatality of British decorum,” (84) not simply a fatality of the female sex or a “bad” woman; and as the narrator says the reader should “think no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary” (281).

## Chapter IV

### The “Bad Women” vs. “the Angel in the House”: The Depiction and Assessment of these Two Types by the Narrator in *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch*

“The angels—I say under breath—were not very bright! The human creatures did not like intelligent angels—intelligence seemed to dim their shine, somehow, and pale their virtues.” -- Charlotte Perkins Gilman in “An Extinct Angel”

The term “the Angel in the House” derives from Coventry Patmore’s poem by the same name, published in the mid-nineteenth century, which then became a reference for a woman who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal. Charlotte Perkins Gilman defined the duties of this ideal woman thus: “It was the business of the angel to assuage, to soothe, to comfort, to delight. No matter how unruly were the passions of the owner...the angel was to have no passion whatever—unless self-sacrifice may be called one” (48). Although Gilman was criticizing and using sarcasm in her essay “An Extinct Angel,” her definitions are throughout accurate of what was expected of a lady. Young Victorian women were led to believe that they had to fit into this ideal by society, publications of books on manners such as *The Women of England* by Mrs. Sarah Ellis (1839) where the role of the English lady is discussed, and by fiction novels. Fiction novels, however, taught by example, usually by presenting and esteeming the noble actions of the “Angel in the House.” Furthermore, these novels also taught by presenting the alternative to this ideal woman, as Gilbert and Gubar affirm: “for every glowing portrait of a submissive woman enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness” known as the fallen angel, the bad woman (28). Where the “angel” possessed virtues as modesty, purity, gracefulness, delicateness, politeness and compliance among others, the fallen woman was shown to be conniving, manipulative, and selfish. As previously discussed, these female characters almost always reached a tragic end and the narrators’ appraisal of them is generally negative throughout the novel. Still, as seen in novels

such as *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch* with Becky Sharp and Rosamond Vincy respectively, this common formula for these type of female characters is altered to the point where we see how the narrators, despite the first impression, hold these characters in a certain esteem shown throughout patterns in the narration when depicting these “bad women.” However, further confirming the narrators’ ambivalent view of these characters is the treatment they give to the embodiment of the “angel” in their works. Where they are supposed to encourage the ideal, the descriptions of these characters and their ultimate endings, when compared to those of the “bad” woman, are less than ideal. After a close reading of how these characters are presented one can see how the narrators’ descriptions and treatment of them ultimately seem to be a form of sympathetic mockery, where the narrators want to admire these characters, but cannot really approve of the naïveté they exhibit, especially in their naïve actions and unrealistic ideas. This is shown regardless of presenting some positive traits and seeming to promote their actions. The narrators are sympathetic about their ordeals, yet slightly mocking of their weak actions and reactions in their respective societies. For instance, Amelia Sedley (Becky Sharp’s counterpart) is continuously referred to as a “little creature,” a description that possesses non-human and childish connotations. Additionally, Thackeray’s narrator uses an extremely sarcastic tone when he refers to her and her constantly being “overcome with emotion” (7). The sympathetic mockery is not only seen in the tone the narrator’s uses, but also towards the characters’ goals and their ultimate ending. For instance, although Eliot’s narrator achieves the reader’s sympathy towards Dorothea Brooke, the “angel” and heroine of *Middlemarch*, one notices a slight mockery of Dorothea’s beliefs and aspirations concerning being a help and influence to others, amplified by the novel’s ending where she simply was “absorbed into the life of another, and ...only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother” (886). Therefore, although these

characters are supposed to be considered the ideal Victorian woman, the narrators, despite current trends, sympathize with them at the same time that they mock their self-sacrificing behaviors, and when compared to their treatment of the “bad woman,” these “angels” are presented as slightly inferior beings incapable of surviving in their society.

Having unrealistic ideals and beliefs about the world, along with a submissive attitude, are the main qualities that make Dorothea Brooke appear incapable of surviving in the society she lives in. Many feminist scholars, from the 1970s to contemporary times, find that this makes Dorothea a weak character and believe that she should not have been since she had the makings of being a female role model, but instead they find Eliot promoting the Victorian ideal. Zelda Austen in her 1976 article “Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot” argues that:

Feminist critics are angry with George Eliot because she did not permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical, refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry. (549)

However, contemporary critic Alison Booth in *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* claims (as a possible answer to the angry feminist critics Austen mentions): “the great writer strives to appear unimplicated; her art must not serve politics, though she elaborates a definition of politics in her art that evidently implicates everyone” (37) and most importantly that Eliot “found that the Grand Old Woman of English Letters must ambivalently subscribe to the ideology of influence, because a publicly politicized stance on women’s issues would preclude the cultural privileges they struggled to gain” (51). As Booth suggests, it is obvious that novelists had to take their readers into consideration and if Eliot had created the character that many feminists wished to have seen in Dorothea, the book probably would have not received the positive reception it did. However, by looking closely at how the narrator speaks of and treats

Dorothea it is possible that Eliot might not be promoting her as the ideal woman after all; Dorothea could work as an example of what results from having unrealistic and self-sacrificial mindset in a highly patriarchal society. This being so, in the same manner that the author cannot make Dorothea a rebel, she cannot promote Rosamond over her directly either, but does so discreetly. Using the same methods used to discreetly support the “bad woman” the narrator uses patterns in the narration and the characters outcome to show how the “Angel in the House” is not the complete ideal as expected.

When the reader is first introduced to Dorothea there is already the suspicion that she will be one of the “many Therasas” spoken of in the “Prelude” who are “foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed” (ii). After reading this in the “Prelude” the reader might expect to see how this character serves as social criticism concerning the role of woman in society. However, although the reader can already expect what Dorothea’s outcome will be, the narrator’s description of Dorothea in the beginning of the novel seems to show more criticism towards her than towards society as was implied in the prelude. This is seen in the narrator’s account on Dorothea’s potential to be married:

and how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick laborer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles—who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! (3)

At the same time that the narrator is criticizing men for not accepting a woman with strong opinions, she uses irony also to criticize Dorothea's notions and behaviors. Where the reader might have expected a strong-minded character the narrator presents her as a slightly childish and dramatic one, to the point of theatrics. Gilbert and Gubar explain that "Eliot frequently oscillates between pity and disdain" when it comes to Dorothea (475). While she is sympathetic of Dorothea's intentions she mocks them as being unrealistic and unfitting. This is quite recurrent throughout the novel concerning Dorothea, but it is most obvious when Dorothea decides to marry Mr. Casaubon.

As soon as Dorothea meets Mr. Casaubon she forms a high opinion of him thinking that he "was a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint" (20); showing how she bestows on him the utmost positive and ideal qualities, resulting in her quickly falling in love with the image of him she created. The narrator is sympathetic, but disapproving of Dorothea's hasty and "liberal conclusions" about Mr. Casaubon. Although she excuses Dorothea's hastiness and assumptions by comparing her behavior to that of "other young ladies of her age" (20), the narrator does not seem to excuse the fact that Dorothea's vanity about her own opinion makes her ignore all others who showed common sense concerning Mr. Casaubon's potential of being a good husband. Dorothea is shown throughout her courtship as highly proud of her ideas, placing them well above those around her. For instance, although Celia warns Dorothea of her hastiness and possible mistake, she just dismisses her as possessing a "commonest mind" (45). Moreover, her ignorance is also highlighted concerning Sir James Chettam, who was interested in being her husband, but she always assumed with a "little willfulness in her continuing blind" (30) that he was interested in Celia and dismissed him as a potential husband because he did not share her

passion in learning and asceticism, even though he was always willing to please her and respected her opinions. Concerning this condescending mindset the narrator remarks: “Miss Brooke was certainly very naive with all her alleged cleverness. Celia, whose mind had never been thought too powerful, saw the emptiness of other people's pretensions much more readily” (62). This form of criticism ends up working as the foundation for Dorothea’s mistake in marrying Casaubon. When, as expected, Dorothea’s marriage ends up being a silent prison to her, the narrator does not leave any room for doubt that it was due to Dorothea’s vanity about her own opinions that led her to make such a bad marriage.

Curiously enough, after looking at the marital situations Dorothea went through and the narrator’s view of her, the reader might think of Rosamond and her very similar situation. Rosamond shares one of the closest links to Dorothea in comparison to many angel/demon pairs in literature, since these two women suffered through the same situations and shared similar goals (although Rosamond's were more materialistic). Both of these characters had ideas about their role in society and the future; both thought that by marriage they would be able to achieve these goals, and both were deeply disappointed in their first marriage: a disappointment resulting from lack of really knowing the other person. Two strong-minded women were forced to become silent about their aspirations and concerns, the only difference being that where Dorothea is complacent and passively endures her “stone prison” (Eliot 232), Rosamond is “willfully asserting the right to enjoy herself” although she fails (Gilbert and Gubar 514). Apart from personality differences, the main difference between these two characters seems to be that one is active while the other is passive, passivity being a common trait in “Angels of the House.”

An example of similar situations that both of these characters went through but in which Dorothea was passive where Rosamond was active, is when both women ask their husbands

about monetary affairs and both are told not to interfere or ask. For instance, Dorothea, believing that Will Ladislaw has the right to a bigger monetary claim from Mr. Casaubon, asks Casaubon that he take it into consideration only to be reprimanded and told that she has “assumed a judgment on subjects beyond [her] scope” even though she had rightfully claimed it affected her “more” (396). The narrator shows how truly serious and hard this was for Dorothea when she points out that Dorothea felt “a dumb inward cry for help to bear this nightmare of a life in which every energy was arrested by dread” (396). However, although this response was indeed terribly heart-wrenching for Dorothea, the narrator shows that “nothing else happened, except that they both remained a long while sleepless, without speaking again,” (396) showing the real and sad consequences of Dorothea’s passivity. Furthermore, when a dying Casaubon tries to make Dorothea promise that she will always do his will even after he is dead, Dorothea although she knew that whatever it was would be dreadful for her, “simply felt that she was going to say ‘Yes’ to her own doom: she was too weak, too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on her husband, to do anything but submit completely” (509) and is only saved from promising by Casaubon’s sudden death.

In a similar situation, at least concerning money, Rosamond is told the same thing by Lydgate as Dorothea was told by Casaubon, but Rosamond’s consequent actions differ greatly from Dorothea’s. Rosamond finds herself about to lose her house and belongings and every time she tries to offer an opinion, Lydgate responds with: “You must learn to take my judgment on questions you don’t understand” (631), quite similar to the response of Casaubon. Unlike Dorothea however, she takes matters into her own hands by trying to delay the selling of the house. When confronted about her actions Rosamond responds “I think I had a perfect right to speak on a subject which concerns me at least as much as you,” (699) thus refusing to be passive

as Dorothea is. Furthermore, when Rosamond realizes that she will most likely lose everything she strongly urges Lydgate for them to leave Middlemarch. Although it is her home, she cannot tolerate losing her status and reputation in front of those who know her. Being as insistent and active as she has always been, she does manage to leave Middlemarch and start fresh in London. Therefore, when in very similar situations these two characters act completely opposite, and while Rosamond's actions were not exactly successful or positive (except her leaving), she at least tried to take some control over her fate, whereas Dorothea would have promised to sacrifice her wishes and free will even after Casaubon's death for no other reason than her own submission to her husband.

Although passivity was common in Victorian heroines, taking into consideration where it led Dorothea and how clearly the narrator presents its negative consequences, the ideal is not exactly promoted through the novel. The ultimate example of this is the novel's ending. Where it might seem that Dorothea achieves happiness because she married whom she wanted after her disastrous marriage to Casaubon, her other aspirations were forgotten and unreachd. Furthermore, although she willingly marries Ladislav, this is not necessarily an improvement since she is as blind with him as she was with Casaubon, the only difference being that Ladislav is more aware and concerned about her feelings and because of this the narrator is lenient towards him. Dorothea praises him and sees him as the epitome of success and leadership and blindly decides to follow in his path regardless of the consequences, as she did with Casaubon. Because of this the narrator sees it as pitiful that by following in another's shadow again she is unable to reach her aspirations: "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (886). This ending is even more pitiable considering that Dorothea

herself also felt as an underachiever as she was left “feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better” (886). On the other hand, while Rosamond at first glance is the female villain in the novel at the end of the novel she achieved the life she wanted, according to her, as “a reward” (885).

Consequently, it is clear that the concept of the self-sacrificing heroine is made somewhat pathetic in the narrator’s eyes which then allows for the ambivalence seen between the narrator’s opinions of these two characters. Although the narrator is not directly promoting one over the other, nor can it be said that the narrator dislikes the “angel,” but, by comparing the “angel” next to the “bad woman” it is apparent that the bad woman has a better fate. This is especially so in an imperfect society like Middlemarch’s that believes itself to “never [have] been deceived” since their opinions were the truth, no matter the reality, thus proving that idealistic aspirations separate or completely different from those of the community’s are an unrealistic and self-condemning desire, as seen with Dorothea and Lydgate. Moreover, the narrator’s ambivalence between Rosamond and Dorothea is not only apparent in the novel’s ending, but also in patterns in the narration. For instance, when the narrator was describing Rosamond (as discussed in Chapter III) she usually would show some fault first, but then excuse her behavior. Curiously enough for Dorothea it is the exact opposite. She praises her, but afterwards she seems to use a sarcastic tone or directly criticizes Dorothea’s actions as seen in her rash decision to marry Casaubon, her dramatic martyrdom towards others, and her unfair and naïve opinion of James Chettam. Examples of this sort seen throughout the novel ultimately help strengthen the case that the narrator did indeed have some uncertainty between these two female characters, where the preference seems to go towards Rosamond, the (at first glance) typical “bad woman.”

Remarkably, this same pattern of narration when describing the “Angel in the House” is also observable in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* with the narrator’s depiction of Amelia Sedley. In the reader’s first encounter with Amelia Sedley, she seems to be the perfect young girl. Described by the narrator himself as a “poor little white-robed Angel” (127), the novel’s beginning extensively depicts how everyone at Chiswick Mall would be saddened by her departure to the point of “hysterics” by many of the other girls (5). However, the reader cannot fail to notice that there is slight sarcasm in the narrator’s tone when describing this “silly little thing” (5). For example:

she had a pair of eyes which sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled with tears, and that was a great deal too often; for the silly thing would cry over a dead canary-bird; or over a mouse, that the cat haply had seized upon; or over the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid; and as for saying an unkind word to her. (5)

As seen, the narrator does not really seem to be trying for the reader to like or respect Amelia judging by his extensive emphasis on how she cries over anything, “were it ever so stupid,” resulting in a comical and pathetic image of this character. Furthermore, the narrator explains that it is not necessary to describe Amelia physically “as she is not a heroine, there is no need to describe her person” (5) yet, comparing this to how he treats the “bad” woman, he does thoroughly describe Becky, plus gives a history of her past therefore leading the reader’s interest towards her.

Moreover, the narrator constantly compares these two female characters when describing Amelia’s thoughts and actions. He usually presents the difference in her actions and thoughts to those of Becky’s, and his disapproval of Amelia’s weak mind and character in contrast to Becky’s strong will is evident. An example of this is:

the young ones in the nest have a pretty comfortable unromantic sort of existence in the down and the straw...While Becky Sharp was on her own wing in the country, hopping on all sorts of twigs, and amid a multiplicity of traps, and pecking up her food quite harmless and successful, Amelia lay snug in her home of Russell Square; if she went into the world, it was under the guidance of the elders. (120)

By this comparison the reader can see how the narrator does not fully condone Amelia's sheltered lifestyle since she knows nothing of hardship or the world. Unlike Becky who is already "on her own wing" dealing successfully "amid a multiplicity of traps," Amelia on the other hand "had the house to herself—ah! too much to herself sometimes" (122) as the narrator comments. The narrator constantly shows how Amelia and her sheltered life affect a young woman's ability to survive in society, and ultimately will be the root of Amelia's biggest folly: her obsession with George Osborne. This is seen when the narrator compares her again to Becky:

we have talked of Shift, Self, and Poverty, as those dismal instructors under whom poor Miss Becky Sharp got her education. Now, Love was Miss Amelia Sedley's last tutoress, and it was amazing what progress our young lady made under that popular teacher. (121)

The fact that "Love" was Amelia's sole focus is what truly demeans her in the eyes of the narrator. Although sympathetic, the narrator openly disapproves of her blind obsession with George and though Amelia started out as a good, if not silly character, as the novel progresses the reader is shown how weak she truly is because of this obsession.

Amelia and George have been promised to each other since birth as an arrangement between their fathers. Both parties seem happy in their arrangement and appear to be a truly happy couple. However, as the story progresses, the narrator shows how different George is from the one Amelia thinks she knows and idolizes. Moreover, Amelia is willingly ignorant of this and terribly fixated with the fake image of him she creates. The narrator extensively shows how

Amelia had no other focus to her life than her betrothed and does not hesitate to voice his negative opinion of this. This is seen when he reveals the extent of her infatuation and blindness:

this young person (perhaps it was very imprudent in her parents to encourage her, and abet her in such idolatry and silly romantic ideas) loved, with all her heart...She thought about him the very first moment on waking; and his was the very last name mentioned in her prayers. She never had seen a man so beautiful or so clever: such a figure on horseback: such a dancer: such a hero in general. Talk of the Prince's bow! what was it to George's? ... Not amongst all the beaux at the Opera...was there any one to equal him. He was only good enough to be a fairy prince; and oh, what magnanimity to stoop to such a humble Cinderella! (122)

As seen, the narrator immediately claims that Amelia's perception of George is nothing but "idolatry and silly ideas" and his response to this idolatry is to believe that "poor Emmy had not a well-regulated mind" (122). The narrator will continue to believe so throughout the novel as Amelia's obsession worsens, and, as a result, there is a notable decline of estimation toward this character by the narrator.

One of the scenes that show how the narrator stops approving of Amelia is when her family goes bankrupt and she is forced to break off the engagement with George. Although it can be understandable that Amelia was to be heartbroken by the breaking up of her engagement with George, her fiancé since birth, the narrator makes it clear that her actions are too dramatic, especially how "to death she looked with inexpressible longing" thinking then that if dead she "shall always be able to follow him" (182). The narrator does not excuse this mindset and is direct in voicing that she is not a model to follow, as seen when he comments: "I am not praising her conduct or setting her up as a model" therefore directly stating that this "Angel" is not the ideal woman he seemed to imply in the beginning of the novel.

Moreover, Amelia's character seems to lose esteem even further when she does manage to marry George, yet she is looking back with longing at the time she was pining to be with him in her house after the bankruptcy. The narrator comments that this is her "lot" in life: to "be looking sadly and vaguely back: always to be pining for something which, when obtained, brought doubt and sadness rather than pleasure; here was the lot of our poor little creature and harmless lost wanderer in the great struggling crowds of Vanity Fair" (262). The narrator then makes clear that it is Amelia's own fault for always having a false image of George. She would excuse his cold behavior and believe only the best of him. Most of the times when suspecting the truth she would become willfully ignorant and continue in her fantasy. An example of this behavior occurred when she would read the letters he had written: "if they were cold, yet how perversely this fond little soul interpreted them into warmth. If they were short or selfish, what excuses she found for the writer!" (182). Now after marriage she is starting to realize that her image was false and is longing for the past where her longing for him gave her reason to live. However, although she is realizing the truth, as the narrator comments, she continues to choose ignorance:

did she own to herself how different the real man was from that superb young hero whom she had worshipped? It requires many, many years—and a man must be very bad indeed—before a woman's pride and vanity will let her own to such a confession. (262)

As the narrator explains it was Amelia's "pride and vanity" that made her cling to the fantasy than the truth, and now she is suffering the consequences of a marriage to a man that neglects her and turns out to be quite different than her ideal.

To further show the narrator's displeasure with Amelia he continues to compare her to Becky, where Becky always comes out in a more positive light. What the narrator seems to

praise in Becky is her self-worth, confidence and independence. Amidst dangerous situations she is level headed and able to make rational decisions; meanwhile Amelia is useless and miserable. This is seen when George's regiment is called off to battle and Amelia's behavior is so pitiful that it even worries Becky. For example, while Amelia "remained for hours, silent, motionless, and haggard, by the windows in which she had placed herself to watch the last bayonets of the column as it marched away," (304) Becky "knowing how useless regrets are, and how the indulgence of sentiment only serves to make people more miserable...wisely determined to give way to no vain feelings of sorrow, and bore the parting from her husband with quite a Spartan equanimity" (295). Although, this statement most likely possesses a touch of irony, the narrator still admires Becky for her bravery and calls her behavior "wise" on a number of occasions. Yet, even though he admires Becky's behavior, it is not until George dies that the narrator seems to completely dislike Amelia's weak character and the way in which her obsession takes a new form.

When George dies on the battlefield, Amelia's obsession and codependence turn towards her newborn son and only managed to escape death-by-grief by dramatically refocusing her reason to live for little Georgy:

this child was her being. Her existence was a maternal caress. She enveloped the feeble and unconscious creature with love and worship. It was her life which the baby drank in from her bosom. Of nights, and when alone, she had stealthy and intense raptures of motherly love. (359-360)

However, the narrator's displeasure is not towards these "raptures of motherly love," but to the vanity and weakness behind them. Georgy's birth further confirms Amelia's terrible codependency (how she is always in need of a reason to live) and how she romanticizes and idealizes false memories of her late husband. All of a sudden, George became a saint, and she

completely forgot that when she was married to him “she trembled for the future” (245) when she noticed his neglect of her and had to do what she used to do before their marriage: excuse and disregard reality. And now, after his death, she reverts to this original behavior and is completely blind to possibilities other than being the desolate and loyal widow and mother. The negative consequences of this behavior are especially seen in her attitude towards William Dobbin.

William Dobbin is probably the only “good” character in *Vanity Fair*. He is loyal, kind, and considerate. Moreover, he is in love with Amelia and is always looking out for her well-being. He is the one that always convinced George to go see her; he later convinces him to marry her despite her poverty and later became his son’s godfather. Even though he always loved Amelia, he always did it quietly and never attempted to intrude. After George’s death, he had hoped that he would be able to take care of and marry her, but noticed that Amelia’s heart was now completely focused on her son as it had been focused on George before. However, Amelia is aware of how Dobbin was always there for her and watched out for her safety, and as time passes, is starting to feel for him. But, although they live in the same household, travel around Europe together and are even confused to be husband and wife, she still clings to the memory of George and refuses to admit her love for Dobbin. When Dobbin does confess his love to her, she responds that “George is my husband, here and in heaven” (596), yet she pleads with Dobbin not to leave her side. This request can be considered quite a selfish one, since Dobbin then is “at liberty to look and long” (597). Because of this, the narrator compares Amelia to Shakespeare’s Desdemona and Miranda, since they too kept and encouraged a friendly relationship with a man they knew admired them, keeping them interested, but at a certain distance: “Such an attachment

from so true and loyal a gentleman could make no woman angry” implying then that the women found it flattering and empowering.

As the years passed Amelia started to abuse her power over Dobbin, to the point where the narrator describes it as tyranny and calls him a “spooney”:

this woman had a way of tyrannizing over Major Dobbin (for the weakest of all people will over somebody), and she ordered him about, and patted him, and made him fetch and carry just as if he was a great Newfoundland dog. He liked, so to speak, to jump into the water if she said "High, Dobbin!" and to trot behind her with her reticule in his mouth. This history has been written to very little purpose if the reader has not perceived that the Major was a spooney. (663)

This description shows Amelia as a different woman than that of the beginning, who was considered a “helpless and gentle creature” (312) and needed protection. Now she seems selfish and cruel to Dobbin in how she abuses and disregards his emotions. This selfish nature is further confirmed when, after Dobbin finally sees that she is not “worthy of the love which [he] has devoted to [her]” (670) decides to leave, describing her as ungenerous and in possession of a lofty soul. The narrator consequently shows how Amelia only wanted Dobbin to stay just because it made her feel empowered and it appeased her ego:

Amelia stood scared and silent as William thus suddenly broke the chain by which she held him and declared his independence and superiority. He had placed himself at her feet so long that the poor little woman had been accustomed to trample upon him. She didn't wish to marry him, but she wished to keep him. She wished to give him nothing, but that he should give her all. It is a bargain not unfrequently levied in love. (670)

She only wanted to receive and “trample” and not give anything in return. This behavior towards Dobbin is seen as selfish by almost all characters that have witnessed it, including Becky whose thoughts are provided without irony by the narrator: "What a noble heart that man has," she thought, "and how shamefully that woman plays with it!" (670). Here again Becky is shown as

much wiser than Amelia, and even nicer, since she was moved by Dobbin so much that she decides to help him, which is something that Becky is not really seen doing often.

Although these two female characters are compared often, and Becky most of the times does seem to hold a higher regard from the narrator, it is the ultimate ending of these two that further confirms this higher esteem. Thanks to Becky's help, Amelia ends up marrying Dobbin and they have a baby girl together. However, although it seems to be the perfect ending for both Dobbin and Amelia, the narrator does let the reader know that it isn't so. He lets the reader see that Dobbin lost some of his love for Amelia and now is devoted to his daughter and Amelia is well aware of it: "Colonel seizing up his little Janey, of whom he is fonder than of anything in the world... 'Fonder than he is of me,' Emmy thinks with a sigh." And if there were any doubts, the narrator follows Amelia's train of thought with: "Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" and ends the novel (689), showing then that, unlike Becky who received a happy ending, Amelia did not receive a completely happy ending.

Diana C. Archibald in *Domesticity, Imperialism and Emigration in the Victorian Novel* believes that the reason for Amelia's ending is due to Thackeray's dislike of the seeming "Angel of the House." Archibald argues that Thackeray "levies against the 'angel of the house'" because he believes that an "ideal wife does not guarantee happiness, even if one believed such a creature can exist" (182). Dobbin then is proof of this, since he thought that Amelia was indeed the personification of the ideal, but is left to see that his esteem was not realistic, which seems to be exactly what Thackeray wants to show of these type of women. With Amelia, the narrator shows that underneath that seemingly ideal surface she is incapable of surviving on her own in her society, as seen when the narrator calls her a "tender little parasite" (684), due to her own vanity,

lack of confidence, and upbringing, thus, personifying the type of submissive and weak women that the narrator calls “darlings [that] are like the beasts of the field, and don't know their own power” (27).

With Amelia and Dorothea both Thackeray and Eliot respectively personify the type of submissive Victorian woman considered “Angels of the House” and both novelists show ambivalence between their “angels” and “bad women,” mostly due to their observation of the incompetence these women face when confronted with reality. They show that despite current beliefs, if a woman follows the ideal of being self-sacrificing and weak, it does not necessarily ensure that she would be a great wife, or guarantee happiness for herself or her husband. Instead they present them as a sort of “tender little parasites,” as Thackeray wrote, in all forms; depending so much on others to bring them happiness that they are unable to achieve it plus eventually draining those they cling to or disappearing behind them. This inability to create their own happiness, plus the willingness to sacrifice themselves for others seems to be the major difficulty that both novelists have towards this type of woman. For instance, in *Vanity Fair* when Amelia is blaming herself for not wanting to give up her son to his grandfather the narrator comments:

I know few things more *affecting* than that timorous debasement and self-humiliation of a woman. How she owns that it is she and not the man who is guilty; how she takes all the faults on her side; how she courts in a manner punishment for the wrongs which she has not committed and persists in shielding the real culprit. (590 my italics)

Regardless of whether the narrator is being sincere or ironic, in both ways this “timorous debasement and self-humiliation” behavior is seen negatively and with slight mockery. The fact that it is not only directed towards Amelia but to “woman” or the women who do this, shows that

Thackeray's scope was not only his weak female character, but a message to Victorian society in general. The same can be said of Eliot, since in her "Prelude" and the "Finale" she is broadening the scope from just Dorothea to similar women that might and have shared or will share Dorothea's fate and how they "may present a far sadder sacrifice[s] than that of the Dorothea whose story we know" (886). However, both novelists do not necessarily claim it is this type of women's fault in its entirety, given that women were educated, raised and encouraged to be weak and submissive, and because of this, the narrators and novelists pity them. Nevertheless both novelists seem to share the belief that having highly submissive and self-sacrificing attitudes is less than ideal, due to their usual unhappy outcomes and they did not reserve this mindset only to their characters, but to real Victorian women. In order to do so, they discreetly show their "bad women," who are actively searching and working for their own happiness, as much more adept and having more possibility of happiness and survival in their respective societies than their counterparts whose parasitic tendencies bring nothing but disappointment. Both Thackeray and Eliot are hinting that the notion behind the conventional ideal should be re-thought in order to avoid creating further "tender little parasites" who will most likely share a sad (or sadder) fate than their "angels" did. Both used discretion and tact when presenting this idea and their ambivalence due to their respective social stigmas, but thanks to how their narrators treated these two types of women, both as individuals and when in comparison with each other, it is quite clear that sometimes not being the conventional ideal can be more gratifying in the end.

## Conclusion

“Well behaved women rarely make history” --Leila Thatcher Ulrich

There is no doubt that women’s behavior and role in society has been prescribed, much more harshly and ardently than men’s, since early civilizations. After mass publication became available, this constant imposition of values and propriety on women came as books or pamphlets of etiquette, such as Sarah Ellis’ *The Women of England, their Social Duties and Social Habits* and even fiction would generally serve as examples. Many novels, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile: or, on Education*, not only served as entertainment, but to some degree as educational material. For instance, in Victorian times most novels would present a situation where good was usually rewarded, and bad or deviant behavior was punished, especially with its female characters. This was done not only on the novelists’ preference, but on the readers or the Victorian society’s preference as well. In the early nineteenth century, among many changes, there was a shift in values that caused discomfort and discontent to many, although some values were positive, for many etiquette and manner were given too much of an importance over other social topics. As a result, the novel in a sense “mirrored the significant developments in social history: it was also a recorder of the ‘Victorian Values’” (Dennis 8). Although fiction, it is possible, by using what Hayden White termed as the meta-historical perspective of the novel which made detectable the ideological perspectives found within the novel (Barnaby 33), to see exactly what values these were that the novels expressed and how they did it. As Judith Newton argues:

*this decade is often characterized* as a time of transition, deeply informed by a sense of history, a heightened consciousness that the past was distinctly different from the present and that the future was liable to be marked by greater difference yet. Public written representations of society and social relations, whether structured as novels, as narratives

of the past...offered a sense of control over time and change. ("Sex and Political Economy" 97)

Thus, both Thackeray and Eliot shared this "heightened consciousness" of history and its changes and showed it in their works. For example, according to Edward T. Barnaby in "Thackeray as Metahistorian or the Realist *Via Media*," Thackeray in his novels attempts to "make visible the historical experience of fictional individuals living within a historical society and age" (38). A clear example of how Thackeray makes these experiences visible is the reaction the characters have towards the Napoleonic Wars. At the beginning of the book we see rebel Becky screaming out loud "Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!" shocking Amelia since at the time "'Long live Bonaparte!' was as much as to say, 'Long live Lucifer!'" (10), also we see how Amelia reacts to George's going to war, Rawdon's inventory of his possessions that Becky could sell in case he dies in battle, and the citizens' panic when they had to flee Brussels. Although the story follows fictional characters there is some truth in their reactions to this real life event, the significant factor being that Thackeray, instead of giving the reader historical details and facts of the war, gives the reader his characters' reactions to the war. As the narrator claims: "We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants" (365). Another example, one less obvious, but more relevant and constant is the decorum and traditions that his characters keep and even take advantage of, as Becky does. One example is the hand shaking, where the number of fingers offered augmented depending on the esteem the person providing the hand had for the one shaking it. The reader can see how Thackeray delves into how it was done, and what every variation and the act itself meant societally. An example is when George tries to patronize Becky at Miss Crawley's house and offers his hand for her to shake, but she only offers a finger in return: "He would even shake hands with her...[George] held out his left hand towards her, expecting that she would be quite confounded at the honour. Miss Sharp

put out her right forefinger, and gave him a little nod, so cool and killing” (149). These are just a few of many examples where the reader is immersed into traditions and experiences specific to a certain age where, although the characters are fictitious, the events and traditions are not.

Similar to Thackeray, according to Michael I. Carignan in “Fiction as History or History as Fiction? George Eliot, Hayden White, and Nineteenth-Century Historicism,” Eliot’s novels (especially *Middlemarch*) challenged “the capacity for fiction to create and deepen historical understanding...her novels [are] a science lab for producing historical knowledge” (397). For instance, in the early 1800s, the time that *Middlemarch* is set in, modern science was evolving and receiving much more interest than it had before and this increasing interest is seen in Lydgate’s passion for researching and beliefs of modern medicine. However, Eliot also shows that as when any change is about to take place, the people in society were hesitant about it and even tried to avoid it. Furthermore, a much more notable example is that in the novel there is the discussion about the Great Reform Bill; not only is the importance of the Bill explained, it is also shown how the characters react to it and their many varying points of view about it. Because of examples such as these *Middlemarch* is truly as its subtitle states, “A Study of Provincial Life,” since it shows life was in the rural areas during the early-1800s giving the reader not only the opportunity to learn historical events, but the impact these events had on the society of the time by seeing the impact it had on Middlemarch’s society.

Yet, although Thackeray’s and Eliot’s novels can be considered meta-historical, they did not solely depict events and their characters’ reactions to them, they also expressed their views and criticism on the events and values they presented. George Eliot “is concerned with ‘how to live and what not to think.’” Her intentions [are] ‘to convey [not] her impression of life, but her judgments on it’” (Dennis 90). We have seen throughout this thesis how, after presenting a

character's actions, Eliot as a narrator, would express her judgments of such actions as seen with Dorothea and Rosamond, where with Dorothea, Eliot criticizes her melodramatic mindset, (among other traits) and with Rosamond her terrible self-centeredness. This impartment of judgment is also seen in Thackeray, who according to Juliet McMaster, "what is lastingly engaging and challenging about [him] is that he was both *of* culture, and its searing perceptive critic" (468). As seen in Chapter One of this thesis, Thackeray was indeed trying to move up the ladder in society, but that did not stop him from presenting the flaws he found on the higher rungs. For instance, he constantly shows how cruel society is especially to newcomers (specifically women's society) as seen when Steyne warns Becky about female society: "gare aux femmes, look out and hold your own! How the women will bully you!" (480). Thackeray even went further to say that the society he depicted was indeed vile, but that it resembled his own more than his readers would like to admit (Kaye 730).

However, despite being ardent critics Thackeray and Eliot had to make this criticism in a way that would satisfy their own needs as well as the needs or preferences of their readers. In order for literature to be received positively it had to follow the general guidelines of good being rewarded and bad punished. Nevertheless, as seen with Thackeray's Becky Sharp and Eliot's Rosamond, these novelists managed to beat the system and present their "bad" characters in an uncommonly positive light, by their writing techniques, use of irony and most importantly the use of their narrators.

Thackeray's fiction, considered by some as "a constant and vigorous interpretation, in discriminating the layers of irony, in plucking apart the jokes, the poses, the self-mockery...raising the reader's expectations for some nugget of wisdom forthcoming" (Clarke 468) is made so and possibly thanks to the voice and liberty given to *Vanity Fair's* narrator. The

narrator leads the reader's judgments to where he wants them, regardless of the direction since by being a character in itself it cannot be directly linked to the author or the author's ideals. Furthermore, the narrator by first establishing himself as any other common man and promising that he is "bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it" (Thackeray 83) manages to achieve the reader's trust, especially since he *seems* to be disapproving of all deviant behavior and promoting of established values. However, after a closer look we see, and as this thesis has demonstrated, that the narrator is not so condemning as he seems, but ambivalent in his judgment of Becky Sharp, of whom he *should* disapprove, and the characters he should approve of. Thus, the result is that *Vanity Fair* is "in some sense palimpsestic... [a novel] whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (Jadwin 11).

Eliot's *Middlemarch* also employs a narrator that, although not as intrusive or blatant as Thackeray's, leads the reader to his/her desired judgment while still seeming to be on par with the values of the time. Even more than with Thackeray's narrator, the reader inevitably trusts Eliot's narrator, not only for her seeming desire for propriety, but the truthfulness that she declares to cling to. Of this Dorrit Cohn claims that in *Middlemarch* "the normative discourse is so convincing because it adheres to no fixed norms, [yet] indeed questions the value of all rigid ideologies" (311). This questioning is specifically seen in Eliot's treatment of Rosamond and how, albeit the narrator's apparent disdain for her, sees her as something of a victim and a definite result of the superficialities of female education that Victorian society so valued and supported.

Eliot's and Thackeray's success is greatly due to their understanding of the need to create a narrator that had a voice and was well liked by the public in order to create a strong

relationship with both their “implied” readers (those they create in the text) and their “actual” reader. Since they knew that “for many Victorians, readers and critics alike, the personality of the narrator was one of the most attractive features of a novel” (Dennis 61), and used this to their advantage to create a trusting narrator-narratee relationship. Through this relationship they could discreetly favor ideas that were not the norm without offending either their “implied” or “actual” readers, yet leading them to their desired objective and assuming the readers’ compliancy. Still, although they share an undoubtedly close relationship to their authors’ voices, therefore strengthening the idea that their novels are not mere retelling of some events, both fiction and historical, but criticism of the society in which the novelists lived. As Barbara Dennis, in *The Victorian Novel*, claims:

this is the case with George Eliot who moves freely, in her own voice, in and out of her narrative, manipulating the response of the reader as she thinks fit. It is the voice of an intelligent, concerned, humorous and thoughtful individual, to whom the reader warms. Thackeray too, is his own ringmaster and talks to his readers with the voice of a relaxed and sophisticated storyteller. (61)

By being “ringmasters” in their managing of the novels’ plot and readers they were able to indirectly sponsor their “bad” female characters and hint that the ideal of the “good” female character, or the conventional ideal of the “Angel of the House” desired in young Victorian women, should be re-thought.

Consequently, the major achievement that these narrators have managed is to help both Thackeray and Eliot present “angels” as weak and almost parasitic women, and those that speak their minds, the Beckys and the Rosamonds, as strong, smart and self-reliant. It is not that they completely favored these characters or all of their actions, but both novelists presented them as products of society’s rules and expectations. They weren’t complete victims because the

characters are aware of the negativity behind some of their actions, yet it is also shown that if they wanted to achieve their own happiness, little else was offered or available to them. The narrators achieved this by praises, rebukes and sympathetic intrusions. However, being the intelligently discreet authors that they are, they did not only use these literary techniques to show their favoritism or sympathy towards these characters. It was also done by patterns in the narration were at first glance the reader, specially the Victorian reader, might think that the narrator/author is against such characters and their practices. This pattern of depicting the “superior bad angel[s]” were the same in both novelists and consisted of first rebuking them, and later on (if not immediately) presenting a sympathetic scene where they would lead their readers’ compassion towards them. The extent of the sympathy by the narrators was in complete accordance to the level of rebuke they initially gave. For instance in *Vanity Fair*, when in Chapter LXIV the narrator harshly compares Becky to a “siren” and “monster,” it is followed by an extremely sympathetic scene revealing Becky’s pain and suffering, due to her being ostracized, not seen before in the novel. In *Middlemarch*, when Rosamond is being inappropriate with Ladislaw by confessing her love for him, the narrator in order to avoid the harsh reprimand she would normally get by the readers, shows Rosamond afterwards in the most vulnerable and pathetic state she has ever been seen in, in the whole novel. Curiously enough, both novelists use the opposite pattern to present their “angels”; where they first praise them and afterwards discreetly rebuke them. This is important since it supports the idea that they indeed preferred their “bad” females, or the qualities they exhibited, over the conventional ideal. Therefore, using Judith Newton’s approach to works of literature that seem to be endorsing some patriarchal ideals, although both of these works “suggest a continuing tradition of male domination and female subordination,...it is important, I think, to begin with the observation that what might at

first appear as an unchanging patriarchal tradition is actually a changing one” (“Making-and Remaking-History” 127).

It is true that Rosamond and Becky are far from the conventional ideal since both are female characters that refuse to settle for less than what they hoped for or believe they deserve, despite the roles they were given by the patriarchal and class-driven society to which they belonged. Both managed to do so by voicing their wishes and actively acting on them. Becky, the ““angel and the demon: the culture-hero...and the outlaw-adventurer”” (qtd. in Marks 78) is renowned for using coquetry and her wit to move up in society and present herself to be pleasing to upper-class men. The ambivalence in sympathizing with her or not has been compared to Milton’s ambivalence towards Satan in *Paradise Lost*. As Juliet McMaster claims, “Becky Sharp has taken her place as the culture heroine of disadvantaged women, and the nineteenth-century equivalent of Milton’s Satan” (468). This comparison shows how strong and ambivalent this character’s reception truly is, since her criticism varies between her being a shameless upstart murderer to a “culture heroine for disadvantaged woman.” Meanwhile, Rosamond Vincy manages to ignore her husband’s orders to let him have full control of her fate by attempting to have some control of her own future and happiness, by secretly doing the opposite of what he orders. Because of her actions many see her as Eliot’s most ““sociological’ character...with her sociologically eroticized incarnation of the combination of ‘correct sentiments’...her every perception acutely attuned to the social field of Middlemarch, is also arguably the novel's most solipsistic” (McWeeny 545). On the other hand, she is also seen as a scapegoat victim to Lydgate’s failure, who in reality failed to achieve his professional goals not only because of her, despite popular belief, but due to his own flaws as well. Nevertheless, although the actions of both of these female characters are frowned upon by some and do not always end in positive

results, they still end up in a positive light and happy ending due to how, despite their flaws, they still are much preferred by their creators than the conventional ideal. These female characters, among their many qualities, embody self-reliance, intelligence, determination, and ambition; nowhere to be found is the characteristic self-sacrificing mindset of “angels,” and it is because of this that they achieve their happy endings and a place in their creators’ hearts. At a time when women were pushed to an extreme ideal of perfection and submission and deprived of their own desires, Rosamond and Becky with their smiles, coquetry, wit, and even their suffering managed to win their narrators/novelists’ sympathy and preference resulting in the readers’ sympathy and preference as well. Their actions suggest a rethinking of female education, female social growth opportunities and female role in society among many others. Because of this they have been studied, criticized, questioned and discussed in terms of characters and role models (or the opposite) to real women and their hold on their authors’ minds. And despite many opposite views of these characters one thing is certain: their actions are remembered and still two centuries afterwards manage to cause dialogue, and predictably will continue to do so, all because they refused to limit their own freedom and happiness.

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