Satire and Social Criticism in *Vanity Fair*: A Study on Thackeray

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Perhaps one of the most distinct characteristics of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* lies in the fact that it is as definitely a satire as it is a novel. In it Thackeray amply displays his genius as a brilliant satirist who, while attacking and ridiculing the follies and the weaknesses of human nature and the absurdities and the injustices of society, is also able to observe them with the profound understanding of a compassionate spectator. His satire, sharp as it is, gets to be rather savage in some parts but is never without the tint of mellowness and tender sympathy. According to James Hannay, Thackeray was a humourist rather than satirist. The humourists are, Hannay says, mostly Horatians who “attack the world on its ridiculous rather than its hateful side. They are men of the world themselves, and quite as ready to laugh at a misanthrope, or a cynic, as at the vices and absurdities, the existence of which produces, or is used to excuse, misanthropy and cynicism.”¹ If we accept this generalization Thackeray certainly belongs to the category of humourist. His irony is quiet and grave which provides the reader with the theme of profound meditation rather than cause for a violent reaction.

Although Thackeray was born in nineteenth century during which Romanticism dominated the literary world, he neither supported nor followed the tradition. His admiration was directed toward the great writers of the eighteenth century like Fielding, for their robust common sense, practical shrewdness and hearty realism. The prevailing literary trend of his time—the elegancies of the fashionable novel, the

melodramatic rhetoric of the Newgate Novel, the elaborate poetic diction—has been the frequent target of his ridicules. His comic self-consciousness as an artist as well as his explicit refusal to use fiction for high moral triumphs is also the characteristic product of the eighteenth century. It was Thackeray's firm belief that novel writers "should not be in a passion with their characters, but describe them, good or bad, with a like calm." Thackeray achieves this purpose in *Vanity Fair* mainly by the ingenious device of comparing the world to a fair, the characters to puppets, and the narrator of the book to the manager of the play which is performed in the fair.

The comparison of the world to a fair, however, was not a very new notion at all. Before Thackeray there was Bunyan who created a fair called Vanity in *Pilgrim's Progress*, in which he viewed the world as a "trap which man must avoid on his way to heaven." This is partly true with Thackeray, whose general concept of human nature and the world, and whose attitude toward his characters are implicitly suggested in a chapter called "Before the Curtain." Here Thackeray describes the fair as "not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy." He further writes, "some people consider Fairs immoral altogether, and eschew such, with their servants and families: very likely they are right. But persons who think otherwise, and are of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood, may perhaps like to step in for half an hour, and look at the performances". This and the Manager's feeling of "profound melancholy" which comes over him when he looks into the Fair are the prevailing overtones throughout *Vanity Fair*. "Before the Curtain" is important because it signifies the fact that *Vanity Fair* is a satire, that the experience the reader is going through is a static one in which nobody ever changes. As Wilkenfeld puts it, the chapter "prepares us verbally for what is to

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