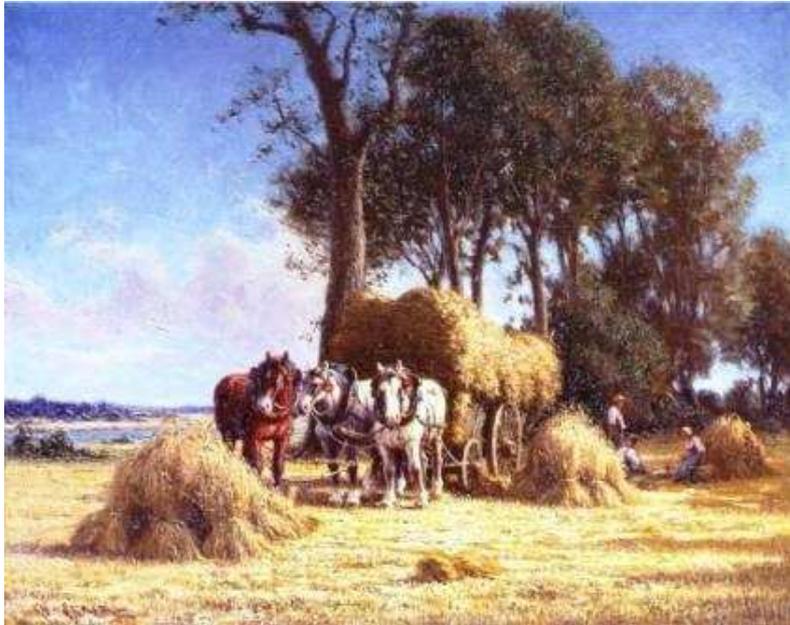
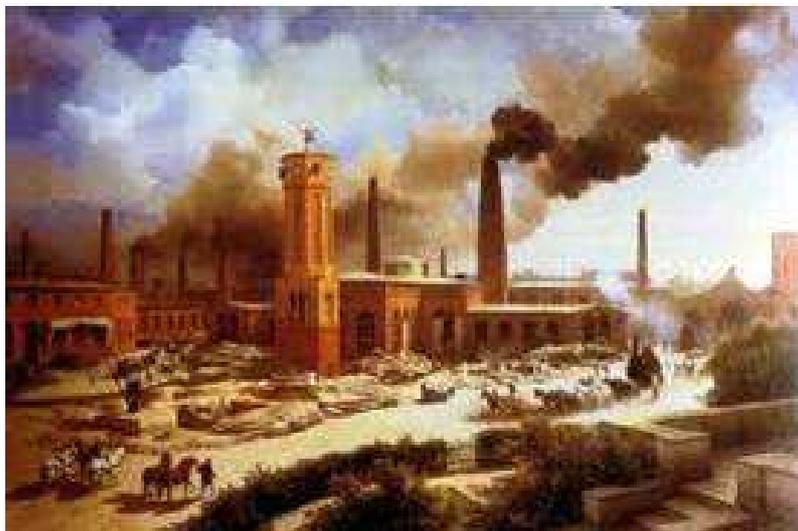


The Novel in the 19th Century

From the Romance of the Countryside to the “Dark Satanic Mills” of Industrial Cities



Jane Austen
The Brontë Family
William Makepeace Thackeray
Charles Dickens
George Eliot
Thomas Hardy
Henry James



JANE AUSTEN (1775-1817)

Jane Austen is considered to be the first outstanding woman novelist. She was one of the first writers to describe ordinary people in a believable way. Her subtle stories tell of well-bred young heroines and the manners and the snobbery of their country-house families.



She was the daughter of a clergyman and received an unusually broad education for her time (this was an age when women were not expected to study - they merely were taught good manners and gracious living.) She wrote her first novel at the age of 14. She finished several novels before any were published. “Sense and Sensibility” appeared when she was 35, and even then she kept its author’s name secret. In those days people thought it very wrong for ladies to be involved in such a business as writing books.

Her novels include:

Sense and Sensibility (1811)
Pride and Prejudice (1813)
Mansfield Park (1814)
Emma (1816)
Northanger Abbey (1818)
Persuasion (1818)

The last two were published after her death.

Pride and Prejudice

This is one of the best-loved and most popular of all English novels. It is the story of the Bennett family: father and mother and five daughters. Because there is no male child, when Mr Bennett dies his property will go to a male cousin. It is therefore very important that all the girls are married to wealthy husbands to protect their future.

The six women – Mrs Bennett and her five daughters – are all beautifully portrayed, each one different from the other and so real.

- **Mrs Bennett** - as a mother, her great ambition is to see all her daughters married. She is so desperate to achieve this, that any man who appears is considered to be a suitable husband.
- **Jane** – is the eldest. pretty and full of goodness. She sees only the best in everyone
- **Elizabeth** - is sensible and strong. She will not put up with any nonsense.
- **Kitty** – is quiet, and a bit of a mystery. She “keeps herself to herself” and is the sister we know least
- **Lydia** – is silly and fluffy-headed. She is thoughtless and brings shame and almost ruin to her family
- **Mary** – is dull and disapproving . She does not know how dull and boring she is to everyone else.

On one level “Pride and Prejudice” is a romantic love story – Jane will marry Charles Bingley and Elizabeth will marry Mr Darcy. But on another level it is a gentle satire on the social manners of the time and of the illogical way women were treated. However, on any level, it is one of the greatest of English novels.

Emma



Before she began the novel, Jane Austen wrote, "I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like." In the very first sentence she introduces the title character as "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich." But Emma is very selfish and full of her own self-importance.

She meddles in people's lives, and believes she is the perfect "matchmaker", arranging meetings and even marriages between various people. She doesn't understand the dangers of interfering with other people's feelings and she often mistakes their reactions.

However, by the end of the story, Emma has completely changed and has become a woman capable of feeling and love..



*Illustrations for Jane Austen's "Emma"
by C.E.Brock*

The Portrayal of Women in Jane Austen's Novels

Before Jane Austen's novels, women were nearly always portrayed from the point of view of the male writer. The earlier portraits of women were generally one-dimensional. They were sweet and gentle (Sophie in "Tom Jones"), sweet and scheming (Pamela in Samuel Richardson's novel) or strong and clever (Moll in "Moll Flanders")

Jane Austen's great contribution to the portrayal of women in the novel was to create multi-dimensional, deeply characterised, "real" women.

She explores the difficulties of genteel women living at that time, at an age when women were just beginning to obtain some degree of independence. Although Jane Austen herself never married and, in fact, never travelled very far from the village she was born in, she seems to have a deep understanding of the society of her time.

She writes with dry humour and an elegant style, and skillfully manages to build excitement from simple misunderstandings and from women torn between their feelings and family duty. In all her novels, the heroines end up happily married.

THE BRONTË FAMILY

The Brontë family – five sisters and one brother – are perhaps the most romantic and the saddest of all figures in English Literature. They were the children of a vicar, and they lived in a remote part of northern England, on the Yorkshire moors.

The vicar, Patrick Brontë, lived long enough to see his wife and six children dead. After 1855, he was the only one left of the family. Their lives were lonely, friendless, and they never had any money.

Their religious upbringing was very strict. Charlotte was the only one to marry. Emily seemed to be happiest when alone walking in the wild Yorkshire Moors. Branwell, the brother, found his escape in drink and drugs. They all died at a young age.



*Anne, Emily and Charlotte,
as painted by their brother, Branwell*

The six children were:

Maria (1814 - 1825)
Died at the age of nine

Elizabeth (1815 - 1825)
Died at the age of ten.

and

Charlotte (1816 – 1855)

Died at the age of 39. She worked as a teacher and a governess. She became a teacher at a school in Brussels. She fell in love with a Belgian teacher, but he was already married. She returned to Yorkshire. In 1847 she published “Jane Eyre” (the same year as her sister published “Wuthering Heights”.) Over the next two years the remainder of her family died, leaving her the only survivor. She wrote two more novels and then, at the age of 38 she married a vicar who worked with her father. One year later, she herself died. Her novel “Jane Eyre” is one of the all-time classics of English Literature.

Branwell (1817 – 1848)

Died at the age of 31. He was an alcoholic and a drug addict. He showed early promise as a writer, but this soon disappeared as the drink and drugs took hold of him. He died of tuberculosis.

Emily (1818 – 1848)

Died at the age of 30, soon after her brother. When she was eight years old she started to make up stories about her brother’s toy soldiers. When she was 24 she went as a student teacher to a school in Brussels. Two years later she published a collection of poems with her sisters. In 1847 she published “Wuthering Heights”. She died the following year of tuberculosis and pneumonia. She seems to have been the loneliest person with no friends. She was a great poet, and her novel “Wuthering Heights” is one of the best novels of the first half of the 19th Century.

Anne (1820 – 1849)

Died at the age of 29. She wrote poems with her sisters and two novels – both published under assumed names.

The three sisters published their “Poems” under the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Currer was Charlotte, Ellis was Emily and Acton was Anne. In 1847 both “Wuthering Heights” and “Jane Eyre” were published – “Wuthering Heights” written by “Ellis Bell” and “Jane Eyre” written by “Currer Bell”.



A mid-Victorian photograph of Haworth Parsonage, home to the Brontës

Wuthering Heights

“Wuthering” is not a normal English word. It is a dialect word from Yorkshire. Sometimes it is mistaken for the normal English word “withering” – which means “fading away”. But it is a dialect word now known only because of the title of this novel. It is based on

the word “weather” and it means a house on the high part of the moor, being exposed to all the winds and bad weather, and built strong enough to survive all the storms. It is “weathering”.

The Importance of this novel

It is a dark tale of passion and revenge set in the Yorkshire moors, and so popular that it has been made into at least four Hollywood films in modern times. When it was first published it did not meet with much success. It was too passionate, too rough and wild, too complicated in its construction. It was published under a man’s name, since readers of the time would not accept that a woman could write such scenes of sex and violence.

However, gradually it was praised for the power of its imagery, its complex structure, its many interconnected themes and its portrait of

- complex human nature
- revenge and cruelty,
- social positions at the start of the 19th Century
- the indestructibility of the human spirit,
- inspiration from the local landscape

And how Emily Bronte had written from her personal experience of religion, of local folklore and of illness and death.

The Structure of the novel:

In the late winter months of 1801, a man named Lockwood has rented a manor house called Thrushcross Grange in the isolated moor country of England. Here, he meets Heathcliff, a wealthy man who lives at Wuthering Heights, four miles away. In this wild, stormy countryside, Lockwood asks his housekeeper, Nelly Dean, to tell him the story of Heathcliff and the strange people living at Wuthering Heights. Nelly consents, and Lockwood writes down his recollections of her tale in his diary; these written recollections form the main part of Wuthering Heights.

So, “Wuthering Heights” is a story-within-a-story. Mr Lockwood is telling a story that was told to him by Nelly Dean

Romantic Influences in the Novel

The fashion for “Romantic” writing was beginning to fade when Emily Bronte wrote “Wuthering Heights”. The peak of the Romantic age had passed for writers of novels, but Emily Brontë lived such an isolated life, and was in many ways out of touch with the current fashions in writing. There is a great deal of Romantic and Gothic influence in “Wuthering Heights”, including:

- Heathcliff is a very Byronic character, though he lacks the self-pity found in many Byronic

characters

- He is deeply attached to the world of nature.
- Catherine is a wild, romantic creature. The scene where she is taking the feathers out of the cushion and naming the birds they once belonged to almost suggests Shakespeare's Ophelia with the flowers in her mad scene (from "Hamlet")
- The brother-sister relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine is very similar to a number of brother-sister-couples in Byron's epics.
- Byron also has the idea of two people being so close that they share an identity – when Catherine says, famously, "I am Heathcliff!"

Gothic Influences in the Novel

- Wuthering Heights is like an old ruined castle
- There are storms and wild weather
- The mysterious bleakness of the moors
- Ghostly elements
- In Chapter 3, Lockwood sees Catherine's ghost through a window
- In the last chapter Ellen (Nelly Dean) talks about people seeing the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine walking on the moors.
- Heathcliff tells Ellen he can hear the dead Catherine sighing in the graveyard
- Ellen imagines Heathcliff as a goblin, and wonders if he is a vampire or a ghoul,

However, all these Gothic and ghostly elements are never presented as "real". They are imaginations and feelings. The novel is therefore not a "ghost story" – it is about real people and the world of their imagination.

"Feminist" Influences in the Novel

Although the word "feminist" would not have been used until the mid-20th Century, the role and position of women in English Society at the start of the 19th Century was undergoing a change and many writers - even women like the Brontës, isolated and far removed from city life - were aware of these changes. In "Wuthering Heights" Emily Brontë records a number of views and statements which indicate these social changes:

- She criticizes social rules and attitudes, especially those about women and their place in Society.
- Her characters have "feminine" and "masculine" characteristics without regard to sex. In other words, her women are not all weak and helpless, and her men are not all strong and forceful.
- She rejects the idea that women are delicate beings who avoid physical or mental activity and are only interested in fashion and flirting with men .
- She does not believe in the usual "class" rules. She suggests Ellen, who is educated but of low class, is a better person than Lockwood – who is a higher class.

"Wuthering Heights" – A different kind of novel:

But "Wuthering Heights" was not simply a Romantic or a Gothic novel. It was something new and different, but although it was very successful, it did not start a new fashion . It stands alone as a "one-off", unique contribution to English literature.

The basic theme of “Wuthering Heights” is that one must be true to oneself or else terrible things may happen. Cathy Earnshaw is faced with two choices: she can marry Edgar, who is rich and respectable in Society, or she can marry Heathcliff who is wild, romantic and from a lower class. Like all 19th century middle-class women, she makes the “respectable” choice, and chooses Edgar.

She has made the “right” choice according to society’s rules for women of the time. But it is the “wrong” choice because she doesn’t love Edgar, she loves Heathcliff. The rest of “Wuthering Heights” is about the terrible consequences of Cathy’s choice. (But Emily Brontë is suggesting that women of the time were not free to make real choices: women had to obey Society’s “rules”.)

“Jane Eyre” has the same message, but it is more direct and political, more open in its criticism. In “Wuthering Heights” the message is not so obvious, but it is there, underlying the story. Both Brontë sisters created a portrait of women in Victorian Society – in different ways, but with the same message: women were not free.

“Wuthering Heights” - all-time popular novel

“Wuthering Heights” must qualify as one of the most enduring novels of all English Literature. It has never been out of print, and it has regularly been turned into plays, films, television versions, musicals, operas and even a ballet.

The earliest known film adaptation of Wuthering Heights was a silent one filmed in England in 1909. Thirty years later came the most famous version, made in Hollywood with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon. This version won many awards and was nominated for an Oscar

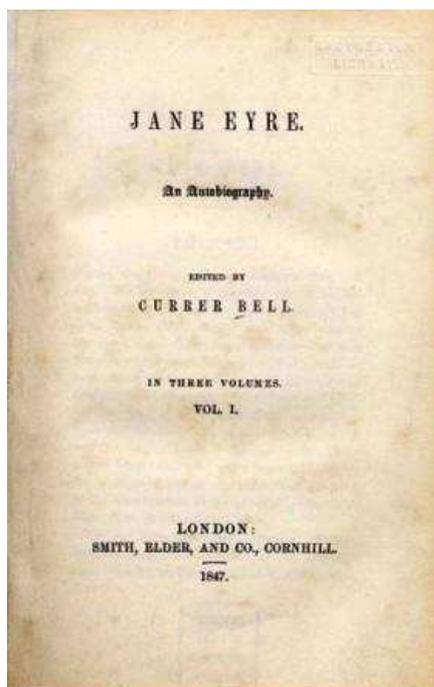
The first colour film was made in 1970, and suggested that Heathcliff may be Cathy’s illegitimate half-brother. The 1992 film version with Ralph Fiennes and Juliette Binoche contained more of the novel than most other versions.

The novel has been adapted into a Spanish version set in Catholic Mexico with Heathcliff and Cathy renamed Alejandro and Catalina, and even into a Japanese version setting the story in Japan during the Tokugawa Period. The most bizarre version was made by MTV in 2003, setting the story in modern California with Cathy and Heathcliff as high school students.

The novel has been turned into an opera on three occasions, into a ballet, into a theatre musical starring Cliff Richard and even into a pop song by Kate Bush



Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon in the 1939 Hollywood version of “Wuthering Heights”



Jane Eyre

“Jane Eyre” is a story about love. Not just romantic love, but for a sense of being needed, of belonging. As the story unfolds, Jane must learn how to get love without sacrificing her individuality or hurting herself.

On the one hand, this is a story about a poor orphaned girl who finally manages to marry the man she loves and to be treated as his equal. But, on the other hand, it is a complicated portrait of mid 19th Century England, and its problems with religion, social class, and the position of women in Society. Because it is an excellent story, it has always been popular – even into modern times and has often been made into a Hollywood film or a television play. But as well as the story, it is an important social document on life and society at the time. The three major themes are

Religion
Social Class
Women in Society

Religion

In the novel, Jane is always trying to find a balance between her religious and moral duty and her emotional need to be loved. There are three main religious characters in the novel and each of them represents a different example of religion. By the end of the novel, Jane will reject all three, and make her own ideas about how to live a decent Christian life. The three examples are:

Mr. Brocklehurst:

is a portrait of the 19th Century “Evangelical” preachers. He is preaching a life of denial and simplicity. But many of his actions are un-Christian. He orders one of Jane’s classmates to cut her curly hair – because curly hair is too “luxurious” for a good Christian. Mr Brocklehurst is also a hypocrite: his own family lives in great wealth while his students are very poor. Jane decides not to trust the Evangelical approach to religion.

Helen Burns

is too meek and forgiving for Jane. Although Jane loves her and admires her, she thinks Helen is too passive.

St. John Rivers (*)

He appears much later in the novel. He is a third example of Christian behavior. His is a Christianity of ambition, glory, and extreme self-importance. St. John tells Jane she must give up her emotional feelings. She must sacrifice everything for her moral duty. To do this, Jane will have to be untrue to her real self.

(The rather strange name “St. John” is supposed to be named after “Saint John” but for some strange English reason, it is pronounced “Sinjun”)*

Although Jane rejects all three different kinds of religion, she still believes in a Christian God.

- When her wedding is interrupted, she prays to God for solace (Chapter 26).
- As she wanders the moors, poor and starving, she puts her survival in the hands of God (Chapter 28).
- She strongly objects to Rochester’s lustful immorality
- She refuses to consider living with him while he is still married to another woman.
- It is a great struggle for Jane to leave the only love she has ever known.
- She thanks God for helping her to escape what she knows would have been an immoral life (Chapter 27).

For Jane, religion brings her full self-knowledge and complete faith in God.

Social Class

“Jane Eyre” is a novel which comments on 19th Century England’s strict social rules. She is employed as a “governess” – a private teacher for the children of rich and wealthy families. Jane is a person who doesn’t quite fit in to the social structure (like Heathcliff in “Wuthering Heights”)

- Her manners, behaviour, and education are those of an aristocrat,
- Governesses were expected to possess the “culture” of the aristocracy. But, as paid employees, they were more or less treated as servants



A drawing of Charlotte Brontë by George Richmond

There is a “double-standard” at work in Society: Jane is equal to Rochester intellectually, but she is lower than him socially. In Chapter 17 Jane is worried about marrying Rochester because he would be marrying a lower class person, and she would always be considered that way. In Chapter 23 Jane quarrels with Rochester, and this is Charlotte Brontë’s strongest criticism of class prejudice. She says:

“Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you.”

However, it is also **important to note** that nowhere in “Jane Eyre” are the strict rules of social class broken. At the end, Jane marries Rochester because she has become his equal. She has inherited money from her Uncle. Now that she is rich – she has “moved up” in Society.

The Position of Women in Society

Charlotte’s novel “Jane Eyre” was very much concerned with “real” life and society. Emily’s novel “Wuthering Heights” was more Gothic, wild and supernatural. However, Emily, like her sister, had strong feelings about the role of women in Victorian Society. Some of her ideas in “Wuthering Heights” are revolutionary for the time she was writing.

Both Charlotte and Emily were typical of thousands of women in the Victorian age. They belonged to families which were higher than the “working class” but they were not rich. They needed to work to earn money, but there were very few respectable jobs available to women of the higher social classes.

The choices were few. Ladies could earn money by working as a governess – but this was regarded as just one step higher than a servant. Ladies could go and live with a wealthy relative – but often they were regarded as an unpaid servant. Ladies could get married – but then they would lose all their independence and become the “property” of their husband.

Long before the idea of equal rights for women, Charlotte Brontë created a portrait of a new kind of woman. Jane Eyre is intelligent, independent and strong-willed. She is determined to succeed on her own. Throughout the story Jane has to fight against prejudice.

- Firstly she is not equal because she is poor.
- Secondly, she is not equal because she is a woman.

There are three male figures in the novel who treat Jane as inferior. These three men believe that women are lower than men and treat Jane as a lower person. These three are Mr. Brocklehurst, Edward Rochester, and St. John Rivers. All three try to keep Jane in a lower position, where she must not say her own thoughts and feelings. In order to gain her independence and be true to herself, Jane must

- escape from Brocklehurst,
- reject St. John,
- and only marry Rochester once she has enough money to be his equal.

It is a kind of symbol that Rochester is blind at the end of the novel. He needs Jane to be his “prop and guide.” He has become the weaker one. In Chapter 12, Jane puts into words what was a very unusual and early version of the Women’s Liberation philosophy:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

The Use of Motifs and Symbols in “Jane Eyre”

Motifs

are images or ideas that help make stronger or emphasise the novel’s themes:

Fire and Ice

Fire and ice appear throughout Jane Eyre. “Fire” represents Jane’s passions, anger, and spirit. “Ice” represents the powers trying to destroy Jane’s spirit.

Fire is a symbol of Jane herself. The story often connects her with images of fire, brightness, and warmth. Images of ice and cold are symbols of emotional sadness, loneliness, and even death.

At Lowood School every morning the girls wake up and find their jugs of water are frozen

When the wedding to Rochester is interrupted, Jane says: “A Christmas frost had come at mid-summer: a white December storm had whirled over June”

There are many other examples of fire and ice through the novel.

Women who become “Mother-Figures”

Jane is an orphan. (There is no mother in her life – just as Charlotte Bronte’s mother had died). Through the novel there are a number of strong women who help Jane, who provide a kind of example of the power of women. These women include:

The servant Bessie, who helps Jane after her trauma in the red-room and teaches her to find comfort in stories and songs.

At Lowood, Jane meets Miss Temple, who helps her in her studies.

Helen Burns teaches Jane about self-worth and the power of faith.

Diana and Mary Rivers – these unmarried sisters love learning and reciting poetry and live as intellectual equals with their brother St. John.

The Rivers sisters also have the names of the pagan and Christian goddesses – Diana, the Virgin Moon Goddess and Mary, the Virgin Mother – and in Chapter 27 Jane has a dream in which the Moon turns into a human mother and talks to Jane.

Symbols

are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or images that give more “depth” to the story.

Bertha Mason

The mystery surrounding Bertha gives suspense and terror to the plot and the atmosphere. Bertha can also be interpreted as a symbol. In some ways she can be seen as:

A symbol of the “trapped” Victorian wife, who never leaves the house and has no outside interest for her talents or abilities

A symbol of the growing British Empire “locking itself away” from other cultures

A warning to Jane of what complete surrender to men can do to women

Bertha’s “mad” behaviour – ripping up the bridal dress, setting fire to the house – is a symbol of the interior fire and passion that Jane must hold back

The Red-Room

The red-room is a symbol of what stands in the way of Jane’s freedom, happiness, and a sense of belonging.

It is a symbol of Jane’s exile from society and how she is trapped

Jane remembers the red room every time something goes wrong in her life

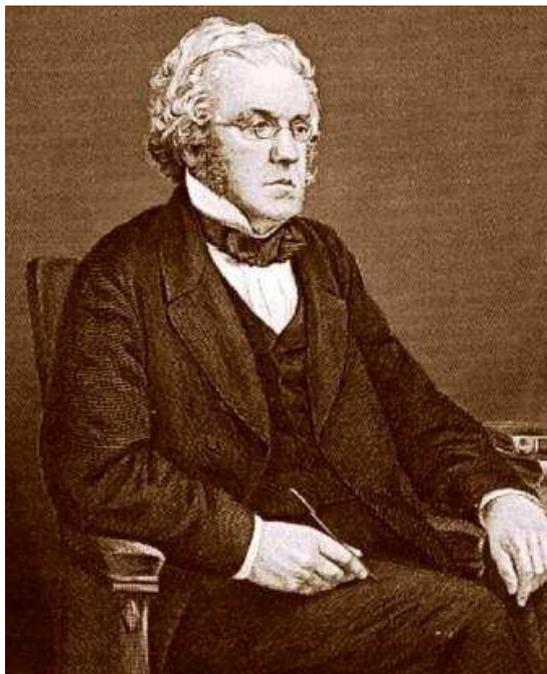
When she is badly treated at Lowood, she remembers the red room

She thinks of the red room when she leaves Thornfield

She remembers the red room when St John offers to marry her.

The red room is the symbol of something stopping her happiness.





William Makepeace Thackeray (1811 – 1863)

The amazing life of Thackeray

Thackeray's life-story is almost as fantastic as some of his novels. He was born in Calcutta, India, where his father was a high-ranking official for the British Foreign Office. But he was only 4 years old when his father died and he returned to England with his mother.

He was sent to the best schools and finally to Cambridge University. He spent his University years gambling, not studying. He failed his Degree examination and lost all the money he had inherited from his father. He traveled to Germany and France and spent more time drinking and gambling. When he returned he had no money at all and great debts.

His mother told him to find a rich woman and marry her, but instead, aged 25, he fell in love and married Isabella Shawe – a poor Irish girl. Soon they had three daughters, so Thackeray finally had to settle down and get a proper job. He started writing for a newspaper, using a number of fictitious names.

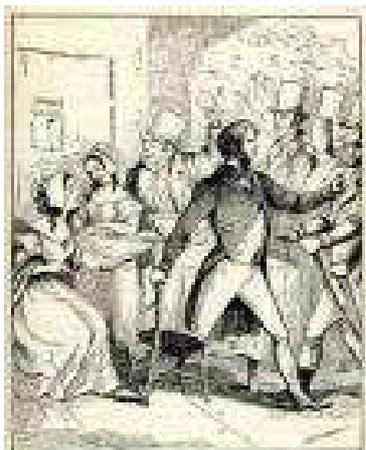
After four years of marriage his wife, Isabella, suddenly became mentally ill. Thackeray took her on holiday to Ireland to help her recover, but she tried to kill herself by running into the sea. She had to be watched all the time and even tied into her bed at night to stop her trying to commit suicide. In the end he had to put her into an asylum. She never got better. Thackeray could not look after three young children on his own, so he sent them to France to his own mother. (They came back to live with him some years later, and eventually looked after him when he became very ill in later life.)

His first novel "**Catherine**" (1839), was written for a monthly magazine. It caused a minor sensation since all the characters were immoral. He was making fun of high society. He continued with this satirical style in "**The Luck of Barry Lyndon**" (1844), the story of an adventurer and gambler.

In his next novel, "**Vanity Fair**" (1845) he created an immoral "anti-heroine" – the fascinating Becky Sharp. She behaves very badly and cheats her way to success without being punished for it. The book brought Thackeray great success. He became rich and famous. Like the great novelist Charles Dickens (once a friend of Thackeray, but they had since quarreled) Thackeray earned extra money by giving lectures in Europe and America. He continued to write – seven novels, many short stories, many newspaper articles. He was very successful, and many people at that time thought he was a better writer than Dickens.

Thackeray became angry about the Government's treatment of soldiers fighting in the Crimean War and he became involved in politics. Although he was an ill man, he tried to get elected to the Houses of Parliament, but he did not win enough votes.

In December 1863 he ended his quarrel with Charles Dickens, and they had dinner together. The next day he collapsed and died. He was just 52 years old. He was so famous that two thousand people attended his funeral.



Vanity Fair (1845)

"I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year."

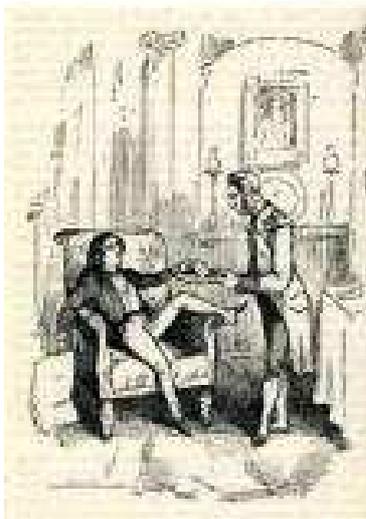
Vanity Fair was sub-titled 'A Novel without a Hero'. It takes place at the time of the Napoleon Wars. The story is about two boarding school friends – Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley. Becky is poor but clever. Amelia is rich and good-natured but silly.

Becky is determined to marry a rich husband. She aims for Amelia's brother, Joseph. It doesn't work. She marries Rawdon Crawley because he will inherit a lot of money. This goes wrong, and Rawdon doesn't get the money. She manages to live in high fashion by flirting with a rich man who is not her husband, but her husband finds out and leaves her. Becky is forced to move out of England because no one in Society will accept her.



Amelia marries a handsome army captain – and she is too silly to see that the Captain doesn't really love her. She is too silly to notice that the Captain's friend, William Dobbin, is the man who really does love her. The Captain dies in the Battle of Waterloo

Amelia and her brother, Joseph travel to Europe and by accident they meet Becky. Their old friendship starts up again. William Dobbin returns from India and meets Amelia. Dobbin is very unhappy that Amelia is friendly with Becky – he says Becky is a bad woman. But Amelia says Becky is not bad – just unlucky. Older and wiser, Dobbin and Amelia now get married.



Becky starts flirting again with Joseph – but Joseph suddenly dies in mysterious circumstances.. The news arrives that Becky's absent husband, Rawdon Crawley, has also died. Becky is now a rich widow, and finally has become "respectable" – "respectable" because she is rich.

The major themes of Vanity Fair

- Thackeray's unheroic story, a novel without a hero
- The title "Vanity Fair" is a symbol of the Society and its "Vanity"
- It represents early Victorian society and social hierarchy (even though it is supposed to take place in earlier years – around 1815)
- Character drawing; Amelia and Becky as two "opposites"
- Making fun of people's obsession with money and social position
- The social ambitions of the characters, vanity

*Illustrations from Chapters 6, 11
& 56 from an early Victorian*

Becky Sharpe - The "Anti-Hero"

Becky Sharpe is the "hero" – or rather, the "heroine" of "Vanity Fair". But she is not the usual kind of heroine – brave, good, kind, etc. She is scheming, manipulating, and uses people to get money – in fact, using her wits just to survive.

However, the reader ends up liking her. We like her spirit, her cleverness. We understand that she is not really a bad person at heart. She behaves badly because it is the only way she can survive. We admire her ability to survive. She is "heroic" in her spirit, but not in her behaviour. She is an "anti-

hero” – the opposite of a hero. And the “anti-hero” is the “star” of the story – something unusual in normal story-telling.

Some Examples of the “Anti Hero” in other Thackeray Novels

“The Luck of Barry Lyndon” (1844)

This is the story of Redmond Barry, an Irish man who cheats and tells lies so successfully that he ends up marrying the wealthy widow, Countess Lyndon. Now called Barry Lyndon, he spends all her money, and ends up penniless and in prison. In spite of being immoral and a liar and a cheat, the reader enjoys his cleverness and his courage and his wit. He is a typical “anti-hero”

“The History of Pendennis” (1848)

This is a long, rambling and complicated story filled with many amusing characters. The “hero”. Arthur Pendennis, plans a series of marriages – all of them based on getting money and not on love. At heart., Arthur is a good person – but the pressures of his family, his friends, and his need for money make him do a series of bad things. Although he has behaved badly, the reader does like and finally admire him. He is another of Thackeray’s “anti-heroes”

What exactly is an “Anti-hero”?

In literature an anti-hero means a character who behaves in the opposite way to the traditional hero. The traditional hero is good, honest, brave and noble, The traditional hero will only do good deeds and will never cheat or lie. We admire and love the hero because he or she is everything we would like to be.

- The “anti-hero” does not have to be bad, dishonest, cowardly and not noble,
- The “anti-hero” is not a villain or a bad person.
- But the “anti-hero” has to do bad, dishonest things, and is forced to lie and cheat and be quick-thinking just to survive.
- The “anti-hero” lives by his own set of rules. He or she lives by moral rules that are different from the rest of society.

In Thackeray’s novels these different rules are usually to gain money or gain social position. (In other writers, the anti-hero’s rules and morals may be for different ambitions.)

Did Thackeray create the first “Anti-Hero”?

Sometimes Thackeray is called the “architect of the anti-hero”. It is true that he was the first writer to create a certain type of anti-hero – the clever, witty, scheming, attractive kind of person that the reader can sympathise with.

However, there are earlier types of anti-heroes – even if they are slightly different. In English Literature Christopher Marlowe’s “Doctor Faustus” makes a bargain with the Devil and sells his soul – and yet his bravery and strength are admired by us. In Shakespeare’s play, Falstaff is a coward and a drunk – and yet we like him because he is so full of life. These are both 250 years or so before Thackeray. However, the Thackeray type of Anti-Hero is one of the best known and most influential – many types of this appear in current literature and Hollywood films.



A scene from the 1911 silent film of “Vanity Fair”