W.M. THACKERAY AND THE

TRADITION OF ENGLISH COMEDY

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Abstract

This thesis is about Thackeray and the comic tradition in the plays and novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It aims at showing that a study of Thackeray’s fiction and its connection with the comedy of the past contributes to an understanding of the sophistication and subtlety of his comic vision. In his fiction Thackeray takes some of the comedic conventions of the tradition, though in some respects he also departs from them, expanding, developing and applying them to his time to make ironic comments on the inconsistencies and follies of English society from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. In the early and central stage of his career as a novelist he adheres to the comic tradition, yet he also introduces unconventional elements, while in the later phase occasionally he detaches himself from it temporarily, but never completely. This study examines Thackeray’s major works of fiction in chronological order, because it allows us to trace a development of his comic perspective, his narrative technique and his concerns through time. Each chapter deals with a single work of fiction, except Chapter 1 and Chapter 8. A selection of his illustrations, which offer visual comments on the story, will also be analysed; they have various purposes and integrate with the text, adding subtlety and sophistication to the author’s vision. Thackeray’s comic perspective is a complex combination of satire and sentimentality where the two aspects often overlap and generate ambiguity and challenge for the reader. But, ultimately, this thesis reveals that towards the end of his life the writer enriches his vision considerably by adding tragic elements in alignment with comic ones, and that he was turning to a new direction: he was embracing the tragicomic.
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Introduction

This is a study of Thackeray's fiction, with some references to his non-fictional writings, where in consideration of particular aspects (genre, narrative tone and technique, characterisation and themes) I found significant connections with the comic tradition in the plays and novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thackeray adopts some of the comedic conventions of this tradition (yet in some respects he also departs from them), and develops them to make complex, subtle and often bitter comments on English society, with its follies and its contradictions, from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century; he does so with the aim of participating actively in the process of formulation and promulgation of a system of values and codes of behaviour in an age of cultural unsettlement which saw the fading of religious faith and the rise of materialism. Throughout his fiction there is a strong sense of continuity due to recurrent themes, concerns, comic stereotypes, and even characters of his own creation. In the early and central phase of his literary career (up to and including Pendennis) in important respects Thackeray adopts the conventions of the comic tradition but he also introduces unconventional elements; in a later stage in his fiction at times he departs from comedy momentarily but never completely (as in Henry Esmond and The Virginians, where his interest shifts to the eighteenth century itself, though, as we will see, in truth these novels are deeply Victorian in spirit), and at times he returns to it (as in The Newcomes, in his last complete novel Philip and in the unfinished Denis Duval). The issues which the comic tradition deals with are considered mainly in Chapter 1 and also in other parts of the thesis. My aim is to demonstrate that an analysis of Thackeray's fiction, together with his illustrations, and its connection with the comic tradition contributes to an understanding of the complexity and sophistication of his vision. This study has produced fresh insights into his narrative style, his concerns, and his place within the nineteenth century.

A brief consideration of ideas of humour in the nineteenth century will provide a context to my study. Nineteenth-century writers and intellectuals inherited the interest in comedy of the previous age, so much so that the comic became a widely discussed topic. Comedy was now a highly regarded genre and was recognised 'as a means of attaining reflection and insight into the human situation'; however, essayists did not really try to define humour – they only divided it by type or style and gave examples.¹ In the Victorian age the comic was given

a different function: to expose, unveil and comment on social and cultural ‘follies’ and inconsistencies (which is exactly Thackeray’s intent). As Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor has pointed out, ‘Victorian humour serves to unmask cultural and intertextual frames, whether or not to a “liberatory” effect.’ Thus, humorous texts as well as cartoons became an effective means of criticising contemporary attitudes, habits and even ideologies.

Some writers theorised on comedy. George Eliot considered humour in her essay ‘German Wit: Heinrich Heine’ (1856) where she observes that ‘Humour draws its material from situations and characteristics’ and ‘in its highest forms . . .  it associates itself with the sympathetic emotions.’ Though distinct from Wit (which is ‘allied to the ratiocinative intellect,’ ‘brief and sudden’), it often blends with it. She also points out that every nation has a different perception and idea of humour. Later on George Meredith in his Essay on the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (delivered as a lecture in 1877 and published in 1897) affirms that whenever men are dishonest and ‘offend sound reason’ and ‘justice’ ‘the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.’ This idea of comedy as a genre illuminating aspects of social behaviour is reiterated in the prelude to The Egoist (1879): ‘Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women . . . to make the correctness of the representation convincing.’ The Victorians, then, saw Comedy as a powerful means of interpretation of human behaviour and of social criticism.

Thackeray expressed some of his ideas on comedy in his lectures The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century (1853), which were first delivered in London in 1851, and then in Scotland and the United States. These lectures are significant because they show how Thackeray went back to the eighteenth century to construct his own comic vision. They also reveal his view on eighteenth-century comedy and, in particular, his attitude towards the writers who influenced his works. One of the first humorists he considers is Congreve. But, just before introducing him, he takes the opportunity to mention the unique ‘Comic Muse’ that inspired and denoted Restoration Comedy: ‘She was kind and popular enough, that daring Comedy, that audacious poor Nell: she was gay and generous, kind, frank, as such people can afford to be . . . ‘ Thackeray admires this kind of comedy for its cheerfulness, gentleness,
generosity, audacity, and, above all, for its honesty. All these qualities are brilliantly displayed in Congreve's comedies, which deal with 'wit, scorn, passion, hope, desire' (170) and which include 'exemplary' characters: 'Congreve's comic feast flares with lights, and round the table, emptying their flaming bowls of drink, and exchanging the wildest jests and ribaldry, sit men and women, waited on by rascally valets and attendants as dissolute as their mistresses – perhaps the very worst company in the world' (172). His male heroes are rakes, scheming and 'irresistible' young men who seduce rich women and ruthlessly fool every one, including their friends and relatives, in order to obtain money; they are always portrayed as 'splendid and triumphant.' Thackeray finds these figures intriguing and entertaining for their wit, their transgressive and passionate behaviour, their capacity to overcome obstacles and 'to conquer everywhere.' Through his characters Congreve effectively exposes some aspects of human behaviour, but his comedies have a fundamental defect, a lack of 'love': 'Such manners as he observes, he observes with great humour; but ah! it's a weary feast, that banquet of wit where no love is' (173). In Thackeray's view, as we will see, comedy is a combination of laughter and sympathy; its main function is to bring human beings to a recognition of their common condition, and to draw them together in a sympathetic understanding of it. Therefore, Congreve's comedies are defective because, despite being 'undeniably bright, witty, and daring,' they do not offer sympathy, thus, they cannot bind us together socially and morally.

Thackeray does find sympathy and benevolence in the comedies of Gay and Goldsmith. He describes Gay as a writer of good nature, kindness and 'artless sweet humour' who has a natural and amazing ability to melt people's hearts with his melodic words. This is particularly evident in his ballad The Beggar's Opera, where 'there is a peculiar, hinted, pathetic sweetness and melody. It charms and melts you. It's indefinable, but it exists; and is the property of John Gay's and Oliver Goldsmith's best verse, as fragrance is of a violet, or freshness of a rose' (249). Gay's peculiar humour awakens sentiment and sympathy in the audience, uniting its members in mutual understanding. The same can be said of Goldsmith's humour, which is defined as gentle, merciful, generous, delightful, soothing and harmless. His writings, and especially 'that sweet story of the "Vicar of Wakefield,"' have the wonderful capacity to please and amuse people of all sorts and of all ages equally: 'He carries no weapon, save the harp on which he plays to you; and with which he delights great and humble, young and old, the captains in the tents, or the soldiers round the fire, or the women and children in the villages, at whose porches he stops and sings his simple songs of love and beauty' (327). But, more importantly, Goldsmith's works deserve genuine admiration because they emphasise the importance of love, sympathy and benevolence, and promulgate them as fundamental values in the life of all human beings; they 'plead with the fortunate for the
unhappy and the poor’ (343). Goldsmith’s sweet and beautiful words ‘soothe’ and ‘caress’ readers of all times magnificently.

The eighteenth-century humorist who, more than others, had a significant influence on Thackeray’s fiction and on the construction of his comic vision is undoubtedly Fielding. His comic novels are seen as a marvellous example of that balanced blend of satirical and sentimental treatment that characterises Thackeray’s own comic approach. Indeed, Fielding is able to criticise human behaviour effectively and, at the same time, to awaken sympathy for people’s suffering. He ‘retains some of the most precious and splendid human qualities and endowments’ (300):

He has an admirable natural love of truth, the keenest instinctive antipathy to hypocrisy, the happiest satirical gift of laughing it to scorn. His wit is wonderfully wise and detective; it flashes upon a rogue and lightens up a rascal like a policeman’s lantern. He is one of the manliest and kindliest of human beings: in the midst of all his imperfections, he respects female innocence and infantine tenderness as you would suppose such a great-hearted, courageous soul would respect and care for them. He could not be so brave, generous, truth-telling as he is, were he not infinitely merciful, pitiful, and tender. (300)

Thackeray, who believes that writers should never lie, admires Fielding for his ‘natural’ honesty and, also, for his capacity to spot, expose and mock hypocritical and roguish behaviour, and ultimately to provoke scorn for it in his readers. More importantly, he praises him for his respectful and compassionate attitude towards the delicate disposition of women and children. This is not surprising, as Thackeray himself in his fiction often takes the side of women and children, emphasising their sensitive nature, and their concealed suffering and feelings; as we will see, he often pleads with his audience for a sympathetic response to them. Thus, Fielding, for his ‘thoughtful humour’ and his soft and honest heart, is the perfect embodiment of Thackeray’s idea of the role of the humorous writer. For him, the humorist’s purpose is to ‘awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness – your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture – your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy’ (128). The humorist tries to promote mutual love and benevolence, and to help us overcome our sense of isolation for a moment by inciting us to share another person’s thoughts, feelings and emotions. He tries to make us aware of our common condition as human beings. In Thackeray’s view, Fielding achieved this purpose brilliantly in his comic novels: ‘What a wonderful art! What an admirable gift of nature was it by which the author of these tales was endowed, and which enabled him to fix our interest, to waken our sympathy, to seize upon our credulity, so that we believe in his people’ (306).
The idea that the humorous writer supports 'the cause of love and charity, the cause of the poor, the weak, and the unhappy' is reiterated in a lecture entitled 'Charity and Humour,' which was delivered in New York in 1852. Here Thackeray affirms that 'a literary man of the humoristic turn' has 'a great sensibility,' is 'easily moved to pain or pleasure,' is able to appreciate the varieties of temper of people round about him, and sympathise in their laughter, love, amusement, tears (350). So, in his view, true humour is not simply laughter, as many mistakenly think. Indeed, 'the best humour is that which contains most humanity, that which is flavoured throughout with tenderness and kindness' (351-2), because only a sympathetic and humane humour can give comfort and a temporary sense of relief to individuals living in an age where the spirit of materialism is rising and religious faith is fading, where self-interest prevails and people's feelings seem to have lost importance.

Thackeray lived in an era characterised by rapid and profound social and cultural changes, and by significant contradictions, which generated a widespread feeling of unsettlement and disorientation. On the one hand, scientific, technological, economic and commercial progress was presented as necessary to the nation's welfare and improvement. The individual was encouraged to aspire to a better, more comfortable and more respectable position in society because this would ultimately stimulate the progress of the entire society, as Samuel Smiles pointed out in his manual Self-Help (1859): 'National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness.' On the other hand, the humane moral virtues of honesty, gentleness, generosity, affection and moderation were presented as the essential principles which would lead to the improvement and inner happiness of the individual and of the community at large. John Stuart Mill, for example, in his essay Considerations on Representative Government (1861) affirmed that 'the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community' was an essential element of good government, and that, therefore, 'the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.' The Victorians found themselves wandering between these two different sets of values, and were often unable to decide which side they should embrace. They struggled to adapt to a world that was changing too rapidly.

Thackeray's writings both reflect and take part in some of the major debates, issues and concerns of the Victorian age: the rise of capitalism, individualism and materialism, the formulation of middle-class ideals and moral values, the emphasis on personal feeling in a society dominated by self-interest, and the promulgation of love as a fundamental humanist
principle of life. This study explores his major works of fiction in chronological order as this enables us to see a development of his comic perspective and his preoccupations through time. Chapter 1 looks at a selection of his early fictional writings and argues that he adopts comic conventions in three major areas (characterisation, narrative tone and style, and themes), applying them to his society in order to expose and criticise it, but also to encourage correction. Chapter 2 is a discussion of Barry Lyndon as a traditional yet in some respects unconventional picaresque novel which, for its emphasis on the protagonist’s feelings, also suggests the possible influence of Sentimental Comedy. Chapter 3 considers Vanity Fair and its complex comic perspective capable of embracing both satire and sentiment, and argues that the book can be defined as a conventional yet innovative comedy of manners and sentimental comedy. Chapter 4 focuses on Pendennis, on its affinities with Fielding’s Tom Jones and on the use of traditional polarities in order to create a story that reflects the Victorian world through the difficult choices an individual has to make in an era full of contradictions where he finds himself caught between two worlds (the commercial and the domestic). Chapter 5 is an analysis of Henry Esmond as a novel which departs temporarily (but not completely) from the comic tradition to explore the early eighteenth century; in truth it is deeply Victorian in spirit for its focus on domesticity, for the issues it raises and the moral values (especially love) it promulgates. Chapter 6 looks at The Newcomes and argues that it offers a satirical view of Victorian society while at the same time stressing the importance of feeling, and that it can be defined as a sentimental comedy where irony coexists with sympathy, but does not prevail. Chapter 7 considers The Virginians which with its exploration of the relationship between England and America, and between past and present, contributes to our comprehension of mid-Victorian culture. Chapter 8 considers Philip and the unfinished Denis Duval as novels which present a different and new comic perspective where powerful elements of tragedy (especially death) are introduced but never allowed to predominate, and which strongly suggests that the writer’s interest was changing, that he was embracing tragicomedy.

Throughout the discussion a selection of the author’s illustrations will also be considered because they are an important integral part of his narrative and enrich his comic perception by offering visual comments on the story. They can be divided into three main groups: pictorial initials, front covers, intra-text or whole-page figures. At times they add meaning to the written word, and at other times they present an alternative view of characters or episodes. Thackeray’s drawings are as important as the text, and are essential to a full understanding and appreciation of the sophistication and subtlety of his ironic perspective. They assume different functions depending on the circumstances: they anticipate events in the story; they
are often emblematic – they effectively highlight or reinforce themes and even feelings; occasionally they are more simply caricatures which ridicule a character’s behaviour.

Thackeray’s comic vision is a complex (and successful) blend of satire and sentimentality where the former is used to analyse, expose and, at times, even attack aspects of English society, while the latter is adopted to emphasise the importance of human values and of personal feelings and emotions in an age dominated by materialism and self-interest. However, the two aspects often overlap, creating an ambiguity in the narration which disorients and challenges the reader. But in the years preceding his death Thackeray refines his vision substantially by introducing tragic features in alignment with comic ones, thus moving towards a new direction: the tragicomic.
Chapter 1

‘Playing’ the Conventions: Thackeray’s Early Fictional Works and the Comic Tradition

Thackeray’s early fictional writings are an obvious starting point for investigating the relation between this author and the tradition of English comedy. These works anticipate many of the character types, narrative techniques, themes and concerns that will recur and will be developed in his major novels. In the years of his journalism and literary apprenticeship Thackeray wrote for several magazines, periodicals and newspapers; his numerous contributions are a mixture of articles, critical reviews, tales, sketches, and longer stories (which are often attempts to approach the novel as a genre). Researching, dividing fictional from non-fictional writings, collecting and selecting sources for this chapter has been a particularly long and difficult task (Edgar Harden’s checklist of Thackeray’s contributions has been an invaluable guide in this regard). In my analysis, some of the author’s early fictional works will be considered more closely than others. Many of these pieces, indeed, are fragments, sketches and short tales which do not offer enough material for critical discussion and, therefore, will be referred to only occasionally.

In his early fictional writings Thackeray borrows the popular comic stereotypes of the rake, the wit and the fool, and the coquette; with regard to narrative style he adopts on one level the burlesque and the mock-heroic, and, on another level, a sentimental tone which is meant to gain the reader’s sympathy for people’s suffering; finally, he re-explores the familiar topics of greatness and criminality, and presents a contrast between a world where obtaining money is a priority and one where spiritual principles are cultivated. But what is the significance of Thackeray’s way of appropriating the comic tradition in an era of cultural unsettlement where society and its values were rapidly changing? And what did he hope to achieve by retrieving recognisable types and issues? In this chapter, I will argue that in his early fictional writing he adopts comic conventions, yet, as we will see, in some respects he distances himself from them, and applies them to his contemporary society with the aim of exposing it and criticising its faults, and, at the same time, of stimulating correction. As many of the writers of the age, including Dickens, he wanted to participate actively in the formulation of new codes of behaviour and sets of values that people could refer to.

In *The Yellowplush Papers*, he adopts the popular type of the rake as an example of an immoderate behaviour that should not be imitated, and the polarity between wit and fool,

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where, however, an ‘unconventional’ double response of scorn and pity for the victim of deceit emerges. In *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan* the influence of Fielding’s narrative style can be perceived in the hilarious depiction of Gahagan who is mocked for being both excessively bloodthirsty and extremely sentimental. In his first novel, *Catherine*, Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild* is used as a model in order to express disapproval of contemporary sympathetic treatments of criminals in Newgate fiction; Thackeray also tries to expose the violence and dishonesty of society, and in this regard Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* can also be seen as a possible influence. The male protagonists may have been modelled on those found in Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer*, while the ‘heroine’ represents the comic type of the coquette, though she receives a more sympathetic treatment. Finally, in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond*, where the promulgation of benevolence and sympathy is a central interest, Thackeray may have had Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* in mind.²

In *The Yellowplush Papers* (1838), Thackeray adopts two conventions of Restoration Comedy, the popular stereotype of the rake and the polarity between wit and fool, in order to expose the vicious, selfish and often unrestrained behaviour of the inhabitants of his society and to show the consequences that such a conduct can have on ingenuous and more ‘innocent’ people. The papers follow the story of Charles Yellowplush in his ‘career’ as a footman, and are divided into two main episodes, ‘Miss Shum’s Husband’ and ‘The Amours of Mr. Deuceace.’ I will concentrate on the second one, which is much longer than the first, because it is here that the conventions are used.

In the second episode, where Yellowplush serves Deuceace, fifth son of the Earl of Crabs, the main male character Deuceace is the embodiment of the familiar comic type of the rake. This figure became prominent in Restoration drama, especially in the comedy of manners which made him its ‘hero.’ Indeed, nearly all the central plots of the comedies of manners of the time revolve around the rake, a fascinating, passionate, proud, witty, and scheming young man whose main goal is to seduce rich women (in order to obtain wealth) or to court and ultimately win the woman he loves. As Patt Gill has pointed out, usually these comedies follow the same plot pattern: they ‘introduce an amiable rake-hero and then bring on a heroine who wins his heart with her beauty, wit, and verve, and his hand with her breeding, money, and honesty. Obstacles appear, the rake manages to eliminate them through clever machinations, and the comedy ends with a promise of marriage between the hero and the

² Another very influential sentimental novel in the eighteenth century was Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771) where its gentle protagonist’s sensibility and benevolence are strongly emphasised. However, I feel that Thackeray is closer in spirit to Goldsmith whom he admired and to whom he refers often in his works.
However, Robert Hume has observed that the rake is not a single, definable type, and that it is important to take into account a basic distinction, that between the ‘Polite Rake’ (Truewit) and the ‘Debauchee’ (Witless or Witwould). He explains that the former is an ingenious young man who defies society’s rules and conventions but who is accepted as a member of the best society, while the latter includes a series of types who are scorned and mocked, such as the country blockhead, the hypocritical, wenching puritan, and the whoremonger. Horner in William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675), Dorimant in Sir George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676) and Sir Harry Wildair in Farquhar’s *The Constant Couple* (1699) are good examples of the ‘Polite Rake,’ the real protagonist of late seventeenth-century comedies of manners. Horner is a clever and outrageous libertine who disseminates the (false) rumour that he has become impotent due to an operation for the small pox, deceiving and seducing various women, including Mr. Pinchwife’s wife Margery, and gaining their sympathy. Dorimant is an extravagant and charming young man who dedicates himself to a life of pleasure and seduction of women – first of Mrs Loveit, then Bellinda, and finally Harriet with whom he falls in love. Sir Harry Wildair (whose name reflects his personality) is a cheerful ‘airy gentleman’ and a good-humoured man of common sense who exhibits an immoderate behaviour; he believes Angelica to be a whore, a mistake that forces him to decide between fighting and marrying – he chooses the latter. Two of these plays also include the other type of rake, the Debauchee; Sir Fopling Flutter in *The Man of Mode* and Vizard in *The Constant Couple* are cruelly despised and ridiculed for their foolish, villainous and hypocritical behaviour which contrasts with the wittiness of the ‘Polite Rake.’ The ingenious rake is an interesting comic type; he is fascinating and unpleasant at the same time. We tend to admire his resourcefulness and intelligence, and to laugh genuinely at his vicious conduct despite the fact that this is undoubtedly his most unattractive feature. But we are not really meant to take his actions seriously, which is also suggested by the mild comic punishment he usually gets in the end.

Towards the end of the Restoration, the figure of the rake becomes less important and less powerful, and receives a more sympathetic treatment; his wit and libertinism are replaced by a new set of moral qualities: honesty, decency, kindness and amiability. Furthermore, the focus of comedies of manners shifts from the rake to the couple. For example, John Vanbrugh’s *The Provok’d Wife* (1697) concentrates on the marital problems between Sir John Brute (who married his wife for love) and Lady Brute (who married her husband for money); they are both shown at fault and their issues are left unresolved in the end. William Congreve’s *The
Way of the World (1700) centres on the love relationships between Mirabell and Millamant, and also between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, and promotes marriage for love. The Rake disappears gradually but never completely; he continues to attract interest, reappearing occasionally in eighteenth-century art and literature. In his famous series of paintings entitled The Rake's Progress (1733-35), William Hogarth adopts this stock character whose libertinism is exposed and used as a warning against gambling and the dangers of debauchery in general. In Richardson's Clarissa (1748) Lovelace is the handsome, charming, and calculating aristocratic rake who becomes obsessed with conquering the object of his love, Clarissa, exhibiting a violent and aggressive behaviour towards her, and attempting to rape her several times.

Thackeray inherited his predecessors' interest in and fascination for the comic figure of the rake and immediately saw its potential in the Victorian age. Indeed, rakes and rascals recur constantly in his early tales and sketches (and in his fiction in general), as, for example, in Stubbs's Calendar; or the Fatal Boots (1838), where the protagonist's misfortunes are all due to a pair of boots he has stolen from a German boot-maker, or in Captain Rook and Mr. Pigeon (1839), where Captain Rook is the rascal taking advantage of artless Mr. Pigeon, and where their names reflect their basic 'qualities,' foolishness and stupidity. By introducing a familiar and popular type in his fiction he could attract and entertain many readers, and, at the same time, show that a rakish behaviour could only cause trouble both to individuals and to society, and thus was not to be imitated. He thought that the exposure of vice, rather than the promotion of virtue, was a more effective means of stimulating moral correction. This can be seen in Deuceace, in The Yellowplush Papers, who is the perfect incarnation of the extravagant rake found in Restoration comedies of manner, and who is the first of Thackeray's characters to live on 'nothing a year.' He is a witty young man who is constantly after money and women, a gambler, a smoker, a deceiver and a seducer – and his father is certainly no better than him; he smokes and drinks heavily, and is ready to deceive his son if in that way he can obtain money. For instance, with the help of his friend Blewitt, Deuceace does not hesitate to take advantage of a simple young gentleman, Dawkins, flattering him, playing cards with him and cruelly making him lose all he has. But he also fools Blewitt because, instead of sharing the money won with him as promised – '... I don't intend to keep my promise! You infernal fool and ninny! do you suppose I was labouring for you? '6 – he keeps it for himself and flies to Paris. The episode exposes Deuceace as a calculating and unscrupulous young man who acts only in his self-interest, who does not care about the consequences that his deceitful behaviour can have on individuals or on their feelings, and

who does not give any value to friendship. This idea is reiterated in another section where Deuceace, while in Paris, takes advantage of two wealthy ladies (Lady Griffin and Matilda Griffin) who are both in love with him, keeping them both close to him until he understands which one will make him richer: ‘Now, then, it was his business to find out which had the most money. . . . In the meantime, his plan was to keep ’em both in play, until he could strike the best fish of the two – not a difficult matter for a man of his genus (sic): besides, Miss was hooked for certain’ (58). This insight into Deuceace’s mind clearly unveils his cruelty and insensitiveness; he treats ladies like prey (which is indicated by the images of the fish and the hook) and does not care if in the pursuit of his goal he may hurt their feelings. The following illustration (Fig. 1.1) entitled ‘Mr. Deuceace’s disinterested declaration’ ironically emphasises his basic false, sly and adulatory attitude towards wealthy ladies. From the beginning readers are entertained yet invited to disapprove of his attitude and to acknowledge the necessity to find an alternative model of behaviour. At this stage, however, Thackeray does not give any suggestion for improvement; he seems to be more concerned with making his audience aware of the problem.

The adoption of another convention of Restoration Comedy, the polarity between wit and fool, which here is applied to Victorian society and is realised in Deuceace and Dawkins, Lady Griffin and Matilda Griffin, Lord Crabs and Deuceace, has a similar purpose. Representing the contrast between clever people with predatory instincts and ingenuous people who become their victims, it is meant to expose a worrying contemporary aspect, to make readers become aware of it and then respond to it. However, there is a substantial difference in the way Thackeray borrows this late seventeenth-century comic convention. While in Restoration Comedy the fool is ridiculed for his/her stupidity and artlessness, here the attitude towards this figure seems to be a lot more sympathetic. Instead of simply mocking his characters for their foolishness (as he does in the sketch Captain Rook and Mr. Pigeon for example), in this story Thackeray at times highlights their disappointment, sadness and desperation in the moment when they acknowledge their own ingenuity; he seems to be trying to draw attention to the importance of feeling in a materialistic culture which tends to deny it. For instance, when Matilda discovers that her husband (Deuceace) has not money and that she has been fooled by her step-mother, she shows profound resignation: ‘“O Algernon! is this true?” and got up, and went to a chair and wep in quiet’ (122). The emphasis on her suffering invites us to feel compassion rather than scorn for her. But Thackeray also shows that even wicked scoundrels like Deuceace have feelings and can be easily hurt (although, at times, he seems to suggest that people that are easily deceived do not deserve to be pitied, but only despised). This emerges clearly when Deuceace finds out that he has been tricked by his father and Lady Griffin and, realising that his wife Matilda has no
Fig. 1.1. ‘Mr. Deuceace’s disinterested declaration,’ *The Yellowplush Papers*
money, he becomes utterly desperate, weeps like a baby and then appeals to his father for help: ‘speaking faint, and very slow’ he pleads his father to give him some money: "‘I hope – I trust – I think, my Lord, you will not forget me? . . . . And that you will make some provision – ?’ “Algernon,” says my Lord, getting up from the sophy, and looking at him with such a jolly malignity, as I never see. “I declare, before Heaven, that I will not give you a penny!”" (122) Deuceace appears in an attitude of humble acceptance and resignation which is made even more painful by his awareness of having been fooled by his own father. Surprisingly all this strongly recalls Shakespeare’s treatment of Malvolio in Twelfth Night, where the servant is at first ridiculed and despised for his arrogance, self-esteem and social ambition, and then pitied for the excessive cruel joke he has been subjected to. This double attitude emerges through Yellowplush’s response to ‘the victims’ of deceit.

From the beginning Yellowplush appears as capable of feeling both scorn and pity for those who are tricked. These two abilities undergo a parallel development throughout the story. Usually his first emotional response is scorn, which is reflected in the satirical tone of the narration. When he sees the person who has been deceived as a victim, though, he becomes more compassionate; consequently, the tone changes, and expressions like ‘poor thing’ are constantly used. In this regard Edgar Harden points out that together with his ability to despise and pity, his moral sense grows too, and is counteracted by his acute sense of comedy. This becomes clear, for example, in his attitude toward Dawkins whom he considers both an innocent victim and a self-deceived fool, thus suggesting that the sympathetic view may have to coexist with the cold one. He shows pity when he often refers to Dawkins as ‘poor Daw!,’ ‘pore Dawkins’ and ‘pore fellow!,’ but also scorn when he realises how ingenuous and foolish the young man is: ‘If Mr. Dawkins had been the least wiser, it would have taken him six months before he lost his money; as it was, he was such a confounded ninny, that it took him a very short time to part with it’ (39). Yellowplush, then, is Thackeray’s earliest comic figure who represents his idea of comedy as a place where, as he will write in Vanity Fair, ‘Satire and Sentiment can visit arm in arm together,’ and where the novelist can adopt one or the other depending on the situation. Overall, The Yellowplush Papers, although still far from being a coherent work of fiction, are one of Thackeray’s earliest pieces where his interest in comedy emerges, and anticipate many of the themes, concerns and characters that will be developed in later works.

The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan (first published with the title Some Passages in the Life of Major Gahagan in the New Monthly Magazine in 1838-39) is the first

8 Ibid., 25.
9 Vanity Fair, Works, I, 197.
story where the influence of Fielding, particularly of his comic narrative style, comes to light. In the famous preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742), Fielding defines his fictional work as a comic romance, or 'a comic Epic-Poem in Prose,' as a story which contains 'a much larger Circle of Incidents,' some of which are taken from the world of epic and romance (incredible adventures, battles, and love), and 'a greater variety of Characters,' and which introduces 'Persons of inferior Rank, and consequently of inferior Manners' who are treated comically and humorously. Moreover, regarding the style to be used in comic writing, Fielding considers two very different options: the comic and the burlesque. The former is the best choice because it does not deviate from nature, and allows the writer to convey 'Pleasure' to 'a sensible Reader'; the latter exhibits the unnatural, the absurd, the monstrous, the distortions and exaggerations, like the 'Caricatura' does in paintings, and therefore it may be used occasionally to achieve a strong humoristic effect.

In the account of the adventures of Major Gahagan, Thackeray adopts the mock-heroic and the burlesque. Major Gahagan, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is an Irishman who considers himself a gentleman, and who proudly declares that his life has been full of extraordinary military adventures in India, where he demonstrated his courage and valour. He clearly thinks of himself as a hero, as the following statement reveals: '... I have led a more remarkable life than any man in the service – I have been at more pitched battles, led more forlorn hopes, had more success among the fair sex, drunk harder, read more, been a handsomer man than any officer now serving Her Majesty.' This passage exposes Gahagan's pomposity and excessive self-esteem, which partly reminds us of the old stock character of the miles gloriosus (which I will consider in Chapter 2), thus encouraging us not to take him and his account seriously. His two main ambitions are love and military glory, which represent the two opposing aspects of his personality: sentimentality and thirst for blood. In the passage where he recalls the time when he was madly in love with a young woman, Julia Jowler, his romantic side emerges:

... there was magic in her beauty and in her voice. I was spell-bound when I looked at her, and stark staring mad when she looked at me! O lustrous black eyes! – O glossy night-black ringlets! – O lips! – O dainty frocks of white muslin! – O tiny kid slippers! – though old and gouty, Gahagan sees you still! (146)

11 Ibid., 50.
12 Ibid., 50-1.
Julia here embodies the siren of the epic world who magically enchants men with her stunning beauty (shining black eyes and black ringlets) and sensual voice. The insistent reiteration of exclamations (‘O’) and of exclamation marks effectively mocks Gahagan’s sentimentality. Unfortunately, his love is unrequited, and when he is openly refused Julia’s hand by her father, he is utterly disappointed.

If in love he is a failure (at least at first), in military action he is very successful. His account contains several detailed descriptions of his military adventures which are terrifying and often appalling. When recalling his battles, Gahagan becomes extremely excited. It is here that he shows his cruel side, for example: ‘. . . I slew with my own sword twenty-three matchlock-men, and cut a dromedary in two . . . I headed nineteen charges of cavalry, took . . . seventeen field-pieces, killing the scoundrelly French artillerymen, on that day I had eleven elephants shot under me . . . ’ (147). He slaughters men and animals indiscriminately, enjoying it as if it was a sport. He also points out the exact number of men and animals that fell under his sword, which demonstrates how incredibly proud of his deeds he is and also how pitiless he is. The following drawing (Fig. 1.2) portrays Gahagan in the middle of an action, fighting brutally against soldiers and elephants. Particularly notable are his stretched-out arms and legs and his fierce look. The following quotation, which describes a personal fight with a man, is another example of Gahagan’s thirst for blood: ‘His head, cut clean in two between the eyebrows and nostrils, even between the two front teeth, fell one side on each shoulder, and he galloped on till his horse was stopped by men, who were not little amused at the feat’ (155-6). This description reaches the level of horror in the accuracy of its macabre details; it reflects man’s dark appetite for the horrific.

Despite the presence of terrifying passages, the overall dominant tone is burlesque. Everything is deliberately exaggerated and pushed to the limits to provoke laughter and pure entertainment – hence Gahagan’s excessive sentimentality and, in contrast to that, his excessive brutality. Thackeray’s comic treatment of both high and low subjects, of both human noble passions (love) and human primitive instincts (thirst for blood), reflects his contemporary audience’s desire for familiar and traditional aspects, and, at the same time, for anything exotic and transgressive. The physical description that Gahagan gives of himself is a good example of Thackeray’s use of the burlesque. Here Gahagan is presented as an eccentric figure:

... [I] allowed my hair to grow very long, as did my beard, which reached to my waist. It took me two hours daily to curl my hair in ten thousands little corkscrew ringlets, which waved over my shoulders, and to get my moustaches well round to the corners of my eyelids. I dressed in loose scarlet trousers and red morocco boots, a scarlet jacket, and a shawl of the same colour
Fig. 1.2. *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan*
round my waist; a scarlet turban three feet high, and decorated with a tuft of the scarlet feathers of the flamingo, formed my head-dress . . . . (176)

Every detail of his look is hyperbolical: very long hair and beard, an infinite number of ringlets, and a very tall turban with feathers on the top to make it look even higher. The fact that each and every item of clothing is red is particularly interesting for two reasons. It clearly reflects Gahagan's thirst for blood, but it also suggests that he is obsessed by it, that he cannot live without it. The description is accompanied by an illustration (Fig. 1.3) which adds colour to the text, while highlighting the mock-heroic theme. Another figure (Fig. 1.4), which depicts Gahagan rescuing his beloved Belinda from a fire, has a similar purpose. It is worth noticing the disproportion between Gahagan and Belinda. He is a giant compared to her, and once again he has his arms and legs stretched out to indicate that he 'dominates the world.' The recurrent epic image of the hero rescuing his beloved one, or one of his parents, is clearly ridiculed here. The mock-heroic theme and the burlesque will be developed by Thackeray in his novel, Barry Lyndon.

It is in Catherine, which was published in Fraser's Magazine in 1839-40 under the pseudonym Ikey Solomons, that the influence of Fielding, particularly of his first novel Jonathan Wild (1743), becomes more evident. Indeed, Gordon Ray has observed that this work was used as a model for the creation of Catherine (which, however, lacks that consistency that characterises Jonathan Wild). Fielding's story is based on the life of the notorious criminal thief-taker Jonathan Wild who attracted interest for his 'professional' approach to robberies, who was then arrested, brought to Newgate prison and finally hanged publicly in 1725. The eighteenth century saw an increase in crime and also in the number of criminal biographies and of reports of crimes in the press which, with their emphasis on the sensational aspect of robberies and murders, contributed considerably to heighten people's interest in the transgressive and witty figure of the criminal. The life of a delinquent was presented as an exciting one which included risk, danger, violence, and which required great courage, boldness and resourcefulness; it clearly satisfied the audience's needs. Even the inevitable end of this outrageous lifestyle, the public execution, was seen as a significant moment when the condemned could show his/her courage and utter memorable words to the audience for the last time. As Keith Hollingsworth has pointed out, 'this was a moment of glory, drama on a grand scale, a part to be played once and never repeated.' Like many of his contemporaries, Fielding found the figure of the criminal very intriguing because of his

Fig. 1.3. *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan*

Fig. 1.4. *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan*
transgressive and thrilling way of living denoted by violence and sex, but also by acts of ingenious artfulness and of incredible courage, and by a final punishment or conversion. He conceived the retelling of the story of Jonathan Wild as a moral allegory of the quality of human greatness which, through the antithesis of the good Heartfree and the great Wild, was meant to show not only the triumph of Good and the punishment of Evil, but also ‘the limitations of Heartfree’s passive goodness’ as well as ‘the evil of Wild’s immoderate greatness.’

Therefore, in Jonathan Wild, he creates a satirical portrait of this famous ‘great’ thief, exaggerating and exposing his greatness, while highlighting his ingenious and calculating mind, his leadership, his passionate ambition, his courage, his hypocrisy, his ruthlessness and cruelty. The account ironically emphasises the ambiguous nature of greatness by displaying Wild as the agent of his own greatness and, at the same time, as the victim of it. His professional leadership of a gang of thieves allows him to succeed in any criminal activity and to gain a huge personal profit by selling the stolen goods. Throughout the account, however, he often suffers comic humiliations and failures especially with women who manage to manipulate him and thus to make him appear as foolish.

And particularly towards the end he emerges as a victim of his own greatness when his gang turn on him, trick him and manage to have him committed to Newgate prison. Nonetheless, he seems to be able to enjoy his Greatness until the end, and he ultimately receives a ‘glorious’ death: ‘When he came to the tree of glory, he was welcomed with an universal shout of the people, who were there assembled in prodigious numbers to behold a sight much more rare in populous cities than one would reasonably imagine it should be, viz. the proper catastrophe of a great man.’

Thus Fielding points out that these repeated spectacles which celebrate greatness in this way clearly demonstrate that people have a distorted and false idea of greatness itself; it is because of their foolish adulation that those who commit roguish deeds are considered ‘great’ after all.

Thackeray shared Fielding’s view of the concept of greatness and wanted to create a story based on a real criminal personage with the aim of degrading rather than elevating rogues and of provoking the audience’s disgust for them. The protagonist of Thackeray’s story, which is taken from an account of the Newgate Calendar, is a woman called Catherine Hayes who was burned at Tyburn in 1726 for the deliberate murder of her husband John Hayes. It is well known that Catherine, which is the first of Thackeray’s novels to be set in the eighteenth century, was conceived as a parody of the Newgate novel that had become so popular in the nineteenth century. Early Victorian novelists inherited the eighteenth-century interest in and fascination for criminals, and between 1830 and 1847 produced a series of novels which

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18 Ibid., 22.
revolved around criminal characters. These works met fierce opposition because of their sympathetic portrayal of a lawbreaker and their way of familiarising the reader with vice and crime in a way that could be potentially dangerous for society. Nevertheless, they were very successful. Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford* (1830), Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837-8) and Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard* (1837-8) quickly became popular. Bulwer-Lytton created his novel with the intention of showing that circumstances generate guilt, that certain unfortunate situations push people to commit crimes. He wanted to take part in the contemporary debate about the origins of criminality by showing that it was more a question of nurture than of nature. Intellectuals were divided on the issue. James Crichton-Browne, for example, in 1830 stressed the significance of the impact of external factors, stimuli and conditions on the child’s mind and, more importantly, ‘the extreme susceptibility of the infant and childish mind.’ He believed that the child did inherit his/her parents’ weaknesses, but that environmental and social conditions had an enormous influence on the development of his/her behaviour and personality. Later on Havelock Ellis in *The Criminal* (1890) affirmed that the child has a natural tendency to delinquent behaviour: ‘The child is naturally, by his organisation, nearer to the animal, to the savage, to the criminal, than the adult . . . . children are naturally egoists . . . they are cruel and inflict suffering on animals out of curiosity, enjoying the manifestation of pain. They are thieves for the gratification of their appetites . . . and they are unscrupulous and often cunning liars . . . .’ For him, then, criminality is part of human nature. If growing up a person is unable to overcome his/her wicked impulses, if, in other words, there is ‘an arrest of development,’ he/she will become a criminal, that is he/she will remain a child, ‘a child of larger growth and with greater capacity for evil.’ Bulwer-Lytton did not believe in the child’s natural propensity to delinquency. His hero Paul Clifford, who was taken from the Newgate Calendar, initially is depicted as a good child whose innocence is soon corrupted by adverse circumstances. After falling among thieves with whom he spends most of his life, he retires in another country where more favourable circumstances allow him to redeem himself. Dickens seems to share Bulwer-Lytton’s position (while Thackeray firmly believes that a criminal is a criminal by nature). In *Oliver Twist* the protagonist falls into the hands of a gang of thieves who constantly (but unsuccessfully) try to convert him into a thief. Nancy is the only member of the gang who demands a sympathetic response. She becomes genuinely fond of Oliver whose presence in the circle has a positive and corrective effect on her personality. Murdered by Bill Sikes for having betrayed him, she

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20 Hollingworth (1963), 14.
23 Ibid., 351.
dies having turned from sin. In *Jack Sheppard*, Ainsworth celebrates the ingenious and sensational escapes from prison of the famous historical figure of Jack Sheppard. His purpose was mainly to provide an entertaining story, thus he presents his criminal hero as a man to be admired for his excellent skills.

Thackeray totally disapproved of the way in which these novels made crime (and criminals) glamorous, and led a fierce and active opposition to this kind of fiction. He responded with the creation of a parody of the Newgate novel, *Catherine*, where through the voice of his narrator he frequently and openly criticises this ‘genre.’ One of the best examples can be found in Chapter 1 where he declares his belief that rascals are rascals, and that, therefore, portraying them as heroes (let alone celebrating them) is wrong and does not make any sense:

Now, if we are to be interested by rascally actions, let us have them with plain faces, and let them be performed, not by virtuous philosophers, but by rascals. Another clever class of novelists adopt the contrary system, and create interest by making their rascal perform virtuous actions. Against these popular plans we here solemnly appeal. We say, let your rogues in novels act like rogues, and your honest men like honest men; don’t let us have any juggling and thimble-rigging with virtue and vice, so that, at the end of three volumes, the bewildered reader shall not know which is which; don’t let us find ourselves kindling at the generous qualities of thieves, and sympathising with the rascalities of noble hearts. . . . Among the rogues, at least, we will have nothing that shall be mistaken for virtues.24

Thackeray complains that these novels confuse Vice and Virtue, often mixing them in the same character, nearly always making Vice appear as interesting and appealing. Rogues are depicted as having some good qualities and therefore receive a sympathetic treatment which, in Thackeray’s view, they do not deserve. Rascals are a vicious ‘species’ which should not absolutely be mingled with honest ‘virtuous’ men. Therefore, a human being belongs to one category or the other; he/she is either wicked or good. The world is seen in terms of black and white. This cynical view of mankind, where crime, sin and vice are seen as deeply rooted in man’s nature, and where there seem to be no possibility nor hope of redemption for a rogue, is conveyed insistently throughout the narration. It is particularly exemplified by Catherine’s son, little Tom, who is a ‘paragon’ of villainy:

. . . [Tom] was in his long-coats fearfully passionate, screaming and roaring perpetually, and showing all the ill that he could show. At the age of two, when his strength enabled him to toddle abroad, his favourite resort was the coal-hole or the dungheap: his roarings had not

diminished in the least, and he had added to his former virtues two new ones, - a love of fighting and stealing; both which amiable qualities he had many opportunities of exercising every day . . . and thus from the pages of history he used to suck in all he knew - thieving and lying namely; in which, for his years, he made wonderful progress. (105-6)

The account of Tom’s behaviour is heavily ironic. He is portrayed as a terrible child capable of imposing himself and of committing wicked deeds. His ‘virtues’ and ‘amiable qualities,’ which he cultivates every day, and his ‘wonderful progress’ in the arts of fighting, stealing and lying make him a prodigy of rascality. It is through characters like Tom and his mother Catherine that Thackeray wanted to show vicious and horrible acts with the intention of provoking so much horror that it would deter people from reading stories of crime; he wanted to give his novel a ‘cathartic’ function. In his final remarks, the narrator Ikey Solomons once again declares: ‘it has been his [Solomon’s] attempt to make vice to appear entirely vicious; and in those instances where he hath occasionally introduced something like virtue, to make sham as evident as possible, and not allow the meanest capacity a single chance to mistake it’ (193). In a letter to his mother dated March 1840, though, Thackeray confessed that he considered Catherine a failure and a mistake: ‘it was not made disgusting enough that is the fact, and the triumph of it would have been to make readers so horribly horrified as to cause them to give up or rather throw up the book and all of it’s (sic) kind . . .’25

Thackeray also wanted to expose the brutality and dishonesty of society, and it is possible that in this regard he was somehow influenced by Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera (1728). Edgar Harden has pointed out that in the beginning of his story Thackeray establishes the historical context of the novel, emphasising its violence and corruption in a way similar to that of Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera.26 The novel opens in the following way:

At that famous period in history, when the seventeenth century (after a deal of quarrelling, king-killing, reforming, republicanizing, restoring, re-restoring, play-writing, sermon-writing, Oliver Cromwellizing, Stuartizing, and Orangizing, to be sure) had sunk into its grave, giving place to the lusty eighteenth . . . when the presiding genius that watched over the destinies of the French nation had played out all the best cards in his hand . . . when there were two kings in Spain employed perpetually in running away from one another; when there was a queen in England, with such rogues for ministers as have never been seen . . . (5-6)

The new century has begun and has inherited the violence that had characterised the previous age. As in Gay’s ‘opera,’ here the criminal action presented is linked to the outside world and

26 Harden (1998), 61.
is only a small version of the evil that invades and degrades England and the world in general. In both works we get the idea that ‘... the lower Sort of People have their Vices in a degree as well as the Rich: And that they are punish’d for them.' Thackeray certainly admired Gay, and, indeed, at the end of the original version of Catherine, he praises him for hitting ‘the great by showing their similarity with the wretches that figure in the play.’ However, it is difficult to establish how strongly Gay might have influenced him in the creation of Catherine, though the affinities between the two works suggest that probably at some level Thackeray was attempting to reproduce an atmosphere similar to that of The Beggar’s Opera.

In regard to the creation of the two male characters, it is likely that Thackeray used Farquhar’s The Recruiting Officer (1706) as a model. At the beginning of the story he recreates the world of The Recruiting Officer by presenting an army recruiting party formed by Galgenstein and Corporal Brock, who are based on Farquhar’s heroes Captain Plume and Sergeant Kite respectively. And, indeed, the following quotation confirms this: ‘Our Captain Plume and Sergeant Kite (it was at this time, by the way, that those famous recruiting-officers were playing their pranks in Shrewsbury) were occupied very much in the same manner with Farquhar’s heroes’ (7). Nonetheless, Thackeray makes his characters less attractive, less amusing and less lively than their original model. This emerges clearly from their descriptions. Corporal Brock is depicted as a fifty-seven-year old stout man who likes strong liquors and who has ‘an arm that was like an opera-dancer’s leg; a stomach so elastic that it would accommodate itself to any given or stolen quantity of food’ (8). He is a moody man who when pleased is ‘simply coarse, boisterous, and jovial; when angry, a perfect demon: bullying, cursing, storming, fighting, as is sometimes the wont with gentlemen of his cloth and education’ (8). Galgenstein, ‘a slim young gentleman of twenty-six,’ is as unattractive as his friend. He is half English and half Bavarian, has adopted the title of ‘Count’ (which belongs to his eldest brother), and has been in the service first of the French and then of the Bavarian until he decided to move to the English side: ‘... and when, after the battle of Blenheim, two regiments of Germans came over to the winning side, Gustavus Adolphus Maximilian found himself among them; and at the epoch when this story commences, had enjoyed English pay for a year or more’ (9).

The female protagonist, Catherine, is modelled on a typical stereotype that recurs in Restoration plays: the coquette. In comedies of manners of that period women are divided into three categories: ‘sexually active hypocrites who scheme, betray, entrap, and deceive; naïve or ignorant young women who seem potentially amenable to seduction; and charming

30 Ibid., 62.
The latter is always the heroine of the central plot, while the other two types are usually obstacles or integrating elements of the plot or subplot, and are often satirised. The coquette, with her outrageous flirtations with men, which she uses as a means of obtaining wealth and a higher social position, fits into the first category; she is an ambiguous, insidious and dangerous figure the audience is meant to dislike or in some cases to laugh at. Lady Cockwood in Etherege’s *She Wou’d if She Cou’d* (1668), Lady Fidget in Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675), and Olivia in Wycherley’s *The Plain-Dealer* (1676) are good examples of this stereotype. Lady Cockwood is the wife of a country knight who, once in London, develops a wild desire for extra-marital sex, and thus engages in annoying flirtations first with Mr. Courtall and then with Mr. Freeman, two gentlemen of the town. And she assumes a very hypocritical and almost tyrannical attitude towards her husband. Lady Fidget is a cunning married city-woman who is constantly in search of sexual pleasure, and who always succeeds in fooling and manipulating her silly husband. She is part of a ‘virtuous gang’ of women who love ‘the sport’ of cuckolding and have no sense of honesty or of decency. Olivia is an ambitious and treacherous woman who flatters men with her seductive language and her affectation in order to obtain money and jewellery. Without any regard for her honest lover Manly, during his absence from the county she seduces and marries his best friend Vernish.

Thackeray was interested in this outrageous and seductive figure and thought he could use it effectively in his novel *Catherine* where the heroine is presented as a ‘paragon’ of coquetry. She is introduced as ‘a very smart, handsome, vain, giggling servant-girl, about the age of sixteen, who went by the familiar name of Cat, and attended upon the gentlemen in the parlour . . .’ (13), but also as a little minx. Under the supervision of Mrs. Score, her aunt, she goes through seven years of apprenticeship in coquetry at the ‘Bugle’ inn where she learns how to use her beauty to attract customers, and manages to gain ‘half-a-dozen lovers in the village; and these were bound in honour to spend their pence at the alehouse she inhabited’ (14). But Catherine also uses her charm and beauty to achieve a higher goal: that of obtaining a better social position by marrying a gentleman. This is because from an early age she has been taught that this is the only way for a woman belonging to a low order to improve her condition and lifestyle; she has been instilled with the idea that she should make the acquisition of wealth and a higher social position her priority and use any means available to her, especially her own natural resources, to succeed. Therefore, Catherine refuses several proposals, including that of Thomas Bullock and of John Hayes, and while waiting for better opportunities ‘she considered herself free as the wind, and permitted herself all the innocent

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gaieties which that “chartered libertine,” a coquette, can take. She flirted with all the bachelors, widowers, and married men, in a manner which did extraordinary credit to her years . . . ‘(21). The narrator portrays her as a wicked and ruthless seducer of men, and several times he induces us to despise her for that. Her deserved punishment comes when, after being seduced by Galgenstein, she becomes pregnant and is cruelly treated by him: ‘After the manner of ladies, she very speedily confided him [Corporal Brock] all her domestic secrets; the causes of her former discontent; the Count’s ill-treatment of her; the wicked names he called her . . . how he beat her . . . ‘(43). But it is at this very moment, when her suffering is unveiled, that Catherine begins to be re-assessed and to be seen as a victim of seduction (indeed Thackeray could not make her totally wicked as he intended to do; in a letter to his mother he wrote: ‘. . . you see the author had a sneaking kindness for his heroine, and did not like to make her utterly worthless’32). Edgar Harden has observed that in the story she appears both as a victim of Galgenstein’s sexual aggression and of Hayes’s cold and obsessive wish to acquire a wife.33 In this respect, then, Thackeray detaches himself from the traditional depiction of the coquette by showing her humanity, by displaying her pain and allowing the audience to feel sympathy for her – in comedies of manners these women are always cruelly scorned or mocked. On a larger scale, he demonstrates a more understanding attitude towards women in a period of cultural change by emphasising that they too have feelings; he is also trying to influence and modify the way they are commonly viewed. The theme of seduction, where women first seduce and then are seduced, recurs in a later work, ‘The Ravenswing,’ one of the stories included in Men’s Wives. By George Fitz-Boodle (1842-43), where the protagonist Morgiana is a flirtatious woman lead astray by the rakish Hooker Walker who promises her wealth and power. And the figure of the coquette will reappear constantly in Thackeray’s novels. Catherine, then, has to be seen as a novel which was created with the intention of provoking disgust for crimes and criminals, but which actually resulted in being a story about a woman who first seduces and then is seduced, who is selfish and cruel, yet sensitive and capable of loving (she is sincerely fond of Galgenstein and also of her son). She emerges as a deluded woman who in a desperate situation calls for a desperate measure (the murder of her husband) to end her misery and to be reunited with her lover forever.

The last fictional work that I want to consider is The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond (published in Fraser’s Magazine in 1841) which can be seen as a sentimental comedy bearing the influence of Goldsmith. Thackeray esteemed Goldsmith for his ability to touch the heart of readers across time. In The English Humourists of the

32 Letters, I, 433.
33 Harden (1998), 63.
Eighteenth Century (1853), he depicts him as a good and loving man whose charitable and 'benevolent spirit' is representative of middle-class sensibility and virtue:

His humour delighting us still: his song fresh and beautiful as when first he charmed with it: his words in all our mouths: his very weaknesses beloved and familiar – his benevolent spirit seems still to smile upon us; to do gentle kindness: to succour with sweet charity: to soothe, caress, and forgive: to plead with the fortunate for the unhappy and the poor.34

In particular Thackeray admired Goldsmith's sentimental comedy *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), which he defined as a 'sweet story,' for its emphasis on benevolence and sympathy, and for the brilliant portrayal of the Vicar as an honest, generous, loving, and good-natured man who does not lose faith in time of misfortune. Similarly, and for the first time in his works, Thackeray in *The Great Hoggarty Diamond* creates a protagonist that is a sentimental hero rather than a rogue. Samuel, the first-person narrator of the story, is a sensitive, honest and simple-minded young lad who works for an insurance company in London. Despite the fortunes and misfortunes he encounters in his life, he manages to retain his good qualities until the end while experiencing an inner growth. His life shows a pattern somehow similar to that of Goldsmith's Vicar: to a time of fortune and relative wealth, which allows Sam to marry his sweetheart Mary Smith, follows a time characterised by a series of calamities afflicting Sam and his family. First he is arrested for debt, then he loses his first child, but he and his wife never lose hope. On the contrary, it is in these times of misfortune that they find happiness and comfort in their mutual love. In the end they are rewarded with wealth for their amazing strength and courage.

The story of Sam's adventures and of his inner growth is told with a blend of good humour and sentimentality that invites the reader at times to laugh at him, and at times to share his sufferings. In the first part of his adventures, Sam mocks himself for believing that a big diamond-pin he has received from his aunt as a gift is the cause of his good luck and of the numerous attentions he receives from fashionable people: 'And all this came to me because my aunt Hoggarty had given me a diamond-pin!'35 The following pictorial initial (Fig. 1.5), which depicts Sam proudly showing off his 'talisman,' reinforces the comicality of the situation.

It is when Sam begins to encounter some obstacles in life, however, that he is 'forced' to grow up. As the story progresses, Sam understands that the diamond-pin had nothing to do

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35 *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond, Works*, VI, 32.
Fig. 1.5. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 2, The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond

The Common Lot

Fig. 1.6. ‘The Common Lot,’ The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond
with the events of his life, and in time of necessity he sells it. But it is mainly thanks to his wife Mary, and her goodness, courage and devoted love, that he is finally able to mature. In Chapter 11, on his way to the Fleet prison, Sam acknowledges his wife’s affection and feels stronger:

Ah! I had loved her before, and happy it is to love when one is hopeful and young in the midst of smiles and sunshine; but be unhappy, and then see what it is to be loved by a good woman! I declare before Heaven, that of all the joys and happy moments it has given me, that was the crowning one – that little ride, with my wife’s cheek on my shoulder, down Holborn to the prison! (113-14)

The passage can be seen as an attempt to exalt the moral qualities of love, honesty, kindness, and goodness as specifically middle-class virtues and principles (as we have seen, the promulgation of a morality based on the cultivation of spiritual values was at the core of Victorian non-capitalist middle-class ideology). In particular love is promoted as a fundamental value that exists above everything else, as a reinvigorating force that provides us with the necessary energy to overcome the difficulties of life, that gives meaning to our existence and fills it with happiness. It is in a troublesome moment that Sam understands the importance of love and feels almost blessed for having a wife that is so fond of him. And, indeed, in the end he learns that ‘a good wife is the best diamond a man can wear in his bosom’ (129), thus emerging as a wiser man.

But when things look gloomier for Sam, who is ruined by his boss Mr. Brough, the reader is encouraged to be moved and to feel sympathy for him and his wife. The birth of their first child brings Sam joy, but also sorrow and concern because of his extreme poverty: ‘I had my last guinea now in my pocket; and when that was gone – ah! my heart sickened to think of what was to come, and I prayed for strength and guidance . . .’ (125). His words reveal both anxiety for the present and confidence in the future. The reader acknowledging Sam’s feeling is brought to share them and to follow his story with affection. One of the most moving passages can be found in the part relating their first child’s death:

The child lay there in its wicker cradle, with its sweet fixed smile in its face (I think the angels in heaven must have been glad to welcome that pretty innocent smile); and it was only the next day, after my wife had gone to lie down, and I sat keeping watch by it, that I remembered the condition of its parents, and thought, I can’t tell with what a pang, that I had not money left to bury the little thing, and wept bitter tears of despair. (126)
Sam refers to his lost infant using words like ‘sweet,’ ‘pretty,’ ‘innocent,’ and ‘little,’ which reveal his sincere love for the child. To a first moment of pure contemplation of the beautiful ‘angel’ follows the sudden awareness of his poverty accompanied by grief and despair. And as if the above description was not enough to move us, a powerful illustration depicting the desperate parents covering their faces (Fig. 1.6) is introduced as a means to intensify our participation in the characters’ sufferings. As a whole the story of Sam can be seen as one of Thackeray’s earliest attempts to present and promote a set of preferred values that people could adhere to in a culture of profound unsettlement, of changing ideas and of loss of faith. He appears as particularly concerned with the promulgation of benevolence as a fundamental guiding principle of life that can give meaning to our existence. In the years that will follow, however, his attitude towards the world will lose this confidence and will become increasingly pessimistic and cynical.

To sum up, an analysis of Thackeray’s early fictional works and their connections with the comic tradition offers a fresh and more comprehensive understanding of the moment when his comic vision begins to take shape and his main concerns begin to emerge. In these writings Thackeray adopts some of the conventions of the comic tradition, although in some respects he also departs from them, and applies them to his age in order to expose the faults of his society and to stimulate improvement. In *The Yellowplush Papers* he retrieves the popular type of the rake with the aim of displaying people who lead an immoderate lifestyle and do not care about the suffering they can cause to others, of provoking contempt for them, and ultimately of trying to convey the idea of the urgent need for the provision of fixed rules of conduct that individuals can follow. He also takes the polarity between wit and fool, which comes to symbolise the contrasts between people with predatory instincts and those who are innocent victims of them, with a similar intent. However, he detaches himself from the traditional comic treatment of the fool; this figure, instead of being simply scorned or satirised, is at times ridiculed and at times pitied for the cruel way in which he/she is deceived. Thackeray draws attention to the importance of feeling in a selfish and materialistic culture which seems to deny it. In *The Tremendous Adventures of Goliah Gahagan* the comic vitality of Thackeray’s tone recalls that of Fielding’s novels, especially in the use of the mock-heroic and the burlesque. The hilarious depiction of Gahagan as an adventurous and excessively violent man who is also extremely sentimental reflects the contemporary audience’s desire for both low and high topics, for both exotic and traditional elements. But the influence of Fielding becomes more apparent in *Catherine* which is a direct response to contemporary sensational accounts of the lives of delinquents which were portrayed as great and elevated to the status of heroes. Thackeray recovers the theme of greatness and of
criminality in order to deconstruct the myth of the criminal hero, which his age has inherited from the previous century. He also tries to unveil the dishonesty and violence of his era; Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* may have had some influence in this regard. In the creation of the male protagonists he probably used Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* as a model, but his characters are far less attractive than the original ones. Catherine is the perfect embodiment of the type of the coquette; however, by showing her both as a seductress and as a victim of seduction, as selfish and cruel, yet sensitive and capable of loving, Thackeray distances himself from the traditional depiction of the coquette; he shows her humanity, unveils her suffering and asks the audience to feel sympathy for her and for all women, whose feelings are often not taken into consideration. Finally, Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* may have had some influence on the creation of *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond*. The two tales present some affinities in their story line, but, more importantly, they share a central interest in the promotion of the value of benevolence as a middle-class virtue, as well as a fundamental social and moral code.

Thackeray's way of 'playing' with the conventions of comedy allowed him to experiment widely in terms of narration and characterisation, but it also provided an opportunity for self-exploration. It is here that he discovers the two aspects of his personality: the sarcastic and the sentimental one. This is unveiled in two ways: on one level, through his frequent double emotional response of sympathy and scorn to his characters; on another level, through the conveyance of opposing views of the world, a cynical one where the world is seen as inhabited by selfish and dishonest people, and a sentimental one where the belief in the importance of human values prevails. On a larger scale this reveals that Thackeray was having difficulties adapting to a new age, an age of contradictions where the promotion of commercial, scientific and technological development coexisted with the reinforcement of essential human values; but he was also aware of the existence of such contradictions and saw this as an element of discontinuity with the past.
Chapter 2

An Unusual Picaresque Novel: The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon

The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon Esq. of the Kingdom of Ireland was originally serialised in Fraser’s Magazine in 1844 with the title The Luck of Barry Lyndon: A Romance of the Last Century. By Fitz-Boodle. In 1856 Thackeray considerably revised the story and re-entitled it for its publication in his Miscellanies: Prose and Verse. The novel, which is set in the second half of the eighteenth century, was inspired by Fielding’s Jonathan Wild and, on a more general level, by the tradition of the picaresque novel. The mock-heroic theme, which had been introduced in The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan, is further developed in the character and adventures of Barry Lyndon who emerges as a more complex figure capable of being amusing and irritating at the same time. In this chapter, I will argue that Barry Lyndon can be seen as a traditional yet in some respects unconventional picaresque novel.

On his adventures at home and in the army the protagonist, with his roguish behaviour and his bombastic language, can be seen as the embodiment of the popular comic figures of the picaro and the ‘miles gloriosus,’ which exemplifies the Thackerayan idea that heroes do not exist. For his reliance on his own strength and luck, he can also be seen as the representative of another familiar social type in nineteenth-century literature, the adventurer. And, more importantly, he is the incarnation of the sham gentleman, a figure which recurs constantly in Thackeray’s fiction and which reveals the writer’s concern with the idea of true gentlemanliness. But to what extent does Barry Lyndon adhere to these stereotypes? Indeed, if he is a scoundrel, he is also a very sensitive and sentimental person whose feelings of nostalgia, melancholia and paternal love appeal to the reader for his/her sympathetic response — this suggests the possible influence of Sentimental Comedy as well as the author’s concern with middle-class humanistic values. What did Thackeray want to achieve by alternating the depiction of Barry the rogue with that of Barry the sentimentalist, by using him at times as a vehicle of satire and at times as a vehicle of sentimentality? In this chapter I will try to answer these questions.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the novel, a brief look at the origins and aims of Barry Lyndon is particularly helpful. In a letter to James Fraser dated 24th July 1841, Thackeray writes: ‘I have in my trip to the country, found materials (rather a character) for a story, that I’m sure must be amusing. I want to write it & illustrate it . . . . My subject I am
sure is a good one, and I have made a vow to chasten and otherwise popularize my style.' Gordon Ray has pointed out that a real personage is at the base of the creation of Barry Lyndon: the Irish sinister adventurer Andrew Robinson Bowes. Thackeray was fascinated by this figure because in him he saw the incarnation of the scoundrel-gentleman, which had been the main subject of his early fictional works. Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter 1, he was particularly attracted by the stereotype of the rogue. Ray also affirms that Thackeray wanted to achieve two main aims in his first novel: to illustrate that luck or success does not bring happiness, and to show the ‘growth’ a man experiences by adhering to false standards of gentlemanliness — Barry turns from ‘a not ungenerous scoundrel’ to ‘a totally cowardly scoundrel.’ But on a more personal level, as Thackeray’s letter to James Fraser reveals, the author wished and believed that the creation of this ‘amusing’ story could help him succeed as a writer and as an illustrator, and that, therefore, it could also bring him financial stability. His expectations were clearly high at this point. Taking into account the author’s aims will enable us to understand and evaluate his novel properly.

The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon can be defined as a picaresque novel. This genre has its origins in the sixteenth-century Spanish ‘picaresque’ novel, a realistic comic account of the life of a lively and ingenious hero, a ‘picaro’ (which in Spanish means ‘rogue’) on a journey. The story usually follows a plot pattern where the protagonist faces and survives through a series of loosely connected adventures and misadventures, often satirising the society and people around him. In the end the hero is rescued from his misfortunes or repents of his errors, and is rewarded with love and wealth. Although the anonymous Lazarillo de Tormes (1554) is generally considered the prototype of the picaresque novel, the genre owes its success to the much longer Guzmán de Alfarache (1599-1604) by Mateo Alemán, which established the characteristics of form and content, and which was immediately translated into French, German and English. The first examples in English literature are to be found in the eighteenth century with Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722), Smollett’s Roderick Random (1748) and Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749). Moll Flanders’s desire for a secure position in society drives her to commit several sins, including incest, adultery and prostitution, and even to become a ‘professional’ thief. Nevertheless, the novel ends with Moll sincerely repenting of her sins and living happily with her husband in penitence and prosperity. Roderick Random is a belligerent and violent young man who nonetheless has a generous and affectionate disposition. After a series of incredible adventures (he is deceived, then kidnapped, and even imprisoned) and miraculous rescues, he finally marries the woman he loves, Narcissa. Tom Jones is a much more positive character; his fundamental goodness, generosity and ingenuity

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1 Letters, II, 29.
3 Ibid., 345.
make him an easy target for people's meanness. After a long journey full of misadventures Tom is finally united with his sweetheart Sophia, and forgives all who have wronged him.

According to John Dodds, Barry Lyndon is a picaro whose adventures inherited some of the characteristics of his eighteenth-century antecedents, of Defoe and Fielding in particular. He points out that the picaresque element is strong in the early part of the account where Barry though a scoundrel has 'a certain youthful animal charm.' This is certainly true as throughout the story (and especially in the first part) the protagonist displays an immoral behaviour, following a picaresque pattern which is somewhat similar to that of Moll Flanders. His lifestyle, however, also recalls that of Mr. Badman in Bunyan's *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (1680), an allegorical story which places a strong emphasis on the Puritan idea of Original Sin, where Mr. Badman is presented as a 'paragon' of outrageous vicious and sinful behaviour who eventually dies unrepentant of a complication of diseases. Similarly, Barry Lyndon shows how in his life he accumulates all sorts of 'sins,' such as deceit, dishonesty, and treachery, some of which he now seems to be ashamed of. In the army he is easily led into not very respectable ways of entertainment by his fellow soldiers, and he admits: 'I descended gradually to mix with the sergeants, and to share their amusements: drinking and gambling were, I am sorry to say, our principal pastimes.' After quitting military life he travels from one European court to the other gambling heavily, at times losing and at times winning, and he even succeeds in marrying the young widow Lady Lyndon. The cruel treatment of his wife and of his step-son Barry represents the apex of his bad behaviour and of his moral degeneration for which he is eventually punished – he dies of delirium tremens in prison. Despite these similarities (including the ending), I could not find any evidence to support the idea that Thackeray might have had Bunyan's story in mind; I certainly see the picaresque rather than the religious element as predominant in *Barry Lyndon*, and I do think that in spirit it is closer to Defoe, Smollett and Fielding than to Bunyan – but perhaps one could say that the novel sits uncomfortably between these two traditions. Indeed, the opening illustration to the final chapter (Fig. 2.1) suggests a rather unexpected ending for the picaro. It depicts a figure drowning and hopelessly trying to re-emerge from the water; in the background there is a distant castle, the symbol of a lost wealth and nobility. This illustration anticipates the complete downfall of the picaresque hero who, as a reward for not repenting of his 'sins,' can only receive a miserable death. Instead of presenting the traditional ending characterised by the protagonist's willingness to repent or to forgive other people's cruelty, here Thackeray gives his picaro his well-deserved punishment. The final illustration entitled 'The last Days of Barry Lyndon' (Fig. 2.2) portrays Barry in his cell in the Fleet Prison as

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5 Ibid., 73.
Fig. 2.1. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 19, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*

Fig. 2.2. ‘The last days of Barry Lyndon,’ *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*
hopeless, depressed and weak, almost lifeless: ‘... from habits of intoxication, falling into a state of almost imbecility, [he] was tended by his tough old parent as a baby almost, and would cry if deprived of his necessary glass of brandy’ (331). Not even the company of his adored old mother seems to give him comfort. After spending nineteen years in prison, he dies of delirium tremens. This is a major departure not only from the tradition of the picaresque novel, but also from *Barry Lyndon*'s model *Jonathan Wild*. The ending of Thackeray’s novel contrasts with the ‘glorious’ conclusion of Fielding’s work. But we should not be too surprised at this. Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter 1, Thackeray never believed in the redemption of the rogue, and never believed in the existence of ‘heroes.’ Barry’s miserable ending, which recalls that of Catherine, represents an element of continuity in the treatment of rogues in the writer’s fiction.

Thackeray was not alone in his interest in the picaresque world of eighteenth-century novels. A few years before Dickens had written *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) which, as Mark Ford has pointed out, with ‘its open, haphazard progress harks back to the picaresque traditions of the eighteenth century – particularly Smollett and Fielding...’ While reading *Barry Lyndon*, I noticed several similarities with Dickens’s novel and was very intrigued by my ‘discovery.’ Among Dickens’s characters Nicholas is a particularly active one, and has a tendency to become aggressive whenever he witnesses an injustice or a cruelty. This emerges from the early chapters of the novel when, for example, in Chapter 13, Nicholas, after being struck by Mr. Squeers the master for having dared to condemn his heartless treatment of Smike, and of the other pupils in general, attacks and beats him with violence: ‘Smarting with the agony of the blow, and concentrating into that one moment all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon him, wrested the weapon from his hand, and, pinning him by the throat, beat the ruffian till he roared for mercy.’ Despite his propensity to become aggressive, he has good qualities. He is a generous, honest and kind young man as well as a devoted son and brother. Now, Thackeray’s Barry Lyndon is presented as being capable of both uncontrollable violence and sincere affection for his mother and his son, but his impulses, whether negative or positive, are always presented as extreme. If Dickens wanted his hero not to be totally ‘blameless or agreeable,’ Thackeray, on the other hand, wanted his ‘hero’ to be at times very dislikeable and at times somewhat ‘likeable.’

Nicholas and Barry also share, and are motivated by, similar concerns, which also reflect those of their respective creators. As Mark Ford observed, Nicholas feels the need to establish himself as a gentleman, and to recover his ancestral position in the traditional hierarchy (in

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8 Ibid., xvi.
10 Ford (1999), xvi.
the end he buys back his father's estate).\textsuperscript{11} He humbly tries to achieve his goal by working hard and by always being honest. Barry reveals himself as totally obsessed with a false idea of gentlemanliness, and desperately wants to reaffirm his alleged gentlemanly status (this is discussed in more detail in another part of this chapter). But his behaviour is far from correct and humble; he is a rogue and, therefore, ruthlessly uses every available means, including gambling and marrying a wealthy widow, to achieve his goal regardless of other people's feelings. So, if both heroes experience a picaresque growth, they nonetheless take opposite directions. While Nicholas eventually fulfils his dream by recovering his father's property and is rewarded with wealth and marriage (this recalls the ending of Fielding's \textit{Tom Jones}), Barry becomes an incorrigible scoundrel and ends his days miserably in prison; Dickens's story provides a final comic resolution, but Thackeray's novel does not. It is difficult to establish if Thackeray had in mind \textit{Nicholas Nickleby} when he was writing \textit{Barry Lyndon} or if he was somehow fascinated or 'influenced' by it. I suspect that he liked \textit{Nicholas Nickleby} but, that, at the same time, regarded it as yet another 'traditional' novel celebrating a man as a 'hero.' Directly or indirectly Dickens's novel might have increased his desire to promote his idea that human beings, whether they are scoundrels or not, should not be called 'heroes.' The result was the creation of a more 'innovative' picaresque novel where the protagonist, a rogue, is degraded rather than elevated, is punished rather than rewarded.

The depiction of Barry's life at home and in the army unveils his rascality. The protagonist's adventures at home exemplify the idea that he is a rogue by nature. At the beginning of his account he presents himself as a fifteen year-old boy full of energy, confident, proud, but also jealous, irascible and of a disturbing violent nature. His disruptive aggressive behaviour emerges from the very beginning, when he finds out that his cousin Nora, whom he is madly in love with, is engaged to Captain Quin:

I saw Captain Quin and Nora pacing the alley together. Her arm was under his, and the scoundrel was fondling and squeezing the hand which lay closely nestling against his odious waistcoat. \ldots{} I gathered myself up, and, advancing towards the couple on the walk, loosened the blade of the little silver-hilted hanger I always wore in its scabbard; for I was resolved to pass it through the bodies of the delinquents, and spit them like two pigeons. I don't tell what feelings else beside those of rage were passing through my mind; what bitter blank disappointment, what mad wild despair, what a sensation as if the whole world was tumbling from under me \ldots{} (29)

Barry's hostility towards Captain Quin is immediate. First he scornfully refers to him as a 'scoundrel' with an 'odious' waistcoat, then he calls him (and Nora) a 'delinquent.' His

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., xvi and xxvii.
violent nature is emphasised by his excessive reaction, which is to ‘kill’ the couple, and also by his extreme emotions and feelings: ‘rage,’ ‘bitter blank disappointment,’ and ‘mad wild despair,’ which indicate that his instincts are savage, untamed and totally uncontrollable. And, after shooting Captain Quin at duel, and believing him dead, Barry coldly declares to be proud of his deed: ‘I did not feel any horror or fear, young as I was, in seeing my enemy prostrate before me; for I knew that I had met and conquered him honourably in the field, as became a man of my name and blood’ (46-7). This youthful absence of any feeling of pity or guilt for having killed a man is chilling.

In the account of his life in the army he unveils himself as no other than a ‘miles gloriosus.’ Having its origins in Greek and Roman comedy, the stereotype of the braggart soldier is characterised by bombastic language, excessive pride and self-esteem, ability to twist situations and to turn them to his own advantage, and ruthlessness; he is normally subjected to mockery. The character of Pyrgopolynices in *The Miles Gloriosus* by the Roman dramatist Plautus is generally regarded as the prototype. It soon became a popular comic figure in English drama as well. Shakespeare’s Falstaff and Jonson’s Bobadill, for instance, were extremely successful. The former is a fat unscrupulous man who loves jokes and drinking in company, but who is also witty and incredibly skilful at turning other people’s jokes on him to his own advantage. The latter is a boastful, cowardly and deceitful soldier who is at first ridiculed and then punished for his absurd and irritating behaviour. The braggart soldier reappears occasionally in Restoration comedy, for example, in Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) where Captain Brazen, the rival recruiting officer, is portrayed as a silly arrogant man who praises himself for his ‘courage’ in battles, and who manages to marry a wealthy lady only to find himself fobbed off with her maid. Now, Barry Lyndon embodies some, if not all, of the characteristic features of ‘the miles gloriosus.’ He joins the army with the intention of becoming ‘the greatest hero ever known out of Ireland’ (21) and, therefore, of achieving military glory. But the first impact with the army is very unpleasant to him; he, who has ‘a taste for anything but genteel company,’ finds himself ‘forced’ to stay with low soldiers whom he scornfully calls ‘wretched creatures’ (64). He reveals himself as a proud and snobbish young man. The illustrations often emphasise his natural excessive self-esteem and audacity, like this one for example (Fig. 2.3). But the following figure (Fig. 2.4) is even more illuminating. It depicts Barry in Roman attire, thus clearly exposing and mocking him as the perfect embodiment of ‘the miles gloriosus.’

On another level, Barry’s account of his experience in the army reveals a serious issue: the horrors of military life and war. John Peck has pointed out that the fact that Thackeray pays attention to this aspect is unusual and interesting because his contemporaries, including novelists, rarely refer to war, the army or military figures or matters; indeed, until the 1890s
Fig. 2.3. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 6, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*

Fig. 2.4. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 10, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*

Fig. 2.5. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 4, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*
they focus almost exclusively on domestic issues. So why does Thackeray show an interest in military life in *Barry Lyndon*? And does he question war? In an age which saw enormous changes in society, the army was one of the institutions which had remained unaltered. John Peck suggests that Thackeray found refuge in the old code of military behaviour because he was anxious and afraid of these changes and of the disruption they would cause: 'In returning to a traditional military code, Thackeray clings on to known values as his only safeguard against the general instability — including class upheaval — that he detects in contemporary society.' This seems to me a valid explanation. However, it implies that by firmly holding on to the only values he knows Thackeray does not really question the old chivalric code when, on some occasions, I believe he does. In *Barry Lyndon* this emerges particularly in the protagonist's description of the battle of Minden where he killed several enemies, and stole the purse of a dead ensign, as depicted in this capital initial (Fig. 2.5). But instead of being proud of his military deeds, as we would expect from him, he reveals a feeling of uneasiness: 'these are, in truth, not very dignified recollections, and had best be passed over briefly' (73). His reaction becomes stronger when, soon after recalling how his friend Fagan was robbed of his purse as soon as he was killed off, he angrily observes:

Such knaves and ruffians do men in war become! It is well for gentlemen to talk of the age of chivalry; but remember the starving brutes whom they lead — men nursed in poverty, entirely ignorant, made to take a pride in deeds of blood — men who can have no amusement but in drunkenness, debauch, and plunder. It is with these shocking instruments that your great warriors and kings have been doing their murderous work in the world; and while, for instance, we are at the present moment admiring the "Great Frederic," as we call him, and his philosophy, and his liberality, and his military genius, I, who have served him, and been, as it were, behind the scenes of which that great spectacle is composed, can only look at it with horror. What a number of items of human crime, misery, slavery, go to form that sum-total of glory! (73)

The passage above is significant for several reasons. On the one hand, it unveils the true aspect of military life: it is not as exciting, appealing or glorious as it seems from the outside; at the same time, it conveys both a sense of horror and of pity, as well as a concern for the brutal and miserable conditions in which the soldiers are kept and taken advantage of by their Generals who, by inciting them 'to take pride in deeds of blood,' teach them a false idea of military glory. Moreover, Barry's words convey the typical Thackerayan attitude towards 'greatness' which we have already discussed in Chapter 1. Military leaders adopt cruel

13 Ibid., 58.
methods (‘shocking instruments’) in order to perform their ‘murderous work’; people foolishly consider them ‘great’ and thus celebrate them as heroes. But their deeds are far from great and glorious; indeed, they are a cause of human misery.

On the other hand, interestingly the passage contains a ‘pacifist’ message. It condemns war itself for its power to reduce men to a barbarous state, indicated by the use of words like ‘knaves,’ ‘ruffians,’ and ‘starving brutes,’ where they are pushed to murder other men without any regard for the loss of human lives whatsoever. War awakens man’s most primitive and brutal instincts, thus degrading and dehumanising mankind itself. If Barry is a braggart soldier, and he is consequently mocked for being such, here he is also the bearer of a serious message regarding military action. Not being able to stand the horrible condition of military life and the violence of war, Barry leaves the army. For a moment we see him as a better person. On this particular occasion, then, Thackeray through Barry’s words, reactions (anger and compassion) and cynicism reveals a feeling of uneasiness with the military code. He exposes the absurdity of war, conveys his disapproval of the way it degrades mankind, and he even promotes an anti-war ideology. If in some respects he seems to be questioning the validity of a life based on military principles, he is nonetheless not ready to renounce the old code completely; he does not subvert it because he has not found a valid alternative code of behaviour yet. Thus, for the time being he can only hold on to the old one. As we will see in Chapter 5, Thackeray’s problematic attitude towards military principles will emerge again in *The History of Henry Esmond*.

So far we have defined Barry as a picaro and as a miles gloriosus, but he can also be seen as the embodiment of another popular figure in nineteenth-century literature, the adventurer. The basic traits of the personality of this type are self-knowledge (and usually also knowledge of the world), inner strength, courage, wit, presence of mind and charm; his life revolves around extraordinary events or actions, around accidents and around the excitement of adventure in general. Nineteenth-century writers were interested in the idea of adventure as a way of experiencing life; they saw it as a path which could lead to self-development and maturation. In particular, they were intrigued by the adventurer as a character who is capable of judging himself and his actions, who can reflect on his misbehaviour and his mistakes, learn from them, and ultimately experience an inner growth. In Bulwer-Lytton’s *Pelham: or The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) the protagonist is an ingenious dandy who sees life as an adventurous game where rules can be bent and who enjoys the pleasures of the fashionable society. But he progressively moves towards a more responsible and sensitive approach to life and learns to appreciate the values of marriage, moderation and benevolence. In the end he retires to the countryside with his wife where he rejoices its quietness and where intends to dedicate himself to ‘solitude and study.’ In Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1849-50) the hero is
initially portrayed as a young rebellious, undisciplined and impulsive boy. His various 'adventures' at school (Salem House), at Murdstone and Grimby's warehouse in London, at college and at the firm of Spenlow and Jorkins force him to undergo a gradual emotional development. His impulsive nature at first causes him to be overwhelmed by his emotions and leads him to marry a pretty but childish girl, Dora Spenlow, who does not make him happy. It is at this point that he realises the necessity for him to learn to control his emotional impulses in order to avoid making other disastrous mistakes. And his final union with Agnes, which is the result of a sincere growing appreciation and affection for her, exemplifies his achieved emotional maturation. As we will see later on in this chapter, in some respects, Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon* also shows the protagonist experiencing an emotional growth through his expressions of paternal love.

The adventurer remains a popular figure in the twentieth century. The sociologist Georg Simmel, for example, expresses his interest in this type in an essay entitled 'The Adventurer' (1911) where he explains the characteristics of the behaviour of this personage and also his peculiar approach to life. The following remark sums up his way of life: 'The adventurer relies to some extent on his own strength, but above all on his own luck; more properly, on a peculiarly undifferentiated unity of the two. Strength, of which he is certain, and luck, of which he is uncertain, subjectively combine into a sense of certainty.' Simmel refers to Casanova as the personage that best exemplifies his theory. His observations can easily be applied to Barry Lyndon, whom men call 'the shameless Irish adventurer' (205), and who is the typical individual who lives in the present firmly relying on his 'strength.' This consists in his self-confidence and high opinion of himself — in chapter 13 he gives the following definition of himself: 'One of the most accomplished, the tallest, the most athletic, and the handsomest gentlemen of Europe, as I was then . . .' (192). But he cannot rely on 'luck,' which he regards as something totally unpredictable, and, also, more importantly, as the main cause of his misadventures: 'Alas! we are the sport of destiny. When I consider upon what small circumstances all the great events of my life have turned, I can hardly believe myself to have been anything but a puppet in the hands of Fate; which has played the most fantastic tricks upon me' (58). Nonetheless, he never allows the uncertainty of 'luck' to interfere with his 'strength,' thus combining the two into that sense of overall certainty pointed out by Simmel.

Furthermore, Barry thinks of himself as another Casanova and often compares himself to this figure for his success among women. According to Edgar Harden, Barry's moral vacuity makes him inferior to his model: '. . . he basically differs from Casanova by being a “moral

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15 Ibid., 194.
idiot” instead of one who knowingly redefines moral codes.16 This is exemplified by his ‘way of fascinating women,’ which he adopts in order to seduce Lady Lyndon completely. He flatters her with compliments:

‘... I swear to thee, by the spotlessness of thy own soul, by the brilliancy of thy immittigable eyes, by everything pure and chaste in heaven and in thy own heart, that I will never cease from following thee! Scorn I can bear, and have borne at thy hands. Indifference I can surmount; ‘tis a rock which my energy will climb over, a magnet which attracts the dauntless iron of my soul!’ And it was true, I wouldn’t have left her – no, though they had kicked me downstairs every day I presented myself at her door.

That is my way of fascinating women. Let the man who has to make his fortune in life remember this maxim. Attacking is his only secret. Dare, and the world always yields: or, if it beat you sometimes, dare again, and it will succumb. (205)

First Barry praises her purity (‘spotlessness’), innocence, chastity and shining beauty. Then, by declaring that he will never cease to follow her, he reveals his obstinacy but also his obsession with the idea of obtaining her. He emphasises his strong attraction to her by using the metaphor of the ‘dauntless iron’ which is inevitably attracted to a magnet. The last few lines of the quoted passage summarise Barry’s absurd motto that the key to seducing women successfully is to ‘attack’ them, to chase and obsess them constantly until they surrender. This reveals not only his moral vacuity, but also his aggressive nature.

Besides his basic picaresque nature, Barry embodies one of the typical figures that recur constantly in Thackeray’s fiction, that of the sham gentleman – his antecedent is certainly Deuceace in The Yellowplush Papers. According to Robin Gilmour, between 1840 and 1880 the idea and nature of gentlemanliness became burning debated issues and went through a major process of redefinition.17 He observes that ‘the intensity of such preoccupation reflected the needs and aspirations of new groups struggling to establish themselves in a society which was, and remained for most of the nineteenth century, dominated by the land-owning aristocracy.’18 In the eighteenth century everyone agreed that gentlemanliness was determined by birth and rank, that it was merely a social category; the old gentleman was easily recognisable from his fashionable appearance, his excessive ornamented outfit which he was very proud of. During the Regency he was still a member of the aristocracy but his flamboyance diminished considerably. In the Victorian age which saw the rise of the English middle classes and their struggle to establish their position and values, people began to

18 Ibid., 2.
question the validity of the old definition of gentlemanliness. There was much confusion and uncertainty about what constituted a gentleman, but it was gradually becoming to be considered a moral as well as a social category.\textsuperscript{19} The pre-Victorian novel \textit{Pelham: or The Adventures of a Gentleman} (1828) by Bulwer-Lytton already seems to suggest that the old idea of gentlemanliness should be discarded. The aristocracy is shown in its phase of decadence; it is criticised and satirised for its arrogance and hypocrisy, for being concerned only with society and fashion, and also for its inability to present itself as a model of moral behaviour. In the Victorian period the figure of the gentleman is seen as progressively abandoning social class attributes and assuming moral qualities; once this process of moralisation has come to a standstill, the idea of the new gentleman, of the Victorian gentleman, emerges: he is a gentle man who lives by the Christian principles of love, generosity and forgiveness, and who does not care about money or rank. The novelists of the age were increasingly eager to affirm and promote this type of gentlemanliness. Mrs. Craik’s \textit{John Halifax, Gentleman} (1856), for instance, shows how the protagonist John, a poor honest orphan, earns his gentlemanly status not by birth and rank but by his own moral integrity. Dickens also attempts to do so in \textit{Great Expectations} (1860-1) where Pip, in his pursuit of gentility, gradually learns that a man’s true gentlemanliness lies in his ability to demonstrate affection and pity, and eventually recognises this in Joe.

From the beginning of his literary career Thackeray shows a deep preoccupation with the idea of gentility, so much so that it becomes one of the main themes in his fiction. He wanted to make sure that people could distinguish the true gentleman from the false one, that they would admire the former and scorn the latter. Thus, in \textit{Barry Lyndon}, he presents the reader with a character who is a paragon of sham gentlemanliness and who is exposed for being such. From the very beginning of his memoirs Barry arrogantly claims to have gentlemanly origins: ‘... truth compels me to assert that my family was the noblest of the island [Ireland], and, perhaps, of the universal world’ (4). He shows himself as proud of his alleged noble roots, and also as an irritating snob, when he affirms: ‘... as a man of the world, I have learned to despise heartily the claims of some \textit{pretenders} to high birth who have no more genealogy than the lacquey who cleans my boots ...’ (3-4). His words are full of contempt for those people who pretend to be members of the nobility. But Barry himself does not really have ‘gentlemanly origins’; interestingly and ironically the word ‘pretenders’ appears in italics. He manages to hide his poverty by adhering to false standards of gentlemanliness, such as feigning, lying, drinking and gambling, and he is successful most of the time. For example, on his way to Dublin when he stops at an inn, he remarks:

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 3.
Seeing my handsome appearance, silver-hilted sword, and well-filled valise, my landlord made free to send up a jug of claret without my asking; and charged, you may be sure, pretty handsomely for it in the bill. No gentleman in those good old days went to bed without a good share of liquor to set him sleeping, and on this my first day's entrance into the world, I made a point to act the fine gentleman completely; and, I assure you, succeeded in my part to admiration. (49)

The passage clearly shows that Barry has a distorted idea of gentelmanliness. He thinks that one can immediately recognise a gentleman by his look. Usually this figure is beautiful, elegant and valorous, and, of course, wealthy (which is indicated by the 'well-filled valise'). Because a gentleman always receives a special treatment wherever he goes, Barry decides to 'act the fine gentleman completely' (the italics are mine), to enter this role by assuming the physical appearance and the moral behaviour of this highly respected personage. Therefore, he tells big lies in order to prove his status, as for instance when he is conversing with Captain Fitzsimons: 'Not to be behindhand with him, I spoke of my own estates and property as if I was as rich as a duke. I told all the stories of the nobility I had ever heard from my mother, and some of that, perhaps, I had invented . . .' (55). In the army he gets involved in gambling and drinking, forms of entertainment that he will continue to pursue on his journey to various European courts. Throughout his adventures he maintains his firm belief that his gentlemanly look always helps him avoid disasters: 'Such, at least, is the advantage of having a gentlemanly appearance; it has saved me many a time since by procuring me credit when my fortunes were at their lowest ebb' (101). Thackeray cleverly uses the character of Barry to achieve a double purpose: to expose a false idea of gentelmanliness on one level, and to consolidate the idea of true gentelmanliness, which includes social status but also, and more importantly, a set of moral qualities, on another level. He will develop the figure of the sham gentleman in *Vanity Fair* with George Osborne who is a gentleman by birth and rank but who lacks those moral qualities that became part of the Victorian definition of gentleman.

If Barry is a scoundrel and a sham gentleman (and we certainly dislike him for that), he is also presented as a very emotional and sentimental person. Some scholars believe that his soft side is just another form of pretension, and that therefore we should not take his feelings seriously. Peter Shillingsburg, for example, reckons that this is all part of Thackeray's ironic game; he affirms that he is 'poking a stick in the eye of readers who enjoyed sentimentalized stories of victim criminals,' thus suggesting that in some respects this novel was meant to criticise Ainsworth's and Bulwer-Lytton's fiction. Other critics, however, consider Barry's sentimentality genuine. Barbara Hardy in this regard affirms: 'There is no virtue in Barry

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Lyndon, but he is endowed with some capacity for what we may call "good" feeling. He is brilliantly shown as a master of almost all the forms of false feeling, but is allowed genuineness when he feels nostalgia, filial affection, paternal love, and hostility to war.\(^{21}\) I agree with her. In the novel there is a strong emphasis on Barry's emotional life which, I believe, aims at stressing and promoting the importance of human feeling. It seems to appeal to the reader for his/her sincere compassionate response, and it is in this particular aspect that the influence of Sentimental Comedy with its concern with sympathy and feeling can be traced. In particular I want to consider Barry's feelings of melancholy and nostalgia on the one hand, and his paternal affection on the other hand.

While away from Ireland Barry misses his mother and is often homesick. During his military career especially, which is very different from his expectations, he feels lonely and unhappy. The receipt of a letter from his mother provokes feelings of melancholy and nostalgia for his parent and for the old 'happy days' at home:

Four months after my letter to my mother, I got, under cover to the Captain, a reply, which created in my mind a yearning after home, and a melancholy which I cannot describe. I had not seen the dear soul's writing for five years. All the old days, and the fresh happy sunshine of the old green fields in Ireland, and her love, and my uncle, and Phil Purcell, and everything that I had done and thought, came back to me as I read the letter; and when I was alone I cried over it, as I hadn't done since the day Nora jilted me. (113-14)

He calls his mother a 'dear soul,' and he recalls her love for him, which clearly indicates Barry's sincere affection for his parent (Thackeray here emphasises filial duty and love, which, of course, in the Victorian age were identified and promoted as middle-class virtues). He remembers the bright colours of his home country and that 'fresh happy sunshine' which used to give him joy. Overwhelmed by the recollections of such sweet memories and by the strong desire to return home, he weeps. A few pages later, when he narrates how he met his uncle, we see him reacting in the same way: 'As I spoke, I burst into tears; I can't tell why; but I had seen none of my kith or kin for six years, and my heart longed for someone' (121). Then, in chapter 14, Barry returns to Ireland and revisits his old home now in a state of decay. Old memories suddenly awaken in him, and he remembers his happy childhood, his father 'in green and gold' and his mother 'in a flowered sack, with patches on her face.' While reflecting on the power of past recollections, he observes: 'Some day, I wonder, will everything we have seen and done come and flash across our minds in this way? I had rather not. I felt so as I sat upon the bench at Castle Brady, and thought of the bygone times' (212).

Barry suggests that memories are bitter-sweet; they bring you back to the old happy days, thus giving you a temporary sense of relief and joy, but, at the same time, they also provoke an intense longing for the past itself, thus increasing your sadness and nostalgia. The reader easily acknowledges the sincerity of Barry’s feelings here and is brought to share them. But it is in his demonstration of paternal love that the reader is moved considerably.

Barry’s emotional life develops and intensifies when an important event occurs, the birth of his child. It is at this stage that he begins to cherish the value of paternal love. In his account he conveys his deep affection for his son Bryan several times. A first example can be found in the following illustration (Fig. 2.6) where Barry makes a sumptuous entrance with his child, lovingly holding his little hand. Then, later on in the chapter, we find another example when he recollects a happy event in Bryan’s childhood: ‘Another day (it was Bryan’s birthday) we were giving a grand ball and gala at Hackton, and it was time for my little Bryan to make his appearance among us, as he usually did in the smartest little court-suit you ever saw (ah me! but it brings tears into my old eyes now to think of the bright looks of that darling little face)’ (292). Barry calls his son ‘my little Bryan’ and then ‘that darling face,’ which indicate his genuine love for him. His parenthetic observation anticipates a sad event, Bryan’s premature accidental death (he suffers several injuries after falling from his black horse at the age of nine). And Barry’s grief is soon brought to our attention when, remembering how his son was ‘a boy of amazing high spirit’ and rather uncontrollable nature, he exclaims: ‘If it had not been for that, he might have lived to this day: he might – but why repine? Is he not in a better place? would the heritage of a beggar do any service to him? It is best as it is – Heaven be good to us! – Alas! that I, his father, should be left to deplore him’ (302). His words are full of regret and pain which are further increased by his desperate attempt to convince himself that ‘it is best as it is.’ We cannot but share his feelings and feel compassion for him.

Our sympathetic response reaches the apex at the moment of Barry’s account of Bryan’s death. Barry observes how during his son’s two days of agony his ‘dear angel’s temper’ changed; indeed, the boy asked his parents forgiveness for his disobedience and begged them not to quarrel but to love each other. Barry and his wife are moved by their son’s words: ‘His mother was very much affected by these admonitions from the poor suffering angel’s mouth; and I was so too. . . . At last, after two days, he died. There he lay, the hope of my family, the pride of my manhood, the link which had kept me and my Lady Lyndon together’ (306). Barry refers to his son using the word ‘angel’ twice, which not only suggests an image of purity and innocence, but also reveals Barry’s adoration for Bryan, his only ‘hope’ and ‘pride’; since the day his son was born Barry’s life had revolved mainly around him.
Fig. 2.6. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 18, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon*
Thackeray intended to achieve several aims by emphasising the protagonist’s emotional and sentimental side. By showing him as fully capable of genuine feelings of nostalgia for his country and of filial and paternal love, he uses him as a vehicle of sentimentality with the intent to celebrate and, perhaps, even to promote the importance of Love in its various manifestations. But he also wants to challenge the reader with Barry’s complex and contradictory personality, so he alternates the depiction of Barry the rogue with that of Barry the sentimentalist. Barry’s violent temper contrasts with his anti-war attitude; his cruel treatment of Lady Lyndon and his step-son Bullingdon contrasts with his attachment to his mother and to his son Bryan; his desire to consolidate his fortune by marrying a wealthy lady contrasts with his early wish to find true love. Barry’s naïveté, moral vacuity and inconsistency, as Harden has pointed out, distance the readers and make them laugh at him; their laughter, however, is often accompanied by a sense of horror. Indeed, we find ourselves laughing at his snobbishness and pride; we disapprove of his vices, amorality and violence, and we are irritated by his behaviour in general; we certainly strongly dislike him for his bad treatment of Lady Lyndon and for his antipathy for Bullingdon. Every time we witness his outbursts of sentimentality, however, we do tend to get a more positive view of him; we are easily led to share his feelings and his sufferings, and we somehow ‘like’ him. But Thackeray never allows his readers to reach a stable response to his ‘hero,’ and, therefore, forces them to assume an active role, to continuously move back and forth, to feel at times detached and at times involved, and to constantly readjust their view of Barry. Some of us can get extremely frustrated because we feel that we can never take him for granted. But that is exactly what Thackeray wants us to do. Indeed, he adopts this technique to allow us to see the changeable, unpredictable and often contradictory nature of human experience, and, also, to distrust any single interpretation of a person. As we will see in Chapter 3, Thackeray will adopt a similar technique in the portrayal of Amelia in *Vanity Fair*.

Thackeray uses Barry Lyndon’s first-person narrative as a vehicle of sentimentality but, above all, as a vehicle of satire. An example of a brief ironic observation can be found in Chapter 17 when, after marrying Lady Lyndon, Barry rejoices at his restored wealth: ‘It is wonderful how the possession of wealth brings out the virtues of a man; or, at any rate, acts as a varnish or lustre to them, and brings out their brilliancy and colour in a manner never known when the individual stood in the cold grey atmosphere of poverty. I assure you it was a short time before I was a pretty fellow of the first class . . . (263). In his absurd belief that wealth makes one a better man, improving not only one’s appearance but also one’s behaviour, Barry clearly exposes his shallowness. But it is in some of his longer observations that the best passages of satire can be found. I have selected two examples. The first one is his nearly

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convincing defence of gambling. Barry narrates his own and his uncle’s success at play at the Court of Dresden, emphasising how their behaviour was always totally correct. Despite their alleged honesty, they are disliked because of their not very respectable ‘activity’ which Barry, on the contrary, sees as ‘honourable’:

In later times, a vulgar national prejudice has chosen to cast a slur upon the character of men of honour engaged in the profession of play; but I speak of the good old days in Europe, before the cowardice of the French aristocracy (in the shameful Revolution that served them right) brought discredit and ruin upon our order. They cry fie now upon men engaged in play; but I should like to know how much more honourable their modes of livelihood are than ours. The broker of the Exchange who bulls and bears, and buys and sells, and dabbles with lying loans, and trades on State secrets, what is he but a gamester? The merchant who deals in teas and tallow, is he any better? His bales of dirty indigo are his dice, his cards come up every year instead of every ten minutes, and the sea is his green table. . . . It is a conspiracy of the middle classes against gentlemen. . . . I say that play was an institution of chivalry: it has been wrecked, along with other privileges of men of birth. (137-8)

We immediately notice how ingeniously and absurdly Barry twists words and ideas in order to impose his view on the reader and to persuade him/her that he is absolutely right. He defends gambling by pointing out that it is a perfectly honourable ‘profession,’ ‘an institution of chivalry’ and a ‘privilege of men of birth,’ which reveals his distorted view of the concepts of honour, chivalry and even gentlemanliness. In order to reinforce his defence and prove his point, he also unveils that other so called ‘respectable’ professions are nothing but other versions of gambling, therefore gambling itself should not be considered shameful. His irony reaches the apex when he affirms that the prejudiced attitude towards gambling is no other than a ‘conspiracy’ organised by the middle classes in order to eliminate the privileges of the aristocracy.

Barry’s description of his son’s young private tutor from Oxford provides another opportunity for satire. Reverend Edmund Lavender is hired to teach Bryan Latin, grammar, and ‘the other qualifications of a gentleman.’ Father and son soon take advantage of the poor tutor’s submissive behaviour:

He was the means of making a deal of fun there. He was the butt of all our jokes, and bore them with the most admirable and martyrlike patience. He was one of that sort of men who would rather be kicked by great man than not to be noticed by him; and I have often put his wig into the fire in the face of the company, when he would laugh at the joke as well as any man there. It was a delight to put him on a high-mettled horse, and send him after the hounds,
pale, sweating, calling on us, for Heaven's sake, to stop, and holding on for dear life by the mane and the crupper. How it happened that the fellow was never killed I know not; . . . . (284)

Barry takes pleasure in mocking Lavender for his 'most admirable and martyrlike patience,' that is for his incapacity, or maybe unwillingness, to react to the cruel jokes afflicted on him. On a more general level, he seems to suggest that, despite their great knowledge, college tutors are not very smart after all, if they allow themselves to receive such humiliations. Although the way Barry and Bryan disrespectfully abuse the tutor is appalling, because of the ironic tone adopted in the description the whole situation emerges as rather comic and entertaining. Indeed, as John Dodds has pointed out, it is precisely Barry Lyndon's 'completely ironic point of view' which makes Barry's self-exposure 'infinitely amusing' rather than tedious and depressing.23

Scholarly opinions on Barry Lyndon are divided. Some regard it as a total failure, while others consider it one of Thackeray's greatest achievements. It is well-known that Thackeray encountered many difficulties in writing the novel, as his annotations in his diary of the year 1844 clearly reveal. On January 20th he wrote: 'In these days got through the fag end of Chap IV of Barry Lyndon with a great deal of dullness unwillingness & labor.'24 Then, later, on November 1st he annotated: 'Wrote Barry — but slowly & with great difficulty,' and on the following day: 'Wrote Barry, with no more success than yesterday'; finally on November 3rd he wrote: 'Finished Barry after great throes late at night.'25 These annotations indicate how distressed and consumed Thackeray felt during the composition of his novel and right to the very end. His diary might suggest to some scholars that Barry Lyndon was destined to be unsuccessful from the beginning of its creation. David Parker certainly considers it a significant failure in Thackeray's career, an 'exercise of irony' in which we see the novelist faltering.26 His evaluation of the novel sounds extreme to me. According to John Dodds, few of Thackeray's works seem to have more vitality and energy than Barry Lyndon.27 Anthony Trollope's review of it is highly positive: 'In imagination, language, construction, and general literary capacity, Thackeray never did anything more remarkable than Barry Lyndon.'28 And he also points out: 'For an assumed tone of continued irony, maintained through the long memoir of a life, never becoming tedious, never unnatural, astounding us rather by its naturalness, I know nothing equal to Barry Lyndon.'29 Edgar Harden's perception of Barry Lyndon is neither positive nor negative, but he suggests a different way of approaching such

23 Dodds (1941), 74.
24 Letters, II, 141.
25 Ibid., 156.
26 David Parker, 'Thackeray's Barry Lyndon,' Ariel, 6, 4 (1975), 68.
27 Dodds (1941), 72.
29 Ibid., 75.
an unusual novel by emphasising that it was ‘an experiment in narration.’\textsuperscript{30} If this novel might be seen as a failure when compared to his eighteenth-century model, it is not so when we consider that it was a remarkable narrative experiment and a huge challenge for the writer, rather than simply an attempt to imitate other novels. We have seen how its protagonist partly embodies the traditional figures of the picaro and the braggart soldier, and partly goes beyond these conventional stereotypes. Barry displays an immoral behaviour, yet he dies unrepentant; he is a ‘miles gloriosus,’ yet he conveys his horror for war and military life, which reduce men to a barbarous state. For his impulsiveness and way of relying on his own strength and luck he can also be seen as the incarnation of the adventurer. But, more importantly, Thackeray presents him as a model of sham gentlemanliness with the intent to ridicule the false idea of the gentleman while affirming the concept of true (Victorian) gentility, which is determined by the existence of the Christian moral qualities of love and forgiveness, rather than by social status. Barry is a rogue but he is also an emotional and sentimental person; the emphasis on his feeling of nostalgia and melancholia, as well as on his paternal love, which reveals the writer’s concern with the promotion of middle-class humanistic principle, strongly demands the reader’s sympathetic response, and suggests the possible influence of Sentimental Comedy in this novel. Thackeray effectively uses his protagonist both as a vehicle of satire and as a vehicle of sentimentality; he alternates the portrayal of his roguish side with that of his softer side, never allowing us to achieve a stable view of him with the aim of making us aware of the contradictory nature of human behaviour and also of inducing us to disbelieve any single view of a person. By partly adhering to the ‘comic tradition’ and partly distancing himself from its conventions, then, Thackeray created an ingenious and original work, an unusual picaresque novel which challenges readers of all times with its irritating but at the same time amusing protagonist and with its complex ironic perspective. I reckon that this experimental novel, with its merits and its faults, should be considered a success overall because it helped Thackeray to consolidate his narrative style and technique considerably, thus paving the way for his most successful novel \textit{Vanity Fair}.  

\textsuperscript{30} Harden (1998), 130.
Chapter 3

‘Satire and Sentiment can visit arm in arm together’: *Vanity Fair*

Thackeray’s most successful novel *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* was first published in twenty monthly parts (1847-1848) with the subtitle *Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society*. Although the story is set in the Regency, it reflects not only the world immediately preceding Queen Victoria’s reign but also the Victorian age itself, and, in some respects, even the world we live in today. The book’s most notable feature is the complex comic vision it offers, one capable of embracing both satire and sentimentality. In Chapter 17, Vanity Fair is defined as a place where sometimes ‘Satire and Sentiment can visit arm in arm together; where you light on the strangest contrasts laughable and tearful: where you may be gentle and pathetic, or savage and cynical, with perfect propriety.’¹ These opposing elements serve Thackeray’s purpose: to show the contradictory nature of human behaviour. In this chapter, I will argue that *Vanity Fair* can be defined as a traditional yet innovative comedy of manners and sentimental comedy.

In this novel Thackeray develops two themes found in Restoration plays, the follies of human nature and especially man’s desire for money, which in the Victorian era has become a major preoccupation. He responds with irony, exposing and mocking people for their absurd worship of material things. Becky is a ‘paragon’ in this regard, but even the apparently ‘innocent’ Dobbin and Amelia are shown as being affected by the materialistic society they inhabit. Traditional polarities are adopted to describe the world of Vanity Fair: the merchant and the aristocrat, the town and the city, and, above all, the wit and the fool incarnated in Becky and Amelia; but a new polarity, the false and the true gentleman (George and Dobbin), is also added. Thackeray’s characters are traditional types but they also fit into his own classification of people, the Snobs. More importantly, Becky and Amelia, on whose creation Fielding’s *Amelia* might have had some influence, are the true makers of Thackeray’s comedy: the makers of the comedy of manners and of sentimental comedy respectively. The narrator at times sympathises with Amelia’s feelings and at times cruelly mocks them, but to what purpose? In terms of narrative technique and style, Thackeray followed Fielding’s example, creating an omniscient and intrusive narrator with multiple roles whose comments, however, leave us puzzled, and whose irony is stronger and more pervasive.

¹ *Vanity Fair, Works*, I, 197.
A few preliminary observations on the concept of comedy will help us reach a better understanding of Thackeray’s novel. In *Vanity Fair* in some respects he returns to the classical idea of comedy (similarly, in the creation of their comic plays Restoration playwrights partly followed the example of Ben Jonson, who used several traditional and conventional comedic elements, and not of Shakespeare, who in many ways violated the classical rules). Although not a play, from the beginning it is clear that the story has to be seen as a theatrical performance where its characters are merely puppets. This is also indicated by the original front cover for the monthly numbers (Fig. 3.1) which depicts a clown narrating the story to a rather distracted audience. Every character, including the clown, wears asses’ ears, which emphasises the foolishness of men and women. A careful analysis of the structure of the story reveals that it partly follows the rules established by Aristotle (later redefined by Dryden), and partly breaks with them. In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), Dryden explains that to be perfect a play must be divided into four parts: Protasis (the entrance), Epistasis (the working up of the plot), Catastasis (the counter-turn, which destroys the audience’s expectation and brings in new difficulties) and Catastrophe (the unravelling of the plot).\(^2\) The plot of *Vanity Fair* can be split into four parts: Chapter 1 to 11 (when Reverend Bute Crawley and his wife are introduced) form the Protasis; Chapter 12 to 31 (which follows the lives of Becky and Amelia and that of their respective husbands) form the Epistasis; Chapter 32 (when George is killed off) to 55 (when Rawdon leaves for Coventry Island) form the Catastasis; and Chapter 56 (when Dobbin and Jos Sedley return to England) to the end form the Catastrophe. For its well-constructed plot *Vanity Fair* certainly deserves the award of ‘perfect comedy.’

But in order to be ‘perfect’ in the classical sense a play must also respect the three Unities of Time, Place and Action. Robert Polhemus has defined *Vanity Fair* as a comedy of shifting perspectives where the three unities are not respected.\(^3\) With regard to the unity of Time, we immediately notice that the comedy breaks with the convention. Indeed, it follows the story of three generations, thus embracing a long period of time: between 1813 and 1831. Moreover, time is made subjective and it consists in a pursuit for happiness and private fulfilment.\(^4\) The unity of Place is not respected either. In the novel we see the characters in London, in Hampshire and in Brighton, but also abroad, in Brussels or Paris for example. Even the Action does not conform to the rules. *Vanity Fair* includes a series of actions rather than a single one, and involves two ‘heroines’ rather than one. For breaking the above conventions,

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\(^4\) Ibid., 158.
Vanity Fair: 
PEN AND PENCIL SKETCHES OF ENGLISH SOCIETY. 

BY W. M. THACKERAY,

Author of "The Irish Sketch Books," "Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo," of "Jamaica Diary" and the "Scrab Papers" in "Punch" &c. &c.

LONDON:
PUBLISHED AT THE PUNCH OFFICE, 85, FLEET STREET.

J. MURRAY, EDINBURGH; J. M'LEOD, GLASGOW; J. M'GLASHAN, DUBLIN.

1847.

Fig. 3.1. Front cover for the monthly numbers, *Vanity Fair*
hero), it does have a unity of theme.\textsuperscript{5} He points out that Thackeray, instead of using the traditional principle of continuity of action, uses the contrast of characters and the actions they perform as a principle of structure.\textsuperscript{6} These observations on the perfect/imperfect comic form of \textit{Vanity Fair} suggest that in this novel Thackeray adopted the classical conventions of comedy but also departed from them.

In \textit{Vanity Fair}, Thackeray takes and develops some of the themes and preoccupations of Restoration Comedy, such as the follies of human nature and man's hunger for money. According to Robert Polhemus, Thackeray took the title and the concept of the novel from the Vanity Fair episode in Bunyan's \textit{The Pilgrim's Progress} (1678 and 1684); nonetheless, he 'expands and makes specific for his century this allegorical vision of the world as one vast commercial enterprise.'\textsuperscript{7} A very early pencil sketch of the front cover for the novel (Fig. 3.2), which shows the city of Vanity Fair in the background, confirms this idea. In this regard Anne Isabella Thackeray observes: 'The pencil sketch for the cover is very slight because the few pencil lines are among the first that went to build the city his fancy founded and peopled, and named by the well-known name.'\textsuperscript{8} This early drawing also suggests that the theatrical aspect of the story was not part of the original plan; it was an afterthought. Thackeray's vision of the world as a Vanity Fair is clear from the beginning of the novel. In ‘Before the Curtain,’ the prologue of the novel, he anticipates the content of ‘the performance’ which is going to take place:

There is a great quantity of eating and drinking, making love and jilting, laughing and the contrary, smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing and fiddling: . . . Yes, this is VANITY FAIR: not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy . . . . There are scenes of all sorts: some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of low high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business; the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery, and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles. (liii-liv)

The vanity of life and the follies of human nature are clearly the main subject of the novel. Thackeray declares his intention to represent the vices of men and women rather than their virtues: 'eating and drinking,' 'smoking' and 'dancing' excessively, flirting, committing

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{7} Polhemus (1980), 127.
\textsuperscript{8} William Makepeace Thackeray, \textit{The Orphan of Pimlico and other sketches, fragments, and drawings}, with some notes by Anne Isabella Thackeray (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1876).
Fig. 3.2. Early pencil sketch for the front cover of Vanity Fair
adultery, deceiving and being dishonest, indicated by the words ‘cheating’ and ‘fiddling.’ In this amoral and noisy world of Vanity Fair the characters’ actions, which are ‘of all sorts,’ cannot be other than vain, vicious and absurd. In his work *Thackeray*, Trollope affirms that ‘. . . here, in this novel, the vicious and the absurd have been made to be of more importance than the good and the noble. . . . Thackeray thought that more can be done by exposing the vices than extolling the virtues of mankind.’9 Indeed, Thackeray represents, exposes and mocks the social and moral behaviour of men and women, and conveys his view of the world through the actions, lives and personalities of his characters.

Man’s desire for money is a central theme and preoccupation in *Vanity Fair* where money and possessions are presented as the means of achieving social status and power. Restoration playwrights had conveyed a similar view, although it was centred on the aristocracy’s concern about the ambitious ascendancy of merchants and its economic repercussions. In *Vanity Fair*, the merchants have already obtained their place in society. Therefore, the issue of man’s obsession with materialism is treated with an upper middle-class perspective in mind. The Victorian age witnessed a shift from the countryside to the city, from a life based on land ownership to a modern urban life based on trade and manufacturing, and a huge increase in wealth and in capital investments in all continents. The success of capitalism encouraged the accumulation of material possession, such as magnificent carriages, elegantly furnished houses, splendid outfits, among the upper classes. Money became the dominant ‘value,’ and an important part of life in Victorian Britain. The ownership of finances determined one’s position in society, facilitated advancement in the social ladder and granted respectability among the upper and middle classes. The lack or loss of them, however, was considered a disgrace; this ‘forced’ people to desperately try to obtain money in order to be taken into consideration. But the rise of capitalism (as well as the development of new technologies) also caused more disparity between rich and poor. As Frederic Harrison observed, the new era made the rich richer, and more powerful, and the poor poorer and weaker: ‘. . . mechanical improvements pour more wealth into the lap of the wealthy, more luxury into the lives of the luxurious, and give a fresh turn to the screw which presses on the lives of the poor; . . . our inventions double and treble the power of the rich, and double and treble the helplessness of the poor . . . .’10 Nonetheless, many Victorians showed excitement for the industrial and technological development of England and its increasing wealth and power. The historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay was optimistic and immensely proud of the English constitution; in his famous *History of England* (1849 and 1855) he expressed his enthusiasm

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9 Trollope (1879), 93-4.
for the progress of England in the nineteenth century: 'For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement. . . . It will be my endeavour to relate the history of the people as well as the history of the government, to trace the progress of useful and ornamental arts . . . .' Some intellectuals even began to promote the idea of individualism and the necessity to earn a decent salary to improve one’s social position. In his manual Self-Help (1859), Samuel Smiles tried to initiate the idea of independence of character, of self-made individualism, especially among the working classes: "'Heaven helps those who help themselves' is a well-tried maxim, embodying in a small compass the results of vast human experience. The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength." He believed that strong will and hard work were the keys to success in life and to social advance, and that one should create and defend one’s own space at all costs, even at the expense of another human being. This form of individualism would eventually benefit the entire community.

Other Victorians, however, experienced anxiety and a sense of unsettlement in a world that was changing too quickly for its inhabitants to be able to adapt and which presented money as an essential ‘value.’ Some intellectuals argued that commercial and technological progress did not bring any real improvement in life after all. For example, Frederic Harrison complained that material acquisitions and new discoveries ‘only multiply the human instruments’ (they create more books, more means of transportation, more machines and so on), and that ‘when we multiply the appliances of human life, we do not multiply the years of life, nor the days in the year, nor the hours in the day. Nor do we multiply the powers of thought, or of endurance; much less do we multiply self-restraint, unselfishness, and a good heart. What we really multiply are our difficulties and doubts." Thus, Harrison saw the material progress of the nineteenth century as a phenomenon that contributed only to the increase and intensification of human anxieties. Similarly, many novelists were extremely concerned with and critical toward the dominant philosophies of materialism and individualism. They saw them as a threat to mankind; they felt that they would create a less humane, less sympathetic and less sensitive ‘race’ of men. This resulted in many Victorian novels presenting a contrast between material and moral values, showing that if money gives financial stability it does not bring inner happiness, and often exposing the ruthlessness and villainy of businessmen. Dickens’s Dombey and Son (1847-8) and Hard Times (1854), and

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George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2) are some of the best examples in this regard. In *Dombey and Son*, Paul Dombey is portrayed as a patriarchal, selfish, calculating and cold businessman who applies the commercial rules to his family as well as to his business: “‘Dombey and Son’ . . . These three words conveyed the one idea of Mr. Dombey’s life. The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light.”

The market values are the only values he knows, thus, following the rules imposed by the society he inhabits, he places profit above everything else. In his life there is little room for any kind of feeling or emotion. Nonetheless, towards the end of the novel Dickens does convey a positive and powerful message when he allows Dombey to be redeemed through her daughter Florence’s devoted love and compassion. In *Hard Times* through the characters of Gradgrind and Bounderby Dickens criticises the dominant philosophy of Utilitarianism which pervaded all sectors (schools as well as factories) and submitted men, women and even children to a rigid timetable, forcing them to work in dirty and unhealthy environments, and enslaving them to machines. In *Middlemarch*, Bulstrode is presented as the cowardly Protestant hypocrite and financier who has adapted his religion to the spirit of capitalism and who fights to maintain the providential scheme of thing as he sees it, especially when Raffles reappears and threatens him to ‘come back to life.’ Through his selfishness and villainy the commercial world he belongs to is exposed and criticised.

Thackeray too was preoccupied with the predominant philosophies of capitalism and materialism, but he responded with irony. Indeed, in *Vanity Fair* he satirises man’s hunger for money and possessions in various ways. He depicts a world where people ‘worship the false god of gold, silver, rank’ and do whatever is necessary to obtain material gain. Most of the characters, if not all, are shown as pursuing vain materialistic goals, adjusting their behaviour depending on the circumstances, using every means to achieve their aim and taking advantage of every situation. This is exemplified very well by the race for Miss Crawley’s inheritance which occupies several chapters and involves members of the same family who compete ruthlessly to obtain their relative’s money. Everyone treats Miss Crawley with respect only because she has ‘a balance at her banker’s which would have made her beloved anywhere’ (I, 104). The narrator comments on the absurd and condescending behaviour of their relatives: ‘What a dignity it gives an old lady, that balance at the banker’s! How tenderly we look at her faults if she is a relative (and may every reader have a score of such!), what a kind good-natured old creature we find her!’ (I, 104) This illustration (Fig. 3.3), which portrays Miss Crawley and her affectionate relatives, is particularly illuminating. It highlights the hypocrisy.

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Fig. 3.3. 'Miss Crawley's affectionate relatives,' *Vanity Fair*
of Miss Crawley’s nephews, Sir Pitt and Reverend Bute, who ‘hate each other all the year round’ but become ‘quite loving at Christmas’ (I, 118) when they gather around their aunt. Even Sir Pitt’s daughters, Miss Violet and Miss Rose, who are always fighting become adorable in the presence of their rich relative. Miss Crawley is positioned in the centre of the picture, surrounded by her relatives who, pretending to worship her, become her ‘servants’ and treat her almost like a queen. Although she looks pleased, she is certainly aware of the fact that their ‘affection’ is due to her wealth. Indeed, she often complains that they all want her dead because they all want her money. Thus the Crawleys are exposed for their ridiculous and insidious flattering.

But Becky is certainly the most exemplary figure. Barbara Hardy in describing her behaviour affirms that she ‘appears in an entirely predatory relation with objects, envying them, accepting them, showing them off, scrounging, and using them to please and to solicit. What she does with objects is precisely what she does with people. She acquires husband, lovers, friends and admirers, in order to get money and position.’ An example of her way of using people as a means to acquire wealth and rank can be found in the early chapters of the novel when she manipulates Amelia to conquer Jos, her brother. After asking her friend a few preliminary questions about Jos, she decides to try to seduce him and get a proposal from him:

‘If Mr. Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him? I have only a fortnight, to be sure, but there is no harm in trying.’ And she determined within herself to make this laudable attempt. She redoubled her caresses to Amelia; she kissed the white cornelian necklace as she put it on; and vowed she would never, never part with it. (I, 20)

It is interesting to note the irony of the phrase ‘laudable attempt’ which criticises and mocks her ambition. Her hypocritical behaviour and her false affection for Amelia are emphasised by her numerous ‘caresses’ and ‘kisses.’ She also pretends to consider the white necklace a symbol of their true friendship. By doing so she hopes that Amelia will help her succeed with her brother. A few pages later we see her knitting a green silk purse for Jos, which is just another attempt to win him. And, in Chapter 32, she even takes advantage of his stupidity and eagerness to leave Brussels as quickly as possible when she tries to sell him both of her horses for a huge amount of money, and succeeds in fooling him: ‘Jos ended by agreeing, as might be supposed of him’ (I, 395).

16 Idid., 103.
But even the most 'innocent' characters, Dobbin and Amelia, involuntary end up behaving according to the rules established by the society they inhabit. Love, and not money, is their priority; however, it is not completely innocent because, as Barbara Hardy has remarked, in Vanity Fair love cannot be free or pure as it is corrupted by an acquisitive society which forces it to be possessive and jealous. So, Thackeray seems to suggest that genuine benevolence and capitalist society are incompatible. Dobbin is certainly the most positive figure in the novel; he is good-natured, kind, caring and generous, and can be seen as a repository of unworldly values. However, he buys Amelia a piano with the hope of winning her heart, so his present to her is not disinterested as he wants something in return (unfortunately for him, Amelia thinks that the piano is a present from George, which increases her silly adoration for her fiancé). He always tries to please Amelia, hoping that she will notice his love and will requite it. Amelia, on the other hand, reduces everybody to a possession, including her son (whom she calls 'her treasure') and Dobbin. After Dobbin’s 'declaration of independence' from her, she feels lost as she has lost a possession: ‘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’ (II, 408). Though unconsciously, she manipulates him, and likes the idea of having him always at her service. Her ingratitude and selfishness are shameful.

The world of Vanity Fair is described through the same polarities found in Restoration Comedy: the merchant and the aristocrat, the town and the city, the wit and the fool. The first two are displayed through the Osbornes and the Sedleys on the one hand and the Crawleys on the other hand. Both the Osbornes and the Sedleys are wealthy city merchants who have established their position in London and gained a good reputation in society. But here the merchants are not an object of scorn or ridicule as it happens in Restoration Comedy where they are often presented as jealous and envious of the nobility and gentry, and hypocritical – examples of this type are the uxorious old Nonconformist banker Fondlewife in Congreve’s The Old Bachelor (1693) and the old lecherous hypocritical merchant Alderman Smuggler in Farquhar’s The Constant Couple (1699). The Crawleys represent a small part of that old aristocracy that still has some power in the countryside. They are described as ‘honest folks . . . whose simplicity and sweet rural purity surely show the advantage of a country life over a town one’ (I, 112). But this definition is ironic because, as shown in the course of the novel, those people (including both Sir Pitt Crawley’s family and that of his brother Bute Crawley) are all but honest, simple and pure. This implies that not only the city but also the country is part of Vanity Fair, and therefore it is equally inhabited by ruthless people who pursue vain

17 Ibid., 161-2.
aims. If in the comedy of the past the country was seen as the place where the real values were still preserved, here it is seen as another place where corruption and vanity have made their way in: ‘It is all vanity, to be sure: but who will not own to liking a little of it? I should like to know what well-constituted mind, merely because it is transitory, dislikes roast beef? That is a vanity; but may every man who reads this, have a wholesome portion of it through life, I beg . . .’ (II, 185). Nonetheless, because the pursuit of transitory things is part of human life, which gives men a glimpse of that happiness they are looking for, it should not be condemned entirely.

The third polarity, the wit and the fool, is stronger than the other ones, and is mainly shown through the characters of Becky and Amelia. The antithesis between the two women is established from the very beginning of the novel and continues throughout the story. Becky is a young woman who attempts to climb the highest positions in society only with her strength and wit, and ruthlessly uses people as a means to achieve her goals. Amelia is a delicate, sensitive and weak young woman who worships her husband and her son blindly, and whose life is based on a foolish illusion. Peter Garrett has observed that the parallel lives of Becky and Amelia demand a constant comparison, and that the pattern of their relationship is formulated as an antithesis.\textsuperscript{18} Although they find themselves in similar situations (they leave school together, they get married and have a son at the same time), their approach and reactions to life, their aims, their behaviour and attitude to people are antithetical. For example, Becky marries Rawdon because she hopes that he will inherit Miss Crawley’s fortune, while Amelia marries George because she loves him; Becky does not care about her own son, while Amelia adores her own child. But the novel constantly works on a process of construction, deconstruction and reformulation of antitheses, never allowing the reader to simplify the relationships between the two characters.\textsuperscript{19} The symmetries and antitheses presented in the novel have the aim of emphasising the opposite and contradictory aspects of human behaviour, and also of keeping the reader constantly active. However, the presence of antitheses is much stronger than the presence of symmetries. There are even moments in the novel where the lives of Becky and Amelia do not follow a parallel pattern at all. When Becky is successful in Paris – ‘Her success in Paris was remarkable. All the French ladies voted her charming. She spoke their language admirably. She adopted at once their grace, their liveliness, their manner’ (I, 434) – Amelia is poor, miserable and unhappy: ‘Her face was white and thin. Her pretty brown hair was parted under a widow’s cap – the poor child.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 113.
Her eyes were fixed, and looking nowhere’ (I, 445). When Amelia’s financial situation improves, Becky begins her descent.

Thackeray also creates a new polarity, the true and the sham gentleman, represented in Dobbin and George respectively. Gordon Ray has emphasised that in Vanity Fair Thackeray was particularly keen on completing the work of The Book of Snobs by asserting the true image of the middle-class gentleman as opposed to the image of the false gentleman. Therefore, in the two figures of Dobbin and George he set out to portray the true and sham gentleman. Dobbin is depicted as an honest, gentle, generous and sensitive man: ‘Dobbin was very soft-hearted. The sight of women and children in pain always used to melt him. The idea of Amelia broken-hearted and lonely, tore that good-natured soul with anguish’ (I, 218). The narrator also explicitly affirms that Dobbin, despite his ridiculous aspect, is to be considered a gentleman because of his good moral qualities: ‘But his thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble’ (II, 344). He seems to suggest that we should admire Dobbin.

George, however, has all the ‘qualities’ to be considered a sham gentleman. Becky seems to be the only person to be aware of it. She defines him as a ‘selfish humbug,’ a ‘low-bred cockney dandy,’ a ‘padded booby’ who has ‘neither wit, nor manners, nor heart’ (II, 423). His popularity among people, his easy manners and his charm make him a gentleman only on the surface. As Gordon Ray has pointed out, the readers are not impressed by George’s trivial successes because he is ‘simply a spoiled and selfish snob, absorbed in his comforts and dissipations, incurably shallow and weak.’ Thackeray at first presents Dobbin and George as two opposing figures and, then, once he has convinced the reader that George is the sham gentleman, he eliminates the antithesis by excluding George from the story. From Chapter 33 onwards (after George is killed off) onwards he can concentrate on conveying and reinforcing exclusively his ideal of the true middle-class gentleman through Dobbin.

In Vanity Fair, the influence of the comic literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can also be seen in the creation of the characters. According to Myron Taube, Thackeray’s approach to characters is essentially that of the eighteenth century because he believed in types. Roger Swanson remarks that Thackeray, like many of his eighteenth-century predecessors (and especially Fielding), was more interested in the universal traits of

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20 Ray (1955), 414.
21 Ibid., 412.
22 Ibid., 412.
men than in the individual.24 Indeed, not only does Thackeray give some of his characters names that reflect human features in general (for instance, Becky Sharp, which indicates her wit, sarcasm and artfulness, and Miss Swartz, which indicates the colour of her skin), but in them he also recreates many of the stereotypes which recur in the comic literature of the past. Becky is the coquette; Amelia is the innocent and sainted woman; George is the debauchee and the coxcomb; Rawdon is the dandy and the cuckold; Dobbin is the hypocrite; Jos Sedley is the beau and the coward; Mr. Sedley and Mr. Osborne are the rich city merchants of London; Sir Pitt Crawley is the country squire; Reverend Bute Crawley and his wife are country boobies; Miss Crawley is the wealthy woman whose money they are all after; and finally, Lord Steyne is the extravagant rake.

But Thackeray found other ways of classifying and stereotyping people. In The Book of Snobs (1848), which was originally published in Punch in 1846-7 with the title The Snobs of England, by one of themselves, he had collected his observations on English society and had identified a new ‘species’ of people, the snobs – he had given the following definition of Snob: ‘He who meanly admires mean things is a Snob’25. Many of the characters of Vanity Fair belong to some of the categories he had established in The Book of Snobs. Sir Pitt Crawley and Miss Crawley are Aristocratic Snobs; The Osbornes and the Sedleys with their mania for aristocratic marriages are Great City Snobs; George Osborne and Sir George Granby Tufto (who had already appeared in The Book of Snobs) are Military Snobs, people whose success in society is due only to the fact that they have money; lastly, Mr. and Mrs. Bute are Country Snobs whose main characteristic is their insolent pretension of being wealthy. So, Thackeray, in the creation of his various characters, certainly borrowed the traditional comic stereotypes, but he also moved a step forward inventing his own way of classifying people in society.

On a more general level, the strong influence of the comedy of the past in Vanity Fair is particularly evident in the two female protagonists, Becky and Amelia, who can be seen as ‘the maker of the Comedy of Manners’ and ‘the maker of Sentimental Comedy’ respectively. It has also been suggested that in some respects Fielding’s Amelia (1751) might have been a source of inspiration in the creation of these two characters. Winslow Rogers has pointed out that Thackeray probably used Miss Mathews as a prototype for Becky Sharp; he was struck by the portrayal of her, and by the ‘vanity which inspires every one of the actions of that passionate, unscrupulous lady.’26 In Amelia, Miss Mathews pretends to be concerned with

25 The Book of Snobs, Works, IX, 11.
Booth’s distressful situation in prison and convinces him to share a better cell with her. With
her skilful display of false affectionate behaviour and fake tears she succeeds in her intent to
seduce him. Fielding’s characterisation of this ‘lady’ might have given Thackeray a few ideas
for the creation of Becky, but I have to admit I do not see a very strong link between them.
Despite some similarities, indeed, Becky lacks that capacity of faking intense emotions
convincingly which characterises Miss Mathews, and overall emerges as a more complex,
more powerful and more insidious figure that provokes a double response in the reader.
Indeed, we admire her wit, strong will, and optimism, yet we disapprove of her ambition,
ruthlessness, and coldness. Moreover, in *Vanity Fair*, she is also presented as an ‘actress’ and
an entertainer. Robert Polhemus has observed that Becky is the true maker of Thackeray’s
comedy because he ‘concentrated in her the glamorous vanities of the nineteenth-century
Western world,’ summed up in her desire for a respectable social position.\(^{27}\) She is also the
best representative of the vicious manners of the people who live in this world. Hypocrisy,
dishonesty and deceit are some of the things Becky is particularly good at, but, as a very early
sketch of her (Fig. 3.4) clearly indicates, she is also a diabolic ‘mesmerizer’ – Anne Isabella
Thackeray noted: ‘This seems a vague foreshadowing dream of Becky and her future. It is one
of the earlier drawings, and belongs to the time when she first came into existence.’\(^{28}\) In
chapter 17, we see Becky’s hypocritical yet charming behaviour towards her husband. She
considers him a stupid man and has little respect for him; nevertheless, she disguises her
feelings and is very kind, cheerful and warm with him:

When he came home she was alert and happy: when he went out she pressed him to go: when
he stayed at home, she played and sang for him, made him good drinks, superintended his
dinner, warmed his slippers, and steeped his soul in comfort. 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. (I, 204)

Becky plays the part of a loving wife so well that, ironically, her hypocrisy becomes almost a
virtue. Her conduct is exemplary of that of ‘the best women’ who under their apparent
innocence, indicated by the expressions ‘artless,’ ‘confidential’ and ‘frank smiles,’ hide their
schemes and ambitions. On one occasion the narrator ironically defends Becky’s ‘innocence’:

\(^{27}\) Polhemus (1980), 130.
\(^{28}\) William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Orphan of Pimlico and other sketches, fragments, and drawings*, with
some notes by Anne Isabella Thackeray (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1876).
Fig. 3.4. ‘The Mesmerizer,’ early sketch of Becky Sharp

Fig. 3.5. *Vanity Fair*
'It was not the habit of this dear creature to tell falsehoods, except when necessity compelled, but in these great emergencies it was her practice to lie very freely; and in an instant she was ready with another neat plausible circumstantial story which she administered to her patron' (II, 214). Particularly interesting is the highly ironic definition of Becky as a ‘dear creature’ which emphasises her great ability to disguise her real self and thus to appear as innocent. She quickly adjusts her behaviour depending on the situation and becomes deceitful ‘only’ under particular circumstances. She knows the world that surrounds her very well but, as Robert Polhemus has pointed out, she does not like it and is often critical of it; however, she does not wish to change it or renounce it: ‘she wants the system to pay her.’29 Becky is a realist and understands that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to change the world she lives in; to renounce it is an option she excludes because it would not make her happy anyway. Therefore, in her attempt to achieve a respectable position in society by behaving according to the rule established by society itself, she always tries to see the funny side of life. We always see her having fun, and entertaining herself and her audience (both the characters of the novel and us) in various ways, even when she is poor and disgraced. The following illustration (Fig. 3.5) portrays her as a puppeteer. Becky is mocking Miss Pinkerton, with her severity and formality, and Miss Jemima, with her ingenuity and silly fear of her older sister, in front of an audience made of young painters. She is extremely relaxed and clearly having fun at the expense of her two ‘victims’ – the cynical expression of her face is particularly notable. The artists that surround her are genuinely amused by her performance: they are all laughing, drinking gin and water and celebrating her as a comedian. This illustration has the aim of showing Becky as a natural performer, whose ‘sense of ridicule’ forms part of her charm, and also of anticipating the way in which she will manipulate people in the novel. Later on, when, after the scandal of the Steyne affair, she finds herself wandering and then staying at a boarding-house in Paris, we see her amusing herself despite her poverty: ‘Becky loved society, and, indeed, could no more exist without it than an opium-eater without his dram, and she was happy enough at the period of her boarding-house life’ (II, 372). Society is enough to make her happy and has become something she cannot live without.

Despite her vices, we appreciate Becky’s capacity for pleasure, and, therefore, we tend to sympathise with her because in her we see more hope than in the other characters.30 We do see hope in her also because she sees hope in life itself: ‘While there is life, there is hope’ (II, 19). We cannot but admire her incredible inner strength and ability to accept life for what it is, but we also sympathise with her because she is presented more as a woman living in an ordinary world rather than as a heroine engaged in heroic deeds – ‘Even our Becky had her

29 Polhemus (1980), 135.
30 Ibid., 135.
weaknesses' (II, 152). For her artistic talents and her 'ordinary' life she is the perfect performer of Thackeray's 'Comedy of Manners,' the vehicle of his satire, and the perfect conveyor of his view of the world. Indeed, Thackeray uses the particular example of Becky to expose and mock the universal corruption and vanity of the world.

If Becky is the maker of the 'Comedy of Manners,' Amelia can be seen as the maker of 'Sentimental Comedy.' As it has already been mentioned, Fielding's Amelia might have influenced Thackeray in the creation of his female protagonists. Winslow Roger has pointed out that Thackeray was particularly impressed by Fielding's presentation of Amelia Booth and of her beauty and innocence.\(^{31}\) The similarities between the two Amelias are certainly striking. Both are fundamentally good, sensitive, loving, emotional, and loyal. Fielding's character embodies real virtues, and as well as being caring and forgiving she is also a strong and spirited woman who faces the difficulties in her marriage with hope and courage. Thackeray's protagonist, however, despite her good qualities, is often depicted as selfish, jealous, possessive, deluded, and also weak, excessively sentimental and silly at times (as we will see, the narrator's attitude towards her is ambivalent). She is not really presented as a 'paragon' of virtue or as a woman who deserves admiration; she is Becky's opposite, and another representative of Vanity Fair – the two protagonists embody two opposing ways of living, none of which is offered as valid. Indeed, if Becky represents the vanities of the world in general, Amelia represents the vanities of love in the Western world: 'Some [women] are made to scheme, and some to love' (I, 137). In Amelia's hands love becomes selfish, jealous and possessive. She loves George so intensely that she transforms him into an exaggerated object of worship, considering him and her love for him the most important things: 'all the country and Europe was in arms, and the greatest event of history pending... and Amelia thought about her husband, and how best she should show her love for him; as if these were the great topics of the world' (I, 338). Another passage demonstrates even more clearly how self-absorbed she is in her silly adoration of George:

There was only one man in the army for her: and as long as he was well, it must be owned that its movements interested her little. All the reports which Jos brought from the streets fell very vaguely on her ears; though they were sufficient to give that timorous gentleman, and many other people then in Brussels, every disquiet. (I, 399)

War is breaking out but she only cares about her worthless George. She regards him as 'the world' itself and the source of her life and happiness, as the sentence 'there was only one man

in the army for her' (the italics are mine) suggests. After the death of George, whom she continues to worship, her son Georgy becomes the object of her even more absurd idolatrous love: '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' (I, 448). The reiteration of the pronoun 'her' indicates that her affection for her son is extremely possessive and jealous. She considers him the only source of her happiness and life. Amelia's life is based on the idea that to love means to possess, and on the illusion that one can be happy only in the condition of loving and being loved, of possessing and being possessed. But the 'sentimental' aspect of the comedy is especially realised in the grieving and crying of Amelia.

Since the beginning Amelia is presented as an extremely emotional, sensitive and fragile young woman. Her face blushes 'with rosy health' and her eyes fill with tears 'a great deal too often' (I, 6), details which anticipate, and partly justify, her feelings and emotional reactions in the course of the novel. On several occasions, indeed, in the account of Amelia's life Thackeray changes his narrative tone from comic to sentimental, while maintaining it slightly ironic at the same time, in order to demand sympathy and comprehension from the reader. An example of this can be found when Mr. Sedley announces his bankruptcy to his family, which breaks Amelia's heart:

The father had forgotten the poor girl. She was lying, awake and unhappy, overhead. In the midst of friends, home, and kind parents, she was alone. To how many people can anyone tell all? Who will be open where there is no sympathy, or has call to speak to those who never can understand? Our gentle Amelia was thus solitary. . . .

Her heart tried to persist in asserting that George Osborne was worthy and faithful to her, though she knew otherwise. How many a thing had she said, and got no echo from him. How many suspicions of selfishness and indifference had she to encounter and obstinately overcome. To whom could the poor little martyr tell these daily struggles and tortures? (I, 209-10)

Amelia's suffering is caused not only by the fact that now that she is poor she will not be able to marry George, but also by the fact that she feels extremely lonely and has no one to whom she can confide her sorrow. Furthermore, the awareness that she has deluded herself in thinking that George cares about her as much as she cares about him, and the difficulty of accepting the worthlessness of her lover, increase her pain considerably. The narrator tries to demand sympathy for her from the reader by emphasising at first her sadness and loneliness (she is 'unhappy,' 'alone,' 'solitary'), and then her unbearable pain indicated by the two
powerful terms ‘daily struggles’ and ‘tortures.’ This is also reinforced by the tender and affectionate way the narrator refers to her – ‘the poor girl,’ ‘our gentle Amelia,’ and ‘the poor little martyr’ (the italics are mine). The sentimental aspect of the novel reaches its apex when Amelia is forced to part with her son:

So poor Amelia had been getting ready in silent misery for her son’s departure, and had passed many and many a long solitary hour in making preparations for the end. George stood by his mother, watching her arrangements without the least concern. Tears had fallen into his boxes; passages had been scored in his favourite books; old toys, relics, treasures had been hoarded away for him, and packed with strange neatness and care, – and of all these things the boy took no note. The child goes away smiling as the mother breaks her heart. By heavens it is pitiful, the bootless love of women for children in Vanity Fair. (II, 181-2)

Again Amelia is addressed as ‘poor,’ which indicates both her financial situation and her sufferings. Her unhappiness consists mainly in her deep loneliness, which is suggested by the expressions ‘silent misery’ and ‘long solitary hour.’ The fact that she sees her son’s departure as ‘the end’ indicates that she is so fond of her child that he has become life itself. Her painful condition is aggravated by the fact that little George does not see his mother’s careful arrangements for his departure, nor has he any idea that his mother is so broken hearted. In the last sentence of the quoted passage the narrator indirectly appeals to the reader by defining Amelia’s condition and ‘bootless love’ for her son as pitiful. After all this, the reader cannot but feel compassion for her, her unhappiness and inner struggles.

On many other occasions, however, Thackeray does exactly the opposite and describes her feelings with the intent to expose and mock the vanity of her grief and her excessive sentimentality. This illustration (Fig. 3.6), for instance, portrays her spending her time watching out of the window, entirely absorbed in her thoughts of love, and waiting for the arrival of her George. In Chapter 25, when George flirts with Becky at a family party in Brighton, Amelia feels lonely, neglected and jealous: ‘Amelia was making a fool of herself in an absurd hysterical manner, and retired to her own room to whimper in private’ (I, 297). The narrator is clearly annoyed by her exaggerated reaction which is indicated by her foolish and ‘absurd hysterical manner.’ At times he seems to suggest she is almost insane. In Chapter 32, Amelia after receiving the news of the victory prays her brother to conduct her to the army to see George: ‘Her doubts and terrors reached their paroxysm; and the poor girl, who for many hours had been plunged into stupor, raved and ran hither and thither in hysterical insanity – a piteous sight’ (I, 397). In the quoted passage the narrator once again defines her as ‘the
Fig. 3.6. *Vanity Fair*
poor girl,' but this time we clearly perceive the irony contained in this definition. Her 'hysteric insanity' demands pity from the observer, but a kind of pity that assumes the form of despising rather than sympathy. Indeed, at times both the narrator and the reader find her extremely pathetic. For example, here we see her pitying herself for her wrongs and sins: '... the first George was taken from her: her selfish, guilty love, in both instances, had been rebuked and bitterly chastised. She strove to think it was right that she should be so punished. She was such a miserable wicked sinner. She was quite alone in the world' (II, 277). She foolishly aggravates her sufferings by thinking of herself as a 'miserable wicked sinner.' She emerges as very pathetic, tedious and insufferable. Amelia is a constant challenge for the reader who is never allowed to take her for granted and to maintain the same opinion about her throughout the novel. Thackeray plays with us by provoking in us at times sympathy and pity for her, and at other times irritation and scorn. In one way or the other Thackeray succeeds in making us concerned with her feelings and emotions.

If the influence of the Restoration Comedy of Manners and of Sentimental Comedy can be seen in the themes and concerns explored in *Vanity Fair* and in the characters presented in the novel, it is in Thackeray's narrative technique and style that we see the influence of Fielding. As Fielding had done a century before, Thackeray adopts an omniscient narrator who, as Peter Garrett has pointed out, assumes different roles in the narrative: at times he presents himself as a friend of the characters; at other times he is the master of his puppets, a showman who manipulates his puppets, hits and criticises them through his comments. He assumes at least two other roles: the 'observer of human nature' and 'the week-day preacher.' The definition of the role of the humorous writer that he gives in his lectures *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853) is particularly helpful:

The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness – your scorn for untruth, pretention, imposture – your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak. Accordingly, as he finds, and speaks, and feels the truth best, we regard him, esteem him – sometimes love him.

The comic story-teller has the aim of guiding us, showing us the imperfection of human nature and helping us discover the truth through his commentary. In order to achieve his goal, Thackeray creates a narrator who is both 'in' and 'above' the story he is narrating, a narrator

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32 Garrett (1980), 106.
that is both a character himself and a commentator. On at least three occasions he portrays himself as an inhabitant of Vanity Fair and an intimate friend of the characters, a strategy which has the aim of adding credibility to the story he is telling. In Chapter 15 he says: ‘I remember one night being in the Fair myself, at an evening party’ (I, 183), and, in Chapter 17, ‘I have heard Amelia say’ (I, 202). Later on he even reveals himself to be personally acquainted with the characters: ‘It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them first, and to make their acquaintance’ (II, 344). He considers himself an omniscient narrator – ‘for novelists have the privilege of knowing everything’ (I, 29) – but a narrator that does not take a position of moral superiority. And, indeed, in Chapter 8, when he defines himself as a moralist, he emphasises that he is no superior being, but just an ordinary man whose purpose is to tell the truth: ‘the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant), professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which the congregation is arrayed . . .’ (I, 94). In the same chapter, he also defines himself as a commentator who, occasionally, will offer insights into his characters’ lives:

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. (I, 95-6)

He emphasises his position of non-superiority by defining himself as ‘one of us.’ His comments will hit all the characters and will vary depending on their behaviour: he will love them, mock them or abuse them. His act of ‘stepping down from the platform’ also indicates his use of a familiar and confidential narrative tone and his desire to establish an intimate and friendly relationship with the reader. Following Fielding’s model, throughout the novel he addresses the reader directly several times: ‘the good-natured reader’ (I, 59), ‘my kind reader’ (I, 94), ‘the beloved reader’ (I, 129), ‘the observant reader’ (I, 145), ‘my respected reader’ (I, 273), ‘brother reader’ (II, 323) and ‘my dear and civilised reader’ (II, 343) are some of the best examples. They all reveal a deep respect and fondness for the reader.

Thackeray adopts another of the characteristics of Fielding’s narrative technique, the use of an intrusive narrator. But his intrusions, instead of giving us that sense of certainty and solidity that we get in Fielding, leave us puzzled and disorientated. Indeed, his attitude towards his characters and the actions they perform is always ambivalent. This is especially
evident in the treatment of Becky and of Amelia. The former is at times despised and at times addressed with affection: she is ‘The little artful minx’ (I, 56), but also ‘Poor little Becky’ (II, 171) and ‘Our beloved Rebecca’ (II, 153). Similarly, the latter is at times treated with sympathy and times mocked for her silly behaviour: she is ‘our dear Amelia Sedley’ (I, 201) and ‘Our gentle Amelia’ (I, 209), but she is also ‘a hypocrite’ (I, 244). Thackeray is deliberately ambivalent because he does not want his readers to be passive. The narration itself becomes a challenge for the readers who find themselves forced to adjust their own views of the characters and the story. As Catherine Peters has pointed out, we are never ‘allowed to rest comfortably on received opinions.’

Thackeray’s ambiguity provokes two opposite reactions: some of us are irritated, some of us are entertained (I definitely feel amused). So, he plays deliberately with us, provoking us, and forcing us to use our imagination. He often leaves gaps in the narration, like in the scene when Becky and Steyne are found together, which we will have to fill in with our creativity. In that sense, then, Thackeray is an innovator because by emphasising the importance of the role of the reader as a creator of meaning he anticipated one of the modern approaches to the study of literature.

Thackeray also adopts a Fieldingesque narrative style. Gordon Ray has observed that Thackeray ‘employs a range of effects to make Vanity Fair a “Comic History” in the sense that Fielding used the term,’ for example, the wit of his writing, the satirical bite of the casual sentence, his use of irony, the burlesque and the mock-heroic, all of which are a challenge for the modern reader. Among all these aspects, I want to consider briefly the use of irony. Thackeray’s ironic style dominates the entire novel and hits every character and situation indistinctly (as we have seen, even when treating sentimental matters his tone remains slightly ironic). Indeed, what distinguishes Thackeray from Fielding (and also his contemporaries) is the overall ironic perspective which pervades Vanity Fair. John Dodd’s definition of Thackeray’s style is particularly enlightening:

The clue to his art is the complete and covering irony through which his view of life is filtered. It is an irony softened by a sad and wistful humanity, sharpened at times by an indignation against cant and affectation, but warmed also by the gentle melancholy that comes with the ironist’s perception of the gap between man’s aspiration and achievement.

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His ironic perspective has the aim of conveying his view of life, a life characterised by a fundamental contradiction: the vain pursuit of things we cannot get. It makes us aware of the truth that the world is full of contradictions, falsities, hypocrisies, vanity and corruption, that somehow we have to accept it as it is, and, at the same time, never lose the hope that it will improve. Robert Polhemus affirms that Thackeray uses irony to study the inconsistencies not just between appearance and reality but in reality itself, and to express a basic disorder in things.37 The ‘happy ending,’ which is one of the characteristics of comedy, despite giving the reader what he/she had wished in the course of the novel – the final union of Amelia and Dobbin – leaves him/her dissatisfied with the union itself. The reader knows that Dobbin’s love for Amelia has lost its intensity, and that Amelia has married Dobbin for the wrong reason, that is because she wanted to possess him. We get the sad feeling that even if we ultimately obtain what we have wished, life is less fulfilling than we expect: ‘Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? – Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out’ (II, 431). However, Thackeray also seems to indicate that the best way to approach this vain life is to accept it and condemn it at the same time, to laugh at it. Robert Polhemus affirms that for Thackeray comic perspective is what makes life bearable and that it helps to free consciousness from the vanities of a commercial and competitive society.38 Indeed, laughter gives us a temporary sense of relief that helps us live this ‘vain’ life.

To sum up, in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray develops some of the themes, concerns and stereotypes of the comic literature of the past in order to convey his own perception of English society and his dissatisfaction with it. He explores the folly of human nature with the aim of exposing the vices as well as the social and moral behaviour of people; above all, he expresses his concern with man’s hunger for money, and with the increasing materialism of the Victorian age in general, adopting an ironic perspective, ridiculing people for their worship of money and possessions, and showing that even the most ‘innocent’ people are inevitably caught into the system (Amelia reduces everyone to a possession; Dobbin brings Amelia gifts with the hope of winning her love); in this cynical vision none of the various characters’ ways of living are presented as valid. The world of Vanity Fair is depicted through a series of traditional polarities, especially that of the wit and the fool which is realised in Becky and Amelia whose life follows at times an antithetical and at times a parallel pattern. But through George and Dobbin a new polarity is formed, that of the sham and the true gentleman, with the intent to consolidate the idea of true gentlemanliness. Although the characters of the story embody traditional comic stereotypes, they also fit into a new ‘species’

37 Polhemus (1980), 165.
38 Ibid., 124-5.
invented by Thackeray, the Snobs. The influence of the comedy of the past can also be traced in Becky and Amelia, who are probably based on Miss Mathews and Amelia in Fielding’s *Amelia* respectively, but who are the makers of Thackeray’s comedy. Indeed, Becky, who embodies the vanities of the world and is the performer and the entertainer, is the maker of the Comedy of Manners, while Amelia, who incarnates the vanities of love and is excessively emotional and sentimental, is the maker of Sentimental Comedy. However, the narrator treats the latter with ambivalence, encouraging the readers at times to sympathise with her and at times to scorn her, with the intent to keep them constantly active and to prevent them from reaching a stable view of her. Fielding is undoubtedly a major influence on Thackeray’s narrative technique. Like his predecessor, Thackeray adopts an omniscient narrator with multiples roles who is simultaneously in and out of the story, and who seeks an intimate relationship with his readers; he is also an intrusive narrator who, however, does not give us that sense of certainty found in Fielding and who challenges us with his ambiguity and unreliability. Thackeray’s comic style recalls that of Fielding, but it is also denoted by a unique ironic perspective which hits all the characters and situations indistinctly and which distinguishes him from his predecessors and his contemporaries. Thus, by retaining traditional comic conventions and adding new elements, Thackeray created a different comedy, one which, embracing both satire and sentiment, is capable of showing the contradictions of human behaviour truly and effectively. His approach to life at this stage of his literary career can be summed up by the final remark of *The Book of Snobs*: ‘May he [Mr. Punch] laugh honestly, hit no foul blow, and tell the truth when at his very broadest grin – never forgetting that if Fun is good, Truth is still better, and Love best of all.’

In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray had given a comic depiction of England and its inhabitants, exposing the absurd behaviour of men and women in society. In his next serialised novel *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50) he focused on the life of a single man, on his imperfections, his growth, his experiences in life and society, his mistakes, and his constant battle with his ‘Greatest Enemy,’ himself, as the subtitle indicates, against the background of England between the 1830s and the 1840s. The preface suggests that Thackeray had Fielding’s comic novel *Tom Jones* (1749) in mind as a model, which he adopted to create a novel that reflected the Victorian world. As I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter, *Pendennis* is the story of a man living in an era full of contradictions, tempted by two opposing worlds, the commercial world denoted by success and the domestic world characterised by love, trying to choose between them, trying to find and fix his position in society and desperately searching for happiness. His difficulties and opposing impulses reflect those of the early Victorian people struggling to adapt themselves to a rapidly changing world – *Pendennis* embodies the Victorian ‘split personality.’

*Pendennis* explores two of the themes found in *Tom Jones*, temptation and the nature of happiness; nonetheless, the former focuses on the growth of an individual, while the latter emphasises the adventurous aspect of his hero’s life. The basic structure of Thackeray’s novel also is similar to that of Fielding’s: they are both partly set in the country and partly in the city; they are both constructed on the traditional ‘Country-City’ polarity. However, Thackeray expands and applies this polarity to his own time to incorporate the main contradictions of his age: the country women (Helen and Laura), who represent the ideal of Victorian womanhood and the world of spiritual values, coexist with the city women (Emily and Blanche), who symbolise the capitalistic society and its worldly values; Pen’s closest relatives, the Major and Helen, embody the world of reason and of emotion respectively. The danger of excessive sentimentality and goodness is an important aspect of the novel; this is exposed and presented through the character of Helen Pendennis who, with her suffocating affection for her son, is the main target of Thackeray’s ironic and ambiguous treatment. Pen’s behaviour presents some of the characteristics of two important figures we have met before: the traditional comic type of the rake and the gentleman in his phase of transition from the Regency to the Victorian age.
First of all, *Pendennis* presents thematic similarities to Fielding’s *Tom Jones*; it explores the topics of temptation and of the nature of happiness. In Fielding’s novel the protagonist Tom is shown as being affected by the power of sexual temptations (first he gets involved with Molly Seagrim, then with Mrs Waters and finally with Lady Bellaston) but only before he learns that his beloved Sophia requites his love. Temptation is presented as a characteristic of human nature, as a ‘vice’ that is part of human experience, especially in its early phase (adolescence), which, however, is completely overcome once true love has been found. Thackeray considered *Tom Jones* a great work of fiction for its well-constructed plot, ‘the by-play of wisdom; the power of observation; the multiplied felicitous turns and thoughts; the varied character of the great Comic Epic.’\(^1\) In the preface to *Pendennis* not only does he explicitly refer to its model, but, in a way which recalls Fielding’s ‘Bill of Fare,’ he also anticipates the subject of his story and declares his intentions:

Since the author of ‘Tom Jones’ was buried, no writer of fiction has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN. We must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art. Many ladies have remonstrated and subscribers left me, because, in the course of the story, I described a young man resisting and affected by temptation. My object was to say, that he had the passions to feel, and the manliness and generosity to overcome them. . . . A little more frankness than is customary has been attempted in this story; with no bad desire on the writer’s part, it is hoped, and with no ill consequence to any reader. If truth is not always pleasant; at any rate truth is best . . . \(^2\)

Thackeray laments that his society imposes a set of restrictions on writers which no longer allow them to depict honestly human nature (indicated by the capitalised world MAN) and its ‘natural’ defects in the way Fielding could in the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, his novel will centre on the ‘imperfect’ life of a young man who has to learn to overcome temptations of various nature, including sexual ones (and does not always succeed), who is the representative of mankind with all its ‘vices’ and ‘virtues.’ Particular emphasis is given to the concept of ‘Temptation’ as a fundamental aspect of human life, as something we all experience at some point in our lives, and which will be treated with ‘a little more frankness than is customary.’ The allegorical front cover for the monthly numbers (Fig. 4.1) emphasises this idea by representing a young man hesitating and unable to decide which side to embrace. On his right there is Love (his wife, ‘the domestic angel’), the safe world of religion (the church in the background), of domesticity and of unworltdly values. On his left there is Seduction (the Siren), and the ‘vicious’ world of unrestrained pleasures represented by the

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THE HISTORY
OF
PENDENNIS.

HIS FORTUNES AND MISFORTUNES,
HIS FRIENDS AND HIS GREATEST ENEMY

BY

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Fig. 4.1. Front cover for the monthly numbers, The History of Pendennis
Satyrs. On a larger scale the allegory illustrates the moral and psychological tensions of human existence, and the artist’s attempt to depict them truly. Both in the preface and in the frontispiece, Thackeray defends his position by conveying his belief that there is nothing shameful in the acknowledgment of our faults, and that it is much better to be totally honest about ourselves rather than pretend that we are perfect and not subjected to the temptations of life, especially those of sexual nature, which are an important and powerful aspect of our existence.

More importantly, Pendennis shares with Tom Jones an interest in the essence of happiness. As R.P.C. Mutter points out, Tom Jones shows a concern with the nature of happiness as well as of goodness and with how these ideals are threatened by vanity and hypocrisy. Through his story Fielding wanted to convey a precise moral message: ‘... to recommend goodness and innocence hath been my sincere endeavour in this history,’ he wrote in his dedication to George Lyttleton. It is in the protagonist Tom Jones that he portrays and promotes the fundamental human values of generosity, goodness and honesty. And Tom’s antagonist Blifil, who is deceitful, mean, selfish and hypocritical, represents that constant menace to happiness, evil. Tom’s good qualities help him through his misadventures and allow him to forgive his enemies in the end which sees the triumph of Good and the defeat of Evil. Throughout the story the hero slowly moves towards that ideal happiness embodied in Allworthy and in his sweetheart Sophia: when he reaches this level, any tendency to vice he might have had is completely eliminated.

Thackeray’s Pendennis is a much more realistic and critical novel whose main concern is with the difficulties that the individual experiences in growing, living and trying to find happiness in a world full of contradictions, a world which promotes capitalism, materialism and selfishness, and at the same time, domesticity, love and generosity. The issue of what constitutes true happiness is fundamental and problematic here. The story has to be seen as a difficult and, at times even painful, search for a new meaning of happiness in a new and more complex world where the individual finds him/herself strongly coveting both worldly and unworldly values; this makes it hard for him/her to decide which way of living will be able to give him/her true happiness. In the modern capitalistic society are a respectable social position, wealth and success all that one needs to be happy? Without financial stability is the cultivation of spiritual values, including Love, enough to grant happiness? These are questions that Pendennis poses from the beginning, but does Thackeray provide an answer to them eventually? As we will see, throughout the novel in his search for happiness Pendennis

3 Juliet McMaster, Thackeray: The Major Novels (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 64.
fluctuates between the material and the spiritual world, at times embracing the former and at times the latter, and is always unable to decide which one he wants most until the very end. The ending itself, however, is not entirely fulfilling (certainly it is not when compared to Tom Jones's happy conclusion). Only after Pen admits to himself that ‘worldly’ experience is unsatisfactory does he return home where he accepts Laura’s love (and Laura too accepts Pen only after she has realised that she cannot have Warrington). Although Pen ultimately does embrace unworldly values for good, the fact that this was a second choice leaves us partly unsatisfied. But perhaps what counts most here is that in the spiritual world he discovers true happiness, that inner harmony which he was desperately looking for (and could not find) in the material world.

Despite thematic similarities, there is a fundamental difference between the two books: Tom Jones is a picaresque novel, while Pendennis is a Bildungsroman. If the former focuses on the adventures and misadventures of a lively hero who finally forgives all who have wronged him and is rewarded with wealth and love, the latter centres on the troubled life of an ingenuous and inexperienced young man who makes several mistakes which nonetheless help him grow. More specifically, the novel traces ‘the spiritual development’ of Pen, ‘but places this firmly against the material world that he inhabits.’ However, many scholars do not agree that this novel should be defined as a Bildungsroman because when compared to other novels classified as such (for example, Jane Eyre, The Mill on the Floss, David Copperfield and Great Expectations), we notice that the protagonist develops very little. Indeed, Pen’s evolution is not very dramatic or impressive, but this was intentional. Pen develops very little because, according to Michael Lund, in Thackeray’s ‘panoramic vision of history’ the characters’ natures ‘are not greatly dependent on time; the narrator can see the same identity at both ends of a decades-long continuum.’ Indeed, growth, as the following passage indicates, depends on external factors:

We alter very little. When we talk of this man or that woman being no longer the same person whom we remember in youth, and remark (of course to deplore) changes in our friends, we don’t perhaps, calculate that circumstance only brings out the latent defect or quality, and does not create it. The selfish languor and indifference of to-day’s possession is the consequence of the selfish ardour of yesterday’s pursuit . . . (IV, 280-1)

The passage conveys the idea that it is major or minor events in our life that have a psychological impact on us and that cause small (not radical) changes in us, exposing and developing a defect or quality that was already in our personality but that we were not aware of. These alterations are gradual rather than dramatic because they do not add new aspects to the way we are or behave, and do not depend on the passing of time – the belief that people change considerably as time passes by is entirely illusory. This is why Pendennis alters very little in the novel; this is why we find ‘the same Pendennis’ with the same defects and qualities (his selfishness as well as his honesty and generosity) from the beginning to the end of his story. In the end he emerges as a man who has developed only those ‘virtues’ (generosity and affection) that were already part of his personality. So, it does not matter if his growth is limited, the important fact is that he does grow.

Michael Lund offers an interesting argument in favour of *Pendennis* as a Bildungsroman. He defends the novel by arguing that to the protagonist’s evolution in the text should be added that of the reader outside the text. If we accept the modern view of the reader as a creator of meaning rather than as a passive receptacle, then we must acknowledge the fact that the character’s development and that of the reader should be seen as inseparable. This process of parallel growth was certainly intensified by the use of the serial format which enlarged the character’s life and the reader’s reactions to it. Between parts the reader had time to reflect and expand on some important aspects of the novel. Nonetheless, at least partly, we can still experience that growth today when we read a novel in book format; we somehow create instalments for ourselves when we decide to stop reading at the end of a chapter, only to open the novel again in another moment. The difference is that we have the power to decide at which point we want to interrupt the narration and, also, the amount of time we want to wait before continuing to read the novel, while the Victorian audience were ‘forced’ to stop reading at a certain narrative point and had to wait for the next instalment to come out before they could continue to read. Thus, Thackeray cleverly uses time in the novel and time outside the novel to increase the sense of Pen’s development as a Bildungsroman hero. I believe this is enough for *Pendennis* to be considered a Bildungsroman.

The basic structure of *Pendennis* recalls that of *Tom Jones*. The first part of Fielding’s novel narrates Tom’s life in the countryside, while the second part centres on his adventures and experiences in London. Similarly, as Richard Pearson has observed, ‘Pen moves through a Fieldingesque structure of learning; like Tom Jones, he travels from country-house gentility to city rakishness, becoming a “jaded and selfish worldling” before finding salvation through

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9 Ibid., 286-7.
10 Ibid., 295.
11 Ibid., 293.
Indeed, Thackeray’s novel is constructed on the traditional polarity of the Country and the City, which is recreated in the opposing worlds of Fairoaks and London. But Thackeray does not simply borrow this convention; he expands it, develops it and applies it to his own time. Thus, in his view, ‘Country versus City’ comes to incorporate a wider range of meaningful polarities which are representative of the contradictory attitudes of the Victorian age: domesticity and worldliness; traditional unworldly values and modern worldly values; virtue and vice; the ideal and the real. All this is conveyed particularly through the portrayal of the women in the novel, which can easily be divided into two groups: the ‘country women’ (Helen Pendennis and Laura Bell) versus the ‘city women’ (Emily Fotheringay and Blanche Amory).

Helen and Laura embody the ideal of Victorian womanhood and domesticity. They are the virtuous and ‘sainted women’ in Pendennis’s life. Their angelic appearance, goodness, love, kindness, generosity and spirit of self-sacrifice make them the repository of important (and highly desirable) human values. They encapsulate the idea of the Victorian woman’s ‘mission’ as daughter, wife and mother whose role is to be a moral and spiritual guardian (‘the angel in the house’), to preserve stability, harmony and peace in the home environment, to manage the household and bring up children. In an age of rapid social change, writers and artists felt the need to redefine and reinforce sets of social and moral values, including the respectability of the family where women had such a central role. In *Sesame and Lilies* (1864), John Ruskin pointed out clearly the essential virtues that the ideal woman should have in order to be the perfect ‘angel in the house’: ‘She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side.’

Women, then, were meant to dedicate themselves entirely to their companions, to act wisely and always for their husbands’ sake, to honour them, comfort them and stand by them at all times. Victorian novelists in particular were aware of the enormous and powerful influence that the characters of their stories had on their readers, and thus often created exemplary women as a means to convey their message of morality. Dickens, for instance, did this through the portrayal of Agnes, a good-natured, sweet, high-minded, devoted and affectionate young woman, in *David Copperfield*. Similarly, Thackeray uses Helen, and especially Laura, as his ‘messengers’ in *Pendennis*. This emerges from the very beginning of the novel where the following description of Helen is given: ‘... Mrs. Pendennis’s tranquil beauty, her natural sweetness and kindness, and that simplicity and dignity which a perfect purity and innocence are sure to bestow upon a handsome woman, rendered her quite worthy of her brother’s ...

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praises' (III, 17). Her physical beauty, which reflects the purity of her soul, seems to give a sense of tranquillity and security. But at times in these almost supernatural features that some women have ‘there is something awful, as well as beautiful, to contemplate’ (III, 17), which reveals a double response of attraction and ‘repulsion’ (and possibly of fear) for something so extremely and overwhelmingly beautiful, for something that is almost out of reach (as we will see later in this chapter, the way Helen is treated is not always consistent; at times she is not represented as perfect after all). Laura’s angelic features, however, seem to provoke only a feeling of total devotion: ‘A smile heavenly pure, a glance of unutterable tenderness, sympathy, pity, shone in her face – all which indications of love and purity Arthur beheld and worshipped in her, as you would watch them in a child, as one fancies one might regard them in an angel’ (IV, 434). She is like the Virgin in a religious painting, an inspiring and comforting figure surrounded by pure heavenly light. Throughout the novel Laura always offers her moral (and in one case even financial) support and encouragement to Pen; she helps him overcome the difficulties and failures he encounters in life. When he is plucked from Oxbridge, Laura is the one who insists he should try again. Thus, even before becoming his wife, she already has a crucial supportive role in his life. Undoubtedly she is the ideal Victorian woman.

In contrast to these ‘angelic’ beings, the actress Emily Fotheringay (Pen’s first love) and Blanche Amory are presented as insidious women, as the Sirens who seduce men with their stunning beauty and their enchanting singing voice. They are ‘the whores,’ the sort of women who represent a threat to society by their inconstancy and morally dubious behaviour, but who, nonetheless, provoke a complex, powerful and disturbing double feeling of rejection and attraction. The whores are a commodity, a symbol of the corruption of the new modern capitalistic world because, encouraged by the acquisitive society they inhabit, they have found a quick way to obtain money: offering their body ‘for sale’ on the market; they are merely sexual objects and, therefore, they are something to despise and avoid. But they are also an aesthetic object to contemplate whose charms and beauty are irresistible; they are fascinating beings also because they represent ‘the forbidden fruit’ of sex. The following depiction of Emily is very illuminating in this regard: ‘Her forehead was vast, and her black hair waved over it with a natural ripple, and was confined in shining and voluminous braids at the back of a neck such as you see on the shoulders of the Louvre Venus – that delight of gods and men. Her eyes, when she lifted them up to gaze on you, and ere she dropped their purple deep-fringed lids, shone with tenderness and mystery unfathomable’ (III, 47). She is represented as a highly seductive creature, as the emphasis on her beautiful black hair, her god-like neck and her enchanting gaze clearly indicates. Blanche has very similar features: ‘Blanche was fair and like a sylph. She had fair hair with green reflections in it. But she had dark eyebrows. She
had long black eyelashes, which veiled beautiful brown eyes. She had such a slim waist, that it was a wonder to behold; and such slim little feet . . . . Her lips were of the colour of faint rosebuds, and her voice warbled limpidly over a set of the sweetest little pearly teeth ever seen' (III, 282). Overall she appears as a very graceful and light figure which recalls that of the mythological spirits believed to inhabit the air. In addition to her beautiful hair and eyes, she has a wonderful voice, a very distinctive characteristic of the Sirens. One more detail is worth noticing, the contrast between the lightness of her hair, skin, lips and teeth, and the darkness of her eyes, eyelashes and eyebrows. This suggests that beyond her apparent perfection and air of innocence there are darker and threatening elements – indeed, as the narration proceeds, she will emerge as a very selfish, frivolous, sham and cruel person. Pendennis at first cannot resist the charms of Emily and then of Blanche; he strongly wishes to possess them but he cannot see beyond the surface. Only when he manages to detach himself emotionally from them can he acknowledge the vanity, selfishness and unworthiness of these women. It is at this precise moment that he feels ashamed of having given so much attention to these ‘low’ women. Pendennis’s emotional reaction is representative of a problematic aspect of Victorian literature and culture: the coexistence of two opposing feelings towards ‘the prostitute,’ one of strong repulsion for what is low, which generates a desire to eliminate it, and one of powerful attraction for that same low, which provokes a desire for it or to be like it – thus Thackeray satisfies two aspects of the feelings of his own audience.

Thackeray creates another interesting polarity affecting Pendennis’s personal life, that of the world of reason (and selfishness) versus the world of emotions (and goodness). These two equally important and necessary aspects of human life are respectively incarnated in his uncle Major Pendennis and in his mother Helen, his ‘spiritual’ and ‘moral’ guides. The Major’s practical approach to life is brilliantly summed up in the following passage:

It can’t be said that Mr. Pen’s new guide, philosopher, and friend, discoursed him on the most elevated subjects, or treated the subjects which he chose in the most elevated manner. But his morality, such as it was, was consistent. It might not perhaps tend to a man’s progress in another world, but it was pretty well calculated to advance his interests in this; and then it must be remembered, that the Major never for one instant doubted that his views were the only views practicable, and that his conduct was perfectly virtuous and respectable. He was a man of honour, in a word: and had his eyes, what he called, open. He took pity on this young greenhorn of a nephew, and wanted to open his eyes too. (III, 112)

The fact that the Major has ‘his eyes open’ indicates that he has a clear and rational perception of the world he lives in, that he looks at the practical side of things without allowing his
emotions to interfere. It also means that he is always on the lookout for good opportunities that might improve his position – he is a morally ambiguous character. He only cares about ‘progress,’ ‘calculation,’ ‘advancement,’ and ‘interest,’ all concepts belonging to the world of capitalism where ruthless ambition, acquisition, competition and selfishness dominate, and is exclusively interested in maintaining a position of dignity in society. Firmly believing that his approach to life is the correct one, he sets up to rescue Pendennis from the illusory world of emotions and sentimentality and thus ‘to open his eyes too.’ But Helen’s hold on Pen is strong; when he was a child, she never hesitated to ‘declare’ her love for him: ‘Such walks and conversations generally ended in a profusion of filial and maternal embraces: for to love and to pray were the main occupations of this dear woman’s life’ (III, 15). So, Pen grows up surrounded by his mother’s intense demonstration of affection and devotion, and by her goodness and generosity. He considers her ‘as little less than angel – a supernatural being, all wisdom, love, and beauty’ (III, 17); thus, he cannot detach himself from her easily. Both the Major and Helen, then, although in very different ways, influence Pendennis and the choices he has to make in his life. Beside representing the world of reason and that of emotions, they are also emblematic of the inner conflict that Pen experiences. As Juliet McMaster has pointed out, indeed, Pen’s uncle and mother are the incarnations of his rival impulses, one tending to the world and the other tending towards love.14 As the frontispiece to the novel had anticipated, Pen finds himself in the middle of this tension without being able to decide which world he wants to embrace – he exemplifies the Victorian ‘split personality.’ Interestingly Richard Pearson has noticed that this novel ‘is not positing Victorian middle-class domesticity over material gain, but showing how the ordinary man, the “whole man,” desires both.’15 In the story, we see Pen shifting between these extremes, between ‘low’ and ‘high’ visions, coveting both (and feeling uneasy about that), and trying to reach stability. Juliet McMaster clarifies very well the difficult situation Pen has to face: ‘Between these two worlds of illusion, Pen tries to grasp at reality. He sees on the one hand goodness and love, and their fatal tendency to moral tyranny and emotional cannibalism, and on the other worldly success, with its tawdry accompaniments of compromised integrity and carelessness for others.’16

The danger of excessive sentimentality and goodness is an important aspect of the novel; this is raised through the representation of Helen Pendennis. In Barry Lyndon and in Vanity Fair Thackeray had offered a double perspective on sentimentality, at times stressing the importance of feeling and asking for the reader’s sympathetic response, at times showing the extreme (and worrying) level these emotions can reach and encouraging scorn in the reader. He had adopted this technique particularly in the depiction of Amelia Sedley whose feelings

of joy and pain the reader was continuously invited to share and despise at the same time. In *Pendennis*, Helen is portrayed as a fundamentally good mother who would do anything for her son's sake, especially in the early chapters of the novel where we certainly form a positive view of her. Almost immediately, however, we are told that she is not perfect, that she has one vice: pride in her family and, most of all, in her son whom she 'worships with ardour.' As the story proceeds she gradually emerges as an anxious, jealous and possessive mother, which often exasperates the reader.

Interestingly, this aspect of her is exposed very well in the illustrations which at times, and certainly in this case, are even more illuminating than the text. I have chosen three examples which show three stages of her increasingly dangerous sentimentality. The first illustration I want to consider is the following pictorial initial (Fig. 4.2) which represents a mother keeping her child on a lead, not allowing him to move freely and to move away from her. The child's arms point forward, thus indicating his will to explore the world on his own. The big 'E' which encapsulates both mother and child suggests that the two figures are still part of the same world. The initial is significant because it reflects Helen's feelings at the news that Pen is leaving home to go to university. She does not want to let him go; she wished he could stay at home with her forever, but she knows she cannot hold him there. The only way she can still keep him close to her is to remind him of her love and of his filial duty towards her.

My next example is the following pictorial initial (Fig. 4.3) where Helen's jealousy is portrayed as 'life-threatening' through the direct allusion to Othello's. In the Shakespearean play, Othello, enraged by the idea that his wife Desdemona is cheating on him with his best friend Cassio, smothers his innocent companion. Similarly, Helen, jealous and suspicious of Pen's attentions to Blanche, and afraid that she will 'seduce' him with her charms, 'suffocates' her son with her excessive love and absurd protectiveness. These feelings become even more extreme when she believes that Pen has seduced Fanny. This capital initial (Fig. 4.4) anticipates the events narrated in this section by portraying Helen as a wicked old lady sending away a poor little girl, Fanny. Her 'hopelessly cruel and ruthless' face (IV, 172) bears the typical features of a fairy tale bad witch, with her nose pointing downward and her chin pointing upward. The position of her stretched out arms reinforces her threatening attitude. Fanny, on the other hand, is represented as a delicate little girl, a sort of Cinderella who has to suffer a bad mother's cruel treatment.

So, the illustrations significantly contribute to the construction of Helen's image as an excessively sentimental mother whose behaviour alters considerably throughout the novel. As Robert Bledsoe has pointed out, she develops from 'a figure of sympathetic weakness' in the early chapters to 'a figure of terrifying power' over other characters' lives in the
Fig. 4.2. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 17, *The History of Pendennis*

Fig. 4.3. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 24, *The History of Pendennis*
Fig. 4.4. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 14, *The History of Pendennis*

Fig. 4.5. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 19, *The History of Pendennis*
events surrounding Pen and Fanny. It is the dominating feature of her personality, her sentimentality, that makes Helen such a challenging character who is able to be weak and powerful at the same time, sweet and loving on one level, aggressive and cruel on another level. Bledsoe’s comment on her ‘motherly love’ is particularly helpful: ‘The most important aspect of Helen’s sentimental purity is her parasitic ability to be weak and defenceless yet at the same time somehow powerful and stifling.’ As she shifts from one position to the other, the reader’s view of her changes accordingly. But the narrator’s ambiguous treatment of her ensures that the reader does not take her for granted.

More than all the other characters, Helen is the intentional object of Thackeray’s irony. As Pen detaches himself from his mother, Helen’s sentimental attachment to him becomes increasingly pathologic. In the Fanny crisis she becomes paranoid, obsessive and pathetic: “‘I can’t bear to hear such a sin – such a dreadful sin – spoken of in such a way,” the widow said, with tears of annoyance starting from her eyes. “I can’t bear to think that my boy should commit such a crime. I wish he had died, almost before he had done it. . . . it is breaking my heart . . .’” (IV, 202). The reiteration of the phrase ‘I can’t bear’ and the expression ‘such a sin’ (which then becomes ‘such a crime’) are typical manifestations of her obsession with Pen and the idea that he might have seduced a working-class woman. Her emotional reaction, which is appropriately accompanied by hysterical tears, is exaggerated but it is nonetheless destroying her. When ‘the unfortunate Helen’ exclaims ‘I am the most unhappy mother in the world’ (IV, 203), she really reaches the apex of her pathos. Passages like this strongly recall the words and attitudes of Amelia Sedley, and undoubtedly invite the reader to ridicule (if not despise) these women for their absurd and pathetic reactions.

But it is at this point that another crucial event comes to shake our stable view of Helen: her death. The pictorial initial (Fig. 4.5) once again has a first considerable impact on our attitude towards the character. Indeed, not only does it anticipate Helen’s death, but it also prepares the reader to a more compassionate response by depicting her as a ‘sainted woman’ (particularly notable are the Bible lying on her breast and the veil surrounding her head), thus returning to the original image of a good loving mother the narrator had given us at the beginning of the story. The narrator calls her ‘OUR poor widow’ (IV, 244) – where the possessive is used to advance our attachment to her, and the words ‘poor’ and ‘widow’ are meant to increase our sympathy for her losses – then immediately after ‘the suffering lady’ (IV, 244), and, when she dies, ‘the sainte woman’ (IV, 251). These ‘affectionate’ ways of referring to Helen, though, invite the reader to be sympathetic only on the surface; they are full of irony, indeed, and perfectly accompany the mother’s pathetic behaviour in the chapter.

18 Ibid., 872.
Readers find themselves in an awkward position where their reactions constantly shift from one extreme to the other and from one side (Pen's) to the other (Helen's); even after Helen's death we are not quite sure of what feelings we are supposed to have. And, of course, Thackeray does not give us the answer we are looking for. On the contrary, adopting the same narrative technique of shifting perspectives which had characterised *Vanity Fair*, the narrator invites the reader to 'distrust any single interpretation of an event or a person... Pen and the reader must learn to change their focuses (and thus interpretations) as time and space create new conditions for seeing.'  

The character of Pendennis presents many of the features of a typical eighteenth-century stereotype which recurs constantly in Thackeray's fiction: the rake. Throughout the novel the narrator often points out his character's rakish behaviour. For instance, at the very beginning he calls him 'little Pen, a disorderly little rascal' (III, 15), and then 'the young wiseacre' (III, 108) and 'the wretched boy' (III, 230). This not only reveals the narrator's view of the protagonist, but it also directs the reader to share that view. Chapter 19 entitled 'Rake's Progress' (a clear reference to Hogarth's famous series of paintings) details Pen's entry into the world of university. His college life is denoted by an immoderate 'dedication' to all sorts of 'devilish' pleasures, which the satirical pictorial initial (Fig. 4.6) clearly emphasises and anticipates, such as dinner parties, drinking, gambling, smoking and so on, for which he spends all his money and runs into debt. The narrator observes that 'Pen's appetite for pleasure was insatiable, and he rushed at it wherever it presented itself, with an eagerness which bespoke his fiery constitution and youthful health. He called taking pleasure "seeing life"' (III, 236), thus suggesting not only that Pen is completely addicted to 'Pleasure,' which the effective use of expressions such as 'appetite,' 'insatiable,' 'rushed,' and 'eagerness' clearly indicates, but also that he is rather shallow. And his vanity is soon transformed into a ridiculous dandyism and narcissism:

Pen looked very grave, pompous, and dandified. He was unusually smart and brilliant in his costume. His white duck trousers and white hat, his neckcloth of many colours, his light waistcoat, gold chains, and shirt-studs, gave him the air of a prince of the blood at least. How his splendour became his figure! Was anybody ever like him? some one thought. He blushed — how his blushes became him! the same individual said to herself. (IV, 140)

We may immediately notice the ironical tone of the passage. Pen is described as almost emanating light from his exaggerated splendid look, as suggested by his 'brilliant costume,'

Fig. 4.6. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 19, The History of Pendennis
the whiteness of his trousers and hat and the golden chains. His colourful neckcloth gives a final touch to his almost regal appearance (the girl who is so impressed by Pen’s magnificently dressed figure is Fanny Bolton). We can easily perceive not only that he is highly concerned with fashion, but also that he definitely likes himself. His dandyism is also a silly and unsuccessful attempt to imitate his uncle. Indeed, the fact that he blushes is a symptom of his insecurity in such a role. Robin Gilmour has observed that ‘the frequency with which he blushes in the novel is a sign of his incomplete dandyism, of a cosseted vanity easily surprised into bashfulness . . .’.²⁰ We cannot but laugh at Pen’s attempt to be something he is not.

Another important aspect of Pen’s rakishness emerges in the ‘traditional’ motif of the aristocratic rake seducing an innocent and ingenuous country girl, which is represented in his encounter and flirtation with Fanny Bolton, a porter’s daughter. Although Pen does not see his friendly relationship with Fanny as a ‘seduction,’ the impression he gives to the people who observe his behaviour from the outside is different. This is exemplified by Mr. Bows’s reproachful and scornful words to Pen:

Such a fine gentleman as Arthur Pendennis, Esquire, doesn’t condescend to walk up to my garret, or to sit in a laundress’s kitchen, but for reasons of his own. And my belief is that you came to steal a pretty girl’s heart away, and to ruin it, and to spurn it afterwards, Mr. Arthur Pendennis. That’s what the world makes of you young dandies, you gentlemen of fashion, you high and mighty aristocrats that trample upon the people. It’s sport to you . . . (IV, 144-5)

Mr. Bows’s argument is based on the fact that Pen and Fanny belong to two different and incompatible social classes. As aristocrats normally do not wish to mix with people from the lower classes (and if they do so is only to satisfy their appetite for pleasure), he sees Pen’s visits to Fanny as highly suspicious, which the phrase ‘for reasons of his own’ suggests. Mr. Bows’s narrow-minded view reveals two important facts. On one level, it shows how the eighteenth-century stereotype of the aristocratic rake still survived strongly in the minds of people living in the nineteenth century. On another level, it reflects the way the working class considered the aristocracy a proud, mean and selfish group whose occupation was mainly to amuse itself in any way; it reflects class antagonism. The eighteenth-century motif of the young aristocrat seducing and abandoning a country girl for his own pleasure is made even more explicit by the narrator’s numerous comparison of the Pen-Fanny relationship with that of Lovelace and Clarissa in Richardson’s novel _Clarissa_ (1748-9). The narrator refers to these famous figures to exemplify the way people see the relationship between Pen and Fanny

²⁰ Gilmour (1981), 72.
rather than to trace similarities with Richardson's characters or situation. Indeed, Pen's 'seduction' of Fanny does not have Lovelace's violent and obsessive approach and it happens almost involuntarily – Fanny is infatuated by Pen's 'princely' appearance and by the novel he has just written. Our attention is drawn more to Pen's psychological state, to his opposing impulses of attraction and resistance, and to his battle against Temptation, than to the alleged seduction of the girl. Judith Fisher has observed that the severe illness which affects Pen, and nearly kills him, is caused 'by his resistance to his own sexual power,' by the fact the 'He is both the desired and desiring object. Resisting Fanny is resisting his narcissism. To seduce her would satisfy his vanity, but as Fanny's adoration makes clear, this is a vanity of the surface.'21 This life-threatening feverish illness, during which the doctor decides to shave the lad's head as a precaution, brings 'salvation' and relief to Pen. According to Judith Fisher, the loss of his hair not only symbolises the permanent erasing of dandyism (of which hair is a primary aspect), but also his sexual repression: 'His fever burns away his fascination with the surface and releases him from his dandyism.'22 At this point Pen is ready to move towards maturity.

His early not very respectable behaviour and 'dandified' air, as well as his involvement in the seduction of a girl, recall previous rakish characters in Thackeray's novels, in particular Barry Lyndon and George Osborne. Nonetheless, there is a major difference between the treatment of Pen and that of his antecedents. Indeed, while Barry and George are rakes in all respects (and the narrator certainly shows little respect for them), Pen in spite of his rascality emerges as a much more positive, sensitive and conscientious figure towards which the narrator shows a protective attitude. On more than one occasion he points out that Pen has some good qualities indeed. One of the best examples is the following comment: 'We are not presenting Pen to you as a hero or a model, only as a lad, who, in the midst of a thousand vanities and weaknesses, has yet some generous impulses, and is not altogether dishonest' (III, 241). Generosity and honesty are the moral qualities that he retains throughout the story, even during his journalistic career when he begins to acknowledge the selfishness and competitiveness of the capitalistic world he has entered but, despite his strong desire to succeed, he refuses to compromise his integrity for the sake of business – 'One cannot tell all the truth, I suppose; but one can tell nothing but the truth' (III, 456-7), he declares to the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette. We could say that rather than being a real rake Pen goes through a temporary rakish phase – from his childhood up to the point of the Fanny Bolton crisis; after this event he has the ability to drop his shallowness and to further his growth towards maturity.

22 Ibid., 119.
Besides retaining some of the characteristics of the eighteenth-century rake, Pendennis is representative of another important figure in English literature and culture, that of the gentleman. In the preface to the novel Thackeray declares that the story is an attempt to depict ‘a gentleman of our age.’ Pen’s struggles, opposing impulses and difficulties in adapting to the world he inhabits, then, can be seen as symbolic of the uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding the idea of gentlemanliness in the middle of the nineteenth-century. In an age which saw the middle-class struggling to assert itself and its values in society, the figure of the gentleman came to embody the aspirations and the needs as well as the preoccupations and anxieties of the new emerging bourgeoisie. As Robin Gilmour has pointed out, Thackeray, more than any of his contemporaries, was able to perceive and interpret this particular historical moment: ‘... in novels like Vanity Fair (1847-8) and Pendennis (1848-50) he portrays the interaction between the self-confident worldliness of the old order and the angular, domesticated morality of the new, struggling to define and assert itself in the early decades of the nineteenth century.’

As we have seen, in his attempt to find his place in the world and in society Pen finds himself in a perpetual tension between two different approaches to life, the rational and worldly one, and the emotional and unworldly one, respectively incarnated in his uncle and his mother. He is not only caught between two worlds, but also between two types of gentlemanliness: the old Regency gentleman and the new domesticated Victorian one. The former, whose gentlemanly status is determined by birth and rank, and who is elaborately dressed, is represented by Major Pendennis. The description of him in Chapter 1 exemplifies this very well:

At a quarter past ten the Major invariably made his appearance in the best blacked boots in all London, with a checked morning cravat that never was rumpled until dinner time, a buff waistcoat which bore the crown of his sovereign on the buttons . . . . Pendennis’s coat, his white gloves, his whiskers, his very cane, were perfect of their kind as specimens of the costume of a military man en retraite. (III, 1)

His tidy, elegant and fashionable look is identified as a fundamental characteristic of the old gentleman, while his coat, gloves, whiskers and cane are presented as distinctive traits of another category, that of the retired military man. A sense of immense pride of the social class one belongs to and also of the monarchic country one is part of (which is clearly suggested by the buttons bearing the royal crown on the Major’s waistcoat) completes the picture. The Major exemplifies the old idea of gentlemanliness where rank is the only determining factor – ‘but what is a gentleman without his pedigree?’ (III, 9) It is all this that Pen admires in his

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24 Ibid., 73.
uncle; he often tries to imitate him, to adopt his elegant look and behaviour. However, despite succeeding in assuming a ‘grave, pompous and dandified’ air, he does not feel completely at ease with this model; he finds it unnatural somehow.

The new Victorian gentleman, who is defined by a set of important and desirable moral qualities such as benevolence, kindness, and honesty, is part of the whole idea of domesticity, which, as we have seen, is incarnated in Helen and Laura who represent a world where the everyday cultivation of spiritual values is offered as a code of conduct. Thus, in this view, exemplary behaviour is identified as a distinctive feature of gentlemanliness; money, rank and fashion have become matters of secondary importance. Pen certainly has some of the ‘virtues’ belonging to the new gentleman (generosity, honesty and manliness), as the narrator clearly points out when he defines him as a young man who has many defects, but also ‘some generous impulses, and is not altogether dishonest’ (III, 241). His natural kindness and capability of giving (and receiving) affection are particularly exemplified by the way he treats Fanny and fiercely defends her innocence against his own mother’s false accusations. And his unwillingness to lie and, more importantly, to compromise his moral integrity for the sake of business, which emerges during his journalistic career, are definitely essential features of the new gentleman. Nevertheless, his rakish behaviour, his tendency to dandyism and his narcissism do not allow him to embrace this new model either. He considers both types of gentlemanliness as valid, yet he finds himself unable to decide which one he wants to become. As Robin Gilmour has observed in this regard, ‘Pen’s problem is that he can be neither a full-blooded dandy like his uncle nor the kind of domesticated country gentleman his mother would wish . . . ’25 But the important thing to notice here is that Thackeray does present Pen as having the potential, the right moral qualities, to become the new gentleman – and in the end Pen emerges as a more mature man who has developed those important qualities and who is ready to become a Victorian gentleman.

In Pen, then, Thackeray delineates the idea of the gentleman in that delicate historical moment of transition from the Regency to the Victorian age. Retaining some of the characteristics of the Regency gentleman but at the same time having the ‘moral’ qualities to become the Victorian gentleman, Pen in his uncertain position is ‘the new gentleman to be’; he is a hybrid figure. One of the biggest uncertainties that Pen as ‘the new gentleman to be’ embodies is the highly debated dilemma whether the gentleman should work or not. According to Robin Gilmour, the way Thackeray treats the matter in the novel is very ambiguous and unsatisfactory; in the account of the relationship between Pen’s literary career and his status as a gentleman he leaves the problem unresolved.26 The Victorians were divided

25 Ibid., 72.
26 Ibid., 74.
on this front. Thackeray found himself caught in this dilemma and was not able to take a firm position in this regard. While Dickens in *David Copperfield* conveyed his belief that the combination of gentlemanliness and work was the key to success in life, Thackeray was not very comfortable with the idea that work and gentlemanliness were compatible, and that is the reason why the matter is left unresolved in *Pendennis*. My feeling is that his idea of gentlemanliness, at least at this point of his literary career, still had some of the residues of the past which the author had some difficulties letting go. His fascination with the eighteenth century certainly reinforced his doubts. Therefore, Pen is not only representative of the highly debated issue of the idea of the gentleman in the Victorian age, but also of the personal dilemma of his creator who, just like his ‘hero,’ found himself shifting between the old and the new world, unable to fix his position.

To conclude, *Pendennis* presents thematic and structural affinities with Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, its model. It centres on the idea of temptation as a fundamental aspect of human experience which we should not deny or be ashamed of but that we should nonetheless try to overcome. More importantly, it poses questions on the nature of happiness, showing that in an era where the promotion of materialism coexists with that of spiritual values, the search for happiness has become problematic; the ending, which sees Pen accepting Laura’s love (as a second choice though), seems to suggest that true happiness can be found in the spiritual world. If *Tom Jones* is a picaresque novel, *Pendennis* is a Bildungsroman which focuses not only on the growth of his young protagonist, but also on that of the readers; and although the hero’s development is certainly limited, what counts is that he does mature. Nonetheless, the two novels present a similarity in their basic structure which centres on the opposition between the country and the city. In *Pendennis*, however, this polarity comes to embrace the major inconsistencies of the Victorian period. The country women (Helen and Laura) symbolise the ideal of Victorian womanhood, domesticity, and spiritual values; the city women (Emily and Blanche) represent the real world of capitalism and materialism, its threats but also its fascination. The two most significant people in Pen’s life, the Major and his mother, respectively represent the equally powerful spheres of reason and emotion which reflect the protagonist’s rival impulses. The danger of extreme sentimentality and goodness, which is presented through the portrayal of Helen Pendennis, is also a significant concern of the novel. For her overprotective attitude and overwhelming affection for her son Helen is inevitably hit by Thackeray’s ironic but also ambiguous treatment which, at the crucial moment of her death, forces the reader to reconsider his/her view of her, inviting him/her to avoid any single interpretations of a person. Pen has some of the features of two important figures in literature: the rake, for his temporary dedication to pleasures and his ‘seduction’ of the country girl Fanny, and, more importantly, the gentleman in a phase of transition – he
retains the characteristic dandyism and narcissism of the Regency gentleman while possessing some of the ‘moral’ qualities (honesty and generosity) necessary to become the new (Victorian) gentleman.

Most modern readers do not like Pendennis. They find him an empty, boring and weak character who in the end can only achieve a limited maturity. The contemporary audience certainly had a similar view of this ‘hero,’ as Trollope’s famous comment demonstrates: ‘It has to be admitted that Pendennis is not a fine gentleman. He is not as weak, as selfish, as untrustworthy as that George Osborne whom Amelia married in Vanity Fair; but nevertheless, he is weak, and selfish, and untrustworthy. He is not such a one as a father would wish to see his son, or a mother to welcome as a lover for her daughter.’27 But whether we like him or not is not important here. What counts is the sense of a man that we get out of the novel, as the ending makes clear:

We own, and see daily, how the false and worthless live and prosper, while the good are called away, and the dear and young perish untimely, – we perceive in every man’s life the maimed happiness, the frequent falling, the bootless endeavour, the struggle of Right and Wrong, in which the strong often succumb and the swift fail: we see flowers of good blooming in foul places, as, in the most lofty and splendid fortunes, flaws of vice and meanness, and stains of evil; and, knowing how mean the best of us is, let us give a hand of charity to Arthur Pendennis, with all his faults and shortcomings, who does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother. (IV, 495)

Pen is just an individual growing and facing the difficulties and temptations of life, making mistakes and learning from them. He represents human nature, its wishes and aspirations, and its imperfections (selfishness, vanity and pride), which, as Joan Williams observed, Thackeray sees as made of a mixture of good and evil, of real and ideal.28 But, more importantly, Pen is the representative of the early Victorian man trying to find his place in a new world, struggling to let the old world go and to let the new world in, desperately attempting to chose (if not to find a compromise) between two equally strong desires: success and love.

27 Trollope (1879), 109.
Chapter 5

‘I would have History familiar rather than heroic’: *The History of Henry Esmond*

After completing the last number of *Pendennis*, Thackeray immersed himself completely in the previous century, researching and gathering material for his lectures on *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*. Absorbed as he was in his favourite age, he began to think about his next novel, which was to be set in the reign of Queen Anne. In Thackeray’s literary career *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852) represents a major departure from the structure and style of the two novels (*Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*) that had given the author that celebrity he had so longed for. In a letter to his mother dated 15 March 1852, Thackeray wrote: ‘I have given up & only for a day or two the notion of the book in numbers. Its much too grave & sad for that & the incident is not sufficient.’1 The novel, indeed, was not serialised; thought as a unity, it was published in three volumes and, for the first and last time, with no illustrations. It is deeply melancholic and nostalgic in tone, with little room for satire and irony. In this chapter, I will argue that despite recreating the historical setting of the early eighteenth century *Henry Esmond* is deeply Victorian in spirit, particularly for its focus on domesticity, for the issues it raises and for the moral values it promotes.

Embracing the period between 1690 and 1715, the book was conceived as an historical novel, an attempt to reconstruct the atmosphere of the past through the autobiographical account of an ordinary individual. According to Georg Lukács, Thackeray returned to the style and structure of the novels of the eighteenth century because he was deeply and bitterly disillusioned with the nature of politics, with the relations between social and political life in his own time.2 But this was not his only reason; he also wanted to revisit the past as a way of understanding his contemporary world and its modernity. He does so by focusing on the difficulties an individual experiences trying to survive in a moment of considerable cultural changes. This is represented through Henry’s religious and political uncertainties and his ambivalent attitude towards war. But *Henry Esmond* is not only an historical novel with this modified intent; for its insights into the private life and emotions of the protagonist and of the members of his household, and its promotion of family life as something desirable that can give security, protection and happiness, it can also be seen as one of the best examples of the

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Victoria domestic novel. Directly connected to this is the promulgation of Love as the most important principle of living, as a fundamental binding agent without which everything collapses, as the very essence of human existence and harmony. It is viewed both as a human dimension and as a religious value. The former is explored through the depiction of Rachel’s suffering and opposing feelings for Henry, while the latter emerges through Henry’s view of love as a beautiful gift from God to mankind.

First of all, *Henry Esmond* was envisaged as an historical novel. In early Victorian times intellectuals and historians began to reconsider the past carefully in the attempt to find explanations for the rapid changes that England and the world were undergoing; they started to look at it as a way of understanding their modernity and how they came to it. Thus, a new idea of history, which was directly connected with that of progress, emerged. History was now seen as a natural and gradual unfolding of events in which each era created the premises for the next one and which was denoted by development and improvement; the contemporary civilised world, which contrasted with the inferior society of the previous ages, was the most obvious proof of the validity of this theory of progress. This renewed interest in the past led to the flourishing of numerous historical works and novels. In his *History of England* (1848-55), Macaulay celebrated the material achievements of England in the nineteenth century, and the superiority of its people and institutions, pointing out that throughout the past this country had benefited from providential favour and advantageous circumstances:

I shall relate how . . . from the auspicious union of order and freedom, sprang a prosperity of which the annals of human affairs had furnished no example; how our country, from a state of ignominious vassalage, rapidly rose to the place of umpire among European powers; how her opulence and her martial glory grew together . . . how a gigantic commerce gave birth to a maritime power, compared with which every other maritime power, ancient or modern, sinks into insignificance . . . .

Above all, England’s present success and prominence were due to its inhabitants’ tenacious promotion of their liberties which had granted them order, prosperity and stability from early times. In *The French Revolution: A History* (1837), Carlyle conveyed his view of history as essentially cyclic, as a continuous process of deterioration and renewal. This occurs because of man’s fundamental predisposition to moral degeneration, deception (both of himself and of

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others) and hypocrisy, which leads to the corruption and then to the destruction of values.\(^5\) At this stage catastrophic events come to shake and cleanse reality with a ‘destructive and self-destructive force’ to allow the rise of ‘something that has order’ and that is ‘strong enough to bind it into subjection again.’\(^6\) The best example of this process was the French Revolution, which Carlyle compares to a ‘volcanic lava-flood’ that explodes and flows destroying and sweeping away all that it encounters; in this case it has swept away the existing order: ‘Royalty, Aristocracy, and a King’s Life.’\(^7\) Throughout this cyclic process, which Carlyle applied to all aspects of human existence (religion, politics, social relations and so on), it was possible to see how mankind had gradually progressed towards a better life based on higher principles.

Many Victorian novelists also tried to achieve a better comprehension of their contemporary modern condition by looking at the past in their fictional stories. Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last of the Barons* (1843), which is set in the years 1467-71, deals with the theme of historical change, focusing on the moment when society gradually abandoned agriculture in favour of trade, which encouraged the gradual rise of a new group, the middle trading class; all this is seen through the eyes of the Earl of Warwick, the representative of the old order, who appears extremely concerned with the transformations of his age and whose downfall is inevitable. Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which was partly inspired by Carlyle’s *The French Revolution: A History*, was conceived as an attempt to further the understanding of this horrifying and dark time in France. Creating a dichotomy between London, where people live peacefully and happily, following the habits of business and the rule of law, and Paris, where the rich enjoy a life of pleasure and comfort and the poor lead a miserable life of starvation, Dickens suggests that the French Revolution was the result of a process of cause and effect; the aristocracy’s abuses of all laws caused the hungry and oppressed French people to react violently and vengefully. In George Eliot’s *Romola* (1863), which is set in fifteenth-century Florence, the issue of a life not regulated by laws is a central preoccupation. This is presented on one level through the character of Tito Melema whose ‘lawless’ way of life shows the danger and disastrous consequences of avoiding the established rules; for his constant eagerness to please himself and his increasingly individualistic and immoral behaviour he can be seen as the predecessor of modern man. On the other level, the problem is explored through his wife Romola who, after realising the moral deterioration of her husband Tito, is torn between the wish to leave him and the wish

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\(^7\) Ibid., 114.
not to the break the tie (and thus the law) – she eventually takes the risk of ignoring the law, knowing that her reason for doing so is very different from that of her husband.

Thackeray too was interested in studying the past as a way of understanding modernity but his vision of it was different from that of these contemporaries. Indeed he saw history as fundamentally unheroic and believed that the general existing attitude of hero-worship had altered the way historical acts and personages were perceived. As Andrew Sanders has pointed out, Thackeray regarded history ‘as a series of questionable and unheroic human decisions.’ Thus, instead of interpreting crucial past events or looking at the cultural and political background of a particular period, in Henry Esmond he concentrates on the life of an individual in society with the aim of showing the emotional impact that historical conflicts and crises have on him. Human experience, in which one can recognise his/her own experience, rather than heroic deeds is what he is interested in, and this is expressed by Henry Esmond at the beginning of his account when he declares ‘I would have History familiar rather than heroic.’ Georg Lukács observed that Thackeray did not follow Walter Scott’s model, but tried to create a new historical approach where everything is seen through the everyday private life and intrigues of the upper classes. This is not entirely correct, as Thackeray focuses on the personal life and emotions of an individual, not on those of the entire social class he belongs to. Indeed, as Andrews Sanders has emphasised, the fact that we witness historical events through Henry’s eyes and, more importantly, that we see him emotionally involved with them as he remembers them, is crucial to the understanding of Thackeray’s approach to history.

Henry Esmond is a novel about an individual trying to survive in a period of historical changes which question and shake his personal beliefs as well as the established social codes. In the beginning Henry is presented as a follower of the traditional code of honour, which includes a sense of pride in the ancient nobility of his family and declaration of absolute fidelity to his lord and his country. His strong sense of the honour of his family, his desire to maintain it, as well as his sincere affection for and loyalty to his lord, push him to hide the truth about his legitimacy. And when he suspects that the parson Tom Tusher intends to propose to Lady Castlewood, he is enraged and disgusted by the idea that the respectability of the family could be compromised by such a low union: ‘. . . the honour of the family, of which he was the chief, made it his duty to prevent so monstrous an alliance, and to chastise the upstart who could dare to think of such an insult to their house’ (225). Judith Fisher has

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9 The History of Henry Esmond, Works, X, 2.
11 Sanders (1977), 199.
pointed out that Henry relies primarily on this code of fidelity, that of the Arthurian knight-errant, to interpret his life, himself and his world. However, there are several moments where he doubts the validity of this code. One of the best examples can be found at the beginning of Book II when Henry has just learnt the truth about his legitimacy:

Should he bring down shame and perplexity upon all those beings to whom he was attached by so many tender ties of affection and gratitude? degrade his father’s widow? impeach and sully his father’s and kinsman’s honour? and for what? For a barren title, to be worn at the expenses of an innocent boy, the son of his dearest benefactress. He had debated this matter in his conscience, whilst his poor lord was making his dying confession. On one side were ambition, temptation, justice even; but love, gratitude, and fidelity pleaded on the other. (176-7)

In this passage we see him vacillating and struggling between his sense of duty, fidelity and sincere affection for his adopted family on the one hand, and his strong wish to be officially recognised as the head of the Esmonds and the heir of the Castlewood Estate on the other hand. The disclosing of this ‘terrible’ secret would have catastrophic consequences for the widow and her children, as the insistent use of words such as ‘shame,’ ‘perplexity,’ ‘degradation,’ ‘impeachment,’ and ‘sullying’ clearly indicates; Henry cannot stand the thought of being the cause of such a disgrace for them. In the attempt to convince himself that claiming his title would not be worthwhile, he even calls it ‘barren,’ thus devaluing it considerably. And yet he does perceive his supposed illegitimacy as a profound act of injustice which will prevent him from assuming an important position in society, sharing the respectability of the family he belongs to as well as other great privileges. In the end his private sense of obligation and honour prevails, and he decides not to claim his title, but the fact that he was nearly consumed by his dilemma should be considered more significant than his final choice. Robin Gilmour has pointed out that Henry Esmond stands at the crossroads of his society, an insider and an outsider at the same time; he is a gentleman born, but in the eyes of society he is a bastard; he acts according to the old code of honour and fidelity, but he is increasingly aware of the necessity to renounce that code. This suggests that the novel is about the delicate historical moment of transition between established principles and modernity explored through an individual’s personal doubts about the traditional rules. Indeed, from the discovery of his legitimacy onwards Henry will gradually become more uncertain about the validity of the old system and will find himself constantly shifting between opposing political and religious positions.

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The impact of historical changes on the individual is exemplified by Henry's feeling of uneasiness with his age, especially with its political and religious turbulence, its violence and its conflict of values. During and after the Restoration England was a profoundly divided country. With regard to religion, it saw a constant battle between the members of the Anglican Church on one hand, and Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters on the other hand. Laws which privileged one side or the other were continually changing depending on the sympathies of the regnant. Thus, Charles II re-established the Anglican Church and excluded its adversaries from public life, while his successor James II, a Roman Catholic, abolished some of the laws that penalised Catholics and Dissenters. With the deposition of James II and the accession of the Dutch William of Orange, a Protestant leader, in 1689 the religious position of the country changed once again. These conflicts encouraged the emergence of two defined political groups: the Tories, who supported the Crown and the established church, and the Whigs, who opposed the Crown and encouraged the development of commerce. Such turmoil has an enormous impact on Henry who finds himself unable to decide which religious and political side he should take. While studying at Cambridge to take orders, he finds himself in the middle of a personal theological controversy, which sees him constantly shifting from one religious belief to another, and assuming an unusual mixed political position: 'In the course of his reading . . . the youth found himself at the end of one month a Papist, and was about to proclaim his faith; the next month a Protestant, with Chillingworth; and the third a sceptic, with Hobbes and Bayle. . . . Politics ran high, too, at the University; . . . Harry brought his family Tory politics to college with him, to which he must add a dangerous admiration for Oliver Cromwell . . . .' (115-6). His doubts of faith are so strong that at one point he even takes a sceptical position.

His opposing views of war are even more significant – he joins the English army on the occasion of the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13), which saw England allied with Holland, Bavaria and Austria against France and Spain, and which was supported by the Whigs who gained much profit from it. He sees war both as a duty and as a source of horrifying violence. As I have already pointed out in Chapter 2, Thackeray, despite disapproving of certain aspects of the military code, could not abandon it completely because he could not find an alternative to it.\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Henry Esmond}, as we will see later in this chapter, he focuses on family relations and seems to suggest (and even promote) domesticity as a valid replacement of the old set of values. Yet, once again, as John Peck has pointed out, he cannot embrace this new vision of experience completely nor can he renounce militarism.\textsuperscript{15} This becomes apparent in the fact that the problems arising in the story always tend to be resolved.

\textsuperscript{14} See Chapter 2, 40-1.
\textsuperscript{15} Peck (1998), 61.
by the means of a fight, especially of duels: ‘He cannot see a way of resolving a conflict between two people that does not involve the idea of a duel; even when an alternative solution is found, the very fact that he has introduced the concept of the duel indicates the essentially militaristic way in which his mind works.’¹⁶ So, why was Thackeray still unable to break fully with the old code despite his uneasiness with violence and his desire of domesticity? Military duty is based on the fundamental principle of honour which encourages individuals to place the welfare (and reputation) of their country above personal interests, and even above their own life. In such a vision, violence becomes a matter of secondary importance because it is part of the fight for a noble cause. It is this idea of ‘unselfish’ honour that Thackeray had difficulties letting go and that he felt the need to set against the self-centred individualism which Henry represents, and that comes to dominate the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Indeed, only in part do Henry’s views of war mirror Thackeray’s – they convey mainly his preoccupation with the new individualistic code of behaviour arising in his contemporary society. Henry regards military action as a duty to his country, yet he refuses to accept the violence that characterises it. In one instance he observes how the triumph and celebrations of the victory obtained in a battle contrast with the heartless ‘crimes’ that the soldiers commit:

And now, having seen a great military march through a friendly country; the pomps and festivities of more than one German court; the severe struggle of a hotly contested battle, and the triumph of victory, Mr. Esmond beheld another part of military duty: our troops entering the enemy’s territory, and putting all around them to fire and sword; burning farms, wasted fields, shrieking women, slaughtered sons and fathers, and drunken soldiery, cursing and carousing in the midst of tears, terror, and murder. Why does the stately Muse of History, that delights in describing the valour of heroes and the grandeur of conquest, leave out these scenes, so brutal, mean and degrading, that yet form by far the greater part of the drama of war? (259-60)

War is presented as a source of glory which, however, comes at the expense of other people’s lives. If a victory in battle is very rewarding and is therefore worthy of celebrations in grand style (‘great military march,’ ‘pomps’ and ‘festivities’), the brutality that comes during and after a fight is something to be very ashamed of. Fire and sword symbolise total devastation, destruction and death. All these dreadful crimes committed by the soldiers are part of the ‘grandeur of conquest.’ What people celebrate as great heroes are nothing but ‘drunken’ and vulgar soldiers who under the ecstasy of war become pitiless murderers who show no respect for the loss of human lives. Though a firm believer in military duty, Henry is deeply upset by and extremely uncomfortable with all this violence and feels pity for the miserable victims of

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.
¹⁷ Ibid., 62.
conflicts who are deprived even of the few things they possess: 'We found places garrisoned by invalids, and children and women; poor as they were, and as the costs of this miserable war has made them, our commission was to rob these almost starving wretches - to tear the food our of their granaries, and strip them of their rags' (314). He cannot accept the fact that violence is an inevitable part of a greater and 'selfless' cause, the survival of a whole nation. Instead, he is more concerned about his own private life and the lives of the people affected by war.

Henry's doubts about religion, politics, and, more importantly, about the established military code are symptomatic of the difficulties one experiences adapting to an age of transition denoted by oppositions. Indeed, as John Loofbourow has remarked, Esmond is a man 'in conflict with his society and is conscious of it.' He desires the new way of living which revolves around domesticity, but, at the same time, he cannot abandon the military sphere and the chivalric code he has always relied on to interpret the world he inhabits. His personal drama comes from the fact that he cannot solve nor learn to live with these contradictions; nor has he the courage to break free until the very end. Robin Gilmour has emphasised the important symbolic meaning of the bloodless crossing of swords between Esmond and the Pretender in the last chapter, of Esmond's denunciation of the Stuart cause and of the breaking of his sword as signs of his final renunciation of the old code of honour. Indeed, deeply deluded by his country, he claims his title, he marries Rachel and moves to America with her with the desire to redefine rather than to create the future in a new world.

But Henry Esmond is above all a novel about domesticity because its real focus is on the private life and emotions of Henry and of the members of his family. According to Gordon Ray, Thackeray's contemporaries saw in Esmond a supreme example of the dominant variety of fiction in the 1850s, the domestic novel, despite its settings in the eighteenth century. In a world dominated by commercial rules which threatened basic human principles, the Victorians found refuge in their private sphere and exalted family life as the enclosed circle where spiritual and moral values could be cultivated and where personal feelings and emotions were valued. Family life was characterised by harmony, a sense of unity, and mutual affection and support. It cherished and reinforced the bond of its members by establishing and following a regular pattern of habits which were performed with solemnity, such as the reading aloud around the fireplace in the evenings, the common reciting of prayers, the gathering at dinner and tea time, and the attendance at religious services on Sundays. The idea of family life was directly connected with that of the home as an enclosed

20 Edgar F. Harden, Thackeray the Writer: From Pendennis to Denis Duval (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 63.
space which remained unaffected by the coldness, selfishness and cruelty of modern lifestyle. As John Ruskin clearly emphasised in his lecture ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’ in Sesame and Lilies (1864), it was a circumscribed ‘garden,’ a place of almost sacred peace:

This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home: so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted a fire in.\(^\text{22}\)

Home is presented as an ideal world of innocence, harmony and love, and also as a ‘shelter,’ a fundamental area of protection not just against the meanness of modern society but also against any kind of conflict, fear and preoccupation. It is the place where unworldly values can be truly preserved and where one can find inner happiness.

Anxious about the materialistic principles which were at the base of the increasingly commercial world they inhabited, many Victorian novelists began to promote domesticity in their stories, giving birth to a new kind of fiction, the domestic novel, which centred on the lives (and emotions) of a small family, and was particularly interested in the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, and between the children themselves. Dickens’s Dombey and Son (1846-48) and David Copperfield (1849-50), and Mrs. Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters (1864-66) are some of the best examples. Dombey and Son shows a family which has become dysfunctional because the commercial rules of the outer world have been allowed to enter the home. In Mr. Dombey’s life there is no room for any kind of feeling and emotion; entirely absorbed in business matters, he has lost his humanity. His daughter Florence’s sensitive, generous and affectionate spirit contrasts with his coldness. She embodies desirable and ideal domestic virtues; she knows and cherishes the value of family bonds, is aware that father and daughter need each other, and constantly (but unsuccessfully) tries to reach out to his parent. But thanks to the perseverance and power of her love ultimately Mr. Dombey abandons his materialistic approach and opens his heart to his child, embracing domesticity for good. In David Copperfield family life is also central and is presented through the various exemplary households that David comes into contact with. When in London, where he is miserable and poor, his life is cheered by his acquaintance with Mr. Micawber and his relatives who manage to live happily despite their financial troubles. His aunt Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Dick receive him with kindness and affection, and, later,

Mr. Wickfield (his aunt's lawyer) and his daughter Agnes welcome him and treat him almost as a member of their family. Through his old friend Steerforth, David is also introduced to Mr. Peggotty, a fisherman, and his relatives who live in harmony until they are disrupted by Emily's escape. And by marrying Agnes he too forms a happy family. In *Wives and Daughters*, which focuses on the every-day stories of two families, the Gibsons and the Hamleys, Mrs. Gaskell depicts and promotes domesticity as an idyllic world where women in their role as wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers are fundamental to ensure the harmony of the family and the home. Molly Gibson is intentionally presented as the embodiment of those ideal feminine virtues, such as honesty, innocence, unselfishness, trust and love, which were essential to the preservation of domestic peace. The importance of sisterly bond is also emphasised, through the relationship between Molly and her step-sister Cynthia (who lacks many of Molly's qualities, especially her innocence) who are loyal, honest and committed to each other.

Thackeray too believed in the ideal of domesticity, but, as we have seen, he was not able to embrace it completely because he was still partly attached to the old lifestyle based on the code of honour. Thus, in *Henry Esmond*, public and private life, militarism and domesticity, often overlap, and Henry is shown as coveting at times the former and at times the latter. However, the novel does offer a deep insight into the feelings and emotions of Henry and of its family members. Throughout the account Henry reminds his readers—his grandchildren—that 'this is only the story of your grandfather and his family' (293), thus drawing our attention to the fact that his account is no other than the private history of a family, his own. The promulgation of domestic life is perhaps not as direct as in other novels of the age but from the beginning it is presented as something highly desirable and also necessary for the achievement of happiness. The first few chapters immediately establish this idea by showing Henry as a lonely child who desperately needs a family as a point of reference. The arrival of the new Lord and Lady at Castlewoods, which includes Lord Francis Castlewood, his wife Rachel, their son Frank and their daughter Beatrix, gives renewed hope and joy to Henry's empty existence. As Terry Tierney has pointed out, the opening chapters are very important because they clearly reveal how Henry's life revolves around his adopted family unit, its members (especially Rachel for her kindness and the Lord for his good nature) and its own history. From the opening of the story the reader is invited to focus mainly on the relationship between the individuals belonging to this household, on their emotional states (especially on love) and on the small and big events affecting them.

Lord and Lady Castlewood at first are presented as an ideal couple whose life is based on the cultivation of spiritual values and whose sincere mutual and parental love guarantees

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harmony in their home. The pressures of the outer world, however, soon penetrate their enclosed 'garden,' creating difficulties and conflicts in their love relationship, causing their progressive (and then final) estrangement and bringing much suffering to both and even to their children. The emotional reaction of Henry, for whom a united family is everything, is particularly meaningful because it clearly unveils his desperation at the acknowledgement that his world has suddenly collapsed:

Waking up from dreams, books, and visions of college honours, in which for two years Harry Esmond had been immersed, he found himself, instantly, on his return home, in the midst of this actual tragedy of life, which absorbed and interested him more than all his tutor had taught him. The persons whom he loved best in the world, and to whom he owed most, were living unhappy together. The gentlest and kindest of women was suffering ill-usage and shedding tears in secret: the man who made her wretched by neglect, if not by violence, was Harry's benefactor and patron. In houses where, in place of that sacred, inmost flame of love, there is discord at the centre, the whole household becomes hypocritical, and each lies to his neighbour. (121-2)

Domestic life is offered as a valid source of happiness, as well as a shelter against the cruelty of the outer world, as long as there is that harmony that keeps it together. A household where conflict has replaced peace is destined to break up and is no longer capable of giving emotional stability. The 'war' between Henry's adopted parents comes as a profound shock to him. It is a nightmare too terrible to be true and an unbearable tragic situation which brings a feeling of emptiness and profound pain not only to the unhappy couple but also to the people who surround and love them. Henry emphasises particularly Rachel's secret suffering, which indicates his special affection and concern for her; her wretchedness is caused by the 'ill-usage,' 'neglect' and 'violence' of her husband. But even more tragic is the fact that she has to be 'hypocritical,' that she has to hide her feelings and pretend that the relationship with her husband has not altered. Here Thackeray reveals an interest in the negative aspects of conflict, enmity and dysfunction within the family; he displays and explores them effectively in order to reinforce the domestic ideal. More importantly the passage conveys a belief in the importance of love – one of the most important Victorian values – as a fundamental binding agent within the family. The sincere affection between husband and wife is essential ('sacred') because it helps to maintain harmony and unity in the whole household. Without it everything collapses and life itself loses meaning. For Henry the lack of love between his adopted parents is a Tragedy indeed, 'one of the deepest sorrows of a life which had never, in truth, been very happy' (125). The fact the both parents confess to him their sufferings makes things even worse, as Henry finds himself 'compelled to understand and pity a grief which he
stood quite powerless to relieve' (125). Thus, his own unhappiness is increased by the awareness that there is little he can do to revive that 'inmost flame of love' that used to unite the couple.

Therefore, the promotion of Love as the very essence of human existence as well as the source of blissful happiness is central in this novel. Eighteenth-century literature had already begun to emphasise the importance of this feeling by presenting it as a highly desirable aspect of human life but, above all, as a divine value, as God's expression of his own love for man. In Joseph Andrew and Tom Jones, Fielding had shown that the pursuit of affection allowed man to get closer to that ideal of happiness he coveted and which was finally achieved through marriage. Sentimental drama had tried to prove that man is fundamentally good and that therefore he gains genuine pleasure in the exercise of benevolent impulses. Goldsmith, who believed in man's good nature, had given value to love as a fundamental Christian guiding principle of life, as the daily practical application of God's lesson – as is exemplified by the Vicar of Wakefield's charitable behaviour. However, the rapid changes and developments occurring in the nineteenth century and especially the decline of religious faith had a significant impact on the traditional ideal of love which began to undergo a process of secularisation. It gradually lost its religious connotations and came to be regarded as a human rather than as a divine value. Feuerbach's The Essence of Christianity (1841), which was translated by George Eliot in 1854, played a crucial role in this regard. In this work, Feuerbach presented a convincing argument against the idea that God made us in his own image and that he is love, affirming that God is a product of our construction, an imaginary superior being upon whom we have projected human needs and desirable human qualities in order to gain a sense of security. 'Reason, Will and Affection' are presented as the fundamental constituents of human existence; they have nothing to do with the divine: 'To will, to love, to think, are the highest powers, are the absolute nature of man as man, and the basis of existence. Man exists to think, to love, to will... Reason, Will, Love, are not powers which man possesses, for he is nothing without them, he is what he is only by them; they are the constituent elements of his nature...'.24 Thus, as he clarifies later on, God and his love exist only because we exist and love: 'Thou believest in love as a divine attribute because thou lovest thyself, thou believest that God is a wise, benevolent being because thou knowest nothing better in thyself than benevolence and wisdom; and thou believest that God exists, that therefore he is a subject... because thou thyself existest, art thyself a subject.25

Feuerbach’s assertion that love is merely a human value had considerable influence on Victorian intellectuals and writers.

Stripped of its religious attributes and placed against the rising commercial spirit, love came to be exalted as a necessary component of life, as something that gives meaning to our existence more than anything else. It was celebrated as a natural impulse which was lived with particular intensity, which should be cultivated and embraced fully but which, at times, if not kept under control, was seen as disruptive. Moreover, it often assumed a social protective and corrective function. It was a binding agent which allowed people to be shielded from the threats and temptations of modern society; it was a powerful force which could direct men and women back to that humanity they seemed to be losing and which could save them from the general corruption and impurity of the outer world. Victorian novelists made love (and the promotion of it) one of their central concerns. Dickens and the Brontë sisters explored this dimension in different ways. In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Dickens attacks the capitalistic system which does not leave room for the cultivation of unworldly values and which denies the basic spiritual needs of people. The absence of love is here seen as the source of personal unhappiness, misery and distress. Indeed, Dickens shows that Scrooge’s life is sad and empty because he does not have love and cannot appreciate it; he has been entirely absorbed by an individualistic and utilitarian society which has replaced this fundamental value with that of money. A painful journey into the past, present and future forces Scrooge to realise how meaningless his current way of living is and to go through a process of re-humanisation, of retrieval of those principles he knew when he was younger. In the end he emerges as a new man who has understood the importance of benevolence and charity, and who is now able to give and receive affection. His existence has been enriched by principles that are more precious than the capitalistic ones. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë presents love as a natural and powerful passion that transcends boundaries such as social class and physical appearance. The affection between Jane and Rochester is a feeling that originates spontaneously and that grows slowly as they get to know each other. Their different position in the social ladder, which at first is a major obstacle to their relationship, is soon considered of less importance than the profound bond that unites them. The idea that love is stronger than anything else is further reinforced by the fact that Jane ultimately swears absolute devotion to Rochester despite his disfigured face and body, and accepts to marry him. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), however, offers a view of love as an almost overwhelming experience which centres on a process of mutual identification where two people become one, thus achieving a spiritual connection. This passion is lived with such intensity that it often brings disruption rather than harmony. Cathy and Heathcliff share a consuming bond of mutual understanding and attraction so powerful that at times unites them and at times divides
them. Their attachment is often denoted by violence and anger. Indeed, Heathcliff becomes vengeful and cruel when he realises he cannot have Cathy any longer but, nonetheless, keeps on exercising pressure on her. If the novel shows love as a destructive force, it nonetheless presents it as central to human experience, and even seems to celebrate it for its capacity to last beyond obstacles, even beyond death, and to unite two people who belong to each other for ever.

In *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray emphasises and promulgates the importance of love as an essential aspect and basic need of human life, as a dimension that, in an unsettling changing world, gives meaning to our existence, bringing personal self-fulfilment and happiness. Interestingly, here love is not seen purely as a human value; it still retains strong religious connotations. This is significant because it suggests that perhaps Thackeray was not ready to abandon the traditional view of this principle completely (and the sense of security it gave him), and yet he wanted to acknowledge it as a powerful *human* feeling which we all desire and inevitably experience whether we believe in the existence of God or not. Throughout the story, both the old and the new idea of love are presented as valid ways of finding self-fulfilment in a capitalistic society which encourages the decline of faith and of fundamental human values. But, more importantly, Thackeray explores the psychology of love, presenting it as a complex human emotion which, although it often generates problems, should not be denied or repressed, but understood, accepted and ultimately fully embraced; only in this way will one succeed in acknowledging difficulties and learning to overcome them, in giving meaning to one’s life and ultimately achieving inner serenity and stability. As Henri Talon has pointed out, *Henry Esmond* is not simply ‘the story of a man’s winning of a woman’s heart’ but rather ‘the relation of a far more difficult task: they must find out the true nature of a feeling that everything – and not least their own words – conceals from them both, then dare to call it by its name, to recognize it for what it is, and, through acceptance, reach self-fulfilment.’

The idea of love as a complex human feeling is explored through Rachel’s problematic attitude towards Henry. Rachel is a kind, gentle and loving woman whose only fault is that of being extremely jealous of other women: ‘With the other sex perfectly tolerant and kindly, of her own she was invariably jealous. . . . as soon as she had to do with a pretty woman, she was cold, retiring, and haughty’ (77). She is a woman who suffers long on the one hand for her husband’s ill-treatment of her, his cheating, and their reciprocal estrangement, and on the other hand, and more importantly, for the difficulties she encounters in accepting her powerful physical and emotional attraction to Henry. Believing her feelings for him to be

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sinful, she tries to fight them. Her personal drama derives from her unsuccessful attempts to hide her affection for him and, above all, from her inability to solve the equally strong conflicting feelings of desire and guilt she experiences. Her occasional sudden outbursts of anger against Henry, which he cannot understand, are clear indications of her frustration and of her failed attempts to contain her attraction to him. A good example can be found in chapter 12 where Rachel blames Henry for bringing unhappiness to her and her family:

"... What wrong have I done you that you should wound me so, cruel woman?"

"What wrong!" she said looking at Esmond with wild eyes. "Well, none -- none that you know of, Harry, or could help. Why did you bring back the small-pox," she added, after a pause, "from Castlewood village? You could not help it, could you? Which of us knows whither fate leads us? But we were all happy, Henry, till then." (138)

Love is here presented as a powerful passion that, if repressed rather than expressed, can bring personal distress and alter one's behaviour towards the beloved. In Rachel’s case it throws her into a bewildered state of mind and it unleashes aggressiveness and anger towards Henry; this emerges clearly from her speech. The explanation she tries to give him is very vague and confusing. The phrase ‘none that you know of, Harry, or could help’ does not clarify the reason of her anger and it reveals that she is hiding something. Unable to disclose her real feelings, she identifies the small-pox as the starting point of her unhappiness. The small-pox has an important symbolic meaning for two reasons: it exemplifies the common idea of physical illness as a sign of moral corruption, of sinfulness, and impurity of soul, and it marks the moment in which Rachel’s love for Henry goes beyond that of a mother, and she sees her unmotherly love as a terrible infectious disease. Her sense of guilt and her inner struggle against her passion are so intense that she attacks the object of her love, instead of herself, as a way of releasing her pain, at least partly. And when she visits Henry in prison she seems to lose control completely: ‘Where is my husband? ... Why did you come among us? You have only brought us grief and sorrow; and repentance, bitter, bitter repentance, as a return for our love and kindness. ... He would have had you sent away, but, like a foolish woman, I besought him to let you stay. ... and I lost him through you -- I lost him -- the husband of my youth, I say’ (179). Once again she blames Henry for her own unhappiness (emphasised by words like ‘grief,’ ‘sorrow’ and ‘bitter repentance’) as if he intentionally had made her fall in love with him, thus ruining her marriage. She refers to herself as a ‘foolish woman’ for allowing her passion for Henry to grow to the point of eliminating the love for her husband, which also indicates a sense of uneasiness with herself. Her words here clearly betray her real
feelings for Henry, especially when she says that she lost her husband through him, and reveal an attachment that goes well beyond that of a mother.

The old view of love as a religious value emerges through Henry’s chivalric approach to it and his firm belief in it. He considers it a visible sign of the existence of God who manifests himself through the divine beauty of a woman, in this case Rachel. This is clearly expressed in his first description of her; she appears to him as a beautiful heavenly creature, as a shining goddess – ‘the sun making a golden halo round her hair’ (7) – who has descended to earth to bless and protect him: he ‘felt as if the touch of a superior being or angel smote him down to the ground, and kissed the fair protecting hand as he knelt on one knee’ (6). Seen in these terms, the devoted affection for a virtuous woman becomes a way of worshipping God daily and ultimately of reaching him. The celebration of such adoration becomes the purpose of Henry’s life: ‘It cannot be called love, that a lad felt of twelve years of age, little more than a menial, felt for an exalted lady, his mistress: but it was worship. To catch her glance, to divine her errand and run on it before she had spoken it; to watch, follow, adore her; became the business of his life’ (71-2). The association of love with religion is strongly reaffirmed at the end of the account:

As I think of the immense happiness which was in store for me, and of the depth and intensity of that love which, for so many years, hath blessed me, I own to a transport of wonder and gratitude for such a boon – nay, am thankful to have been endowed with a heart capable of feeling and knowing the immense beauty and value of the gift which God hath bestowed upon me. Sure, love vincit omnia; is immeasurably above all ambition, more precious than wealth, more noble than name. He knows not life who knows not that: he hath not felt the highest faculty of the soul who hath not enjoyed it. In the name of my wife I write the completion of hope, and the summit of happiness. To have such a love is the one blessing, in comparison of which all earthly joy is of no value; and to think of her, is to praise God. (513)

Love is idealised and strongly presented as a religious value: it is a sacred and beautiful divine gift, a blessing from heaven, the fulfilment of God’s will and his ultimate reward to mankind for exercising ‘the highest faculty of the soul’ (and thus praising him), as the phrases ‘the completion of hope’ and ‘the summit of happiness’ suggest. Its almost miraculous power has transformed Henry’s life from one of sadness and melancholia to one of overwhelming ‘immense happiness.’ However, in the novel, Love is also secularised and presented as a complex human feeling which forms the base of our existence as human beings, giving meaning to our life and filling it with joy when it is allowed to be fully expressed. Moreover, it is seen as capable of shielding us against the corruption of the modern world which promotes the false values of ‘ambition,’ wealth and prestigious titles as the real granter of
happiness. It is the promotion of Love itself, whether in its religious or secular form, that really matters here.

In conclusion, a consideration of *Henry Esmond* as a novel which recreates the world of the eighteenth-century while promoting Victorian ideals and values reveals how Thackeray was struggling with his contemporary age and its profound cultural and social changes. It is an historical novel where history is made 'familiar,' easily recognisable by the reader, because it is seen through the eyes of an ordinary man. It aims at reaching a better understanding of the past by focusing on the emotional impact that changes have on the individual and the difficulties he experiences adapting to an age of conflicting values. This is exemplified by Henry’s religious and political uncertainties, which bring him to constantly shift his position, as well as by his ambivalent view of war (he sees it as a duty to his country, yet he cannot accept its violence, and feels pity for the victims of conflict). His uneasiness with military life partly reflects Thackeray’s personal dilemma and his inability to renounce the old code in order to embrace the new one – domesticity – completely. Indeed, the two spheres often overlap in the story. Nonetheless, *Henry Esmond* is one of the best examples of the Victorian domestic novel because it centres on the private emotions of its protagonist and the members of his household, and it strongly promotes family life as a blissful condition, as a dimension which gives security and protection from the corruption of the outer world; the tragic aspects of conflict and dysfunction within the family are displayed as a means to strengthen the ideal of domesticity. The book also promulgates love as a fundamental binding agent without which life itself makes little sense (the marriage between Lord and Lady Castlewood ceases to be happy when the affection that unites them fades away), as the most important human value, the essence of human existence and the real source of peace and harmony. But, more significantly, it focuses on the psychology of love, presenting it as a complex human emotion and passion which often creates difficulties but which nonetheless should be acknowledged, understood, accepted and ultimately fully embraced. This is explored through the portrayal of Rachel’s conflicting attitude towards Henry; her attempts to repress her passion for him cause her to attack him angrily as way of releasing her pain. Love is also presented as a religious value through Henry’s approach to it; he sees it as a beautiful divine gift to man and the highest form of adoration of God. The fact that for Thackeray love has not completely lost its religious connotations is significant because it shows that he was not yet ready to abandon the traditional view nor to fully accept the new secularised one. Thus, he presents both ideas as valid, making the promotion of the value of Love itself more important that the approach one decides to take. At this stage of his life and literary career he was still holding on to the codes of the past and yet he was contributing to the promulgation of two fundamental values the Victorians believed in: domesticity and love.
Chapter 6

A Sentimental Comedy: *The Newcomes*

While still writing *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray, unhappy with the grave mood which dominated it, was already thinking about his next story, which was to be a more amusing novel on his contemporary world and was to include some of the characters of his previous works. In a letter to his family, dated 16 August 1852, he wrote: 'I sent away the first sheets of Esmond yesterday. It reads better in print, it is clever but it is also stupid and no mistake. Other parts will be more amusing I hope and think, and the new story I am thinking of opening with something like Fareham and the old people there.'

This chapter will argue that *The Newcomes* is a novel which offers a satirical view of Victorian society while at the same time valuing and strongly emphasising people's feelings, and often appealing to the reader for a sympathetic response to personal suffering; that it can be defined as a sentimental comedy where irony coexists with sympathy, but does not prevail.

First of all, I will consider *The Newcomes* as a critique of Victorian society and, in particular, of the 'fashionable' marriage of economic convenience as the cause of couples' unhappiness. Particularly women are shown as victims of the marriage market; Ethel Newcome with her hostile attitude towards this system assumes an important role in this regard. Despite its satirical mood, the novel is dominated by sentimentality, of which Colonel Newcome is the main source. The possible influence of popular comic figures of the literature of the eighteenth century (Fielding and Goldsmith) on the creation of the Colonel and his personal history is also considered. The sentimental appeal of the story is reinforced by the recurrent theme of separation as a painful experience, which the Victorians were very familiar with. Finally, I will look at the idea that *The Newcomes* is to be read as a parable and a comedic performance. Throughout the discussion some of the most significant illustrations by the artist Richard Doyle, who followed closely Thackeray's instructions and sketches, will be analysed.

*The Newcomes* at first presents itself as a satirical novel that strikes us for its likeness with other successful books by Thackeray. In his biography of Thackeray, Trollope observed of *The Newcomes*: 'It is full of satire from the first to the last page. Every word of it seems to have been written to show how vile and poor a place this world is; how prone men are to

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1 *Letters*, III, 69.
deceive, how prone to be deceived. The history of the Newcomes presents many similarities with *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, especially with regard to the structure, and the main themes and concerns. Like those two novels, *The Newcomes* was serialised (from October 1853 until August 1855) and illustrated; but this time the illustrations were supplied by another artist, Richard Doyle, whom Thackeray appointed so that he could concentrate more on the written word. In a letter to his mother, dated 1 September 1853, he wrote: ‘I have just arranged with R. Doyle to do the pictures for my new book: and now that is agreed on feel almost sorry I am not to do them myself: but it will be a great weight off my mind and I can now move about Whithersumever I will.’ Although drawn by Doyle, the illustrations basically maintain the same functions they had in the previous novels: to highlight and reinforce the main themes, to anticipate events and to create satirical portraits. Like *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes* is built on polarities – Good versus Evil; Self, Ambition and Advancement on one side versus Right and Love on the other side; natural impulses versus repression – and on opposing characters, mainly Barnes Newcome versus Colonel Newcome, and Ethel Newcome versus Rosey MacKanzie. The basic theme of people pursuing vain aims in life and the concern with their increasing materialism are retrieved, but studied in more detail, and with a subtler and more sensitive approach. The narrator’s irony, however, concentrates especially on one of the key ‘institutions’ of Victorian society: marriage.

Interestingly, the story is narrated by a fictional character we have met before, Arthur Pendennis. Following a common journalistic practice of the day, Thackeray had already adopted several pseudonyms in his early fictional works. But this time he did it for another reason; he felt that by hiding behind ‘a charming but frequently blind story-teller’ he could convey his messages more effectively and from a safer and more comfortable position. Moreover, he could avoid taking responsibility for his narrator’s frequent silly or inappropriate observations and changeable opinions about people and events. Peter Shillingsburg has pointed out that in his late novels Thackeray distances himself from the narrative voice of Pendennis, thus leaving readers ‘room to breathe free air and to criticize the narrator’s frequently insensitive judgements.’ He seems to suggest that we should always distinguish Pendennis from Thackeray. Although this is generally true, I believe that on some occasions, as we will see, the story-teller does reveal the writer’s personal views and concerns. This occurs mainly when serious contemporary issues, such as economically convenient matches and the suffering of women, or sentimental matters are dealt with.

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2 Trollope (1879), 115.
3 *Letters*, III, 302.
4 Shillingsburg (2001), 118.
5 Ibid., 59.
The marriage of economic convenience was a burning issue of the time and is one of the central concerns in *The Newcomes*. This phenomenon was directly connected with the common hunger for a wealthy and respectable position. By now it had become clear that especially among the middle classes the accumulation of money had become an obsession for at least two main reasons. Indeed, it was the primary means not only of reaching a comfortable and luxurious lifestyle, but also, and more importantly, of advancing quickly up the social ladder and thus of obtaining dignity and respectability in the highest circles. Walter Houghton has pointed out that the new liberal theory that to do the best for yourself was to do the best for society was very influential in this regard, and made people believe that social advancement was a duty.\(^6\) He observes that it was firmly believed that ‘social ambition, driving one to the utmost economic effort, was the blessed means of social progress.’\(^7\) Within this context, marriage was considered one of the easiest, fastest and most convenient ways of advancing in society and of reaching gentility; no wonder it became such a common practice among the Victorians. Although with different approaches and methods, in their novels, both Dickens and Thackeray expose the absurdity and shallowness of the Victorian marriage market while trying to promote the importance of human values and feelings. Dickens in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) attacks not just the marriage of convenience, but the entire money culture of the day which does not leave room for the cultivation of spiritual values and deprives people of their affections. Mr. Dombey’s second wife, Edith Granger, is presented as a young woman who has been exploited by her ambitious mother since she was little. Encouraged to be artful and dishonest from an early age, she has been denied her childhood: “‘Look at me,” she said, “who have never known what it is to have an honest heart, and love. Look at me, taught to scheme and plot when children play; and married in my youth – an old age of design – to one for whom I had no feeling but indifference.’”\(^8\) Edith attacks her mother who, entirely absorbed by the modern capitalistic system, has reduced her to a commodity and made her life miserable. However, she does find some comfort in the genuine affection that her step-daughter Florence (who knows the value of Love and lives according to it) demonstrates for her.

Thackeray, particularly in *Vanity Fair*, had already mocked and criticised the Victorian money culture; as we have seen, his ironic comments had been directed to men’s and women’s hunger for rank, wealth, and material possessions. But in the following years he had become even more hostile towards people’s materialism and the practice of economically

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\(^7\) Ibid., 188.
convenient matches. In a letter to his American friend Sarah Baxter (26 July – 7 August 1853), with regard to her possible future husband Henry Bingham Mildmay, he comments:

B[ingham] is spoiled by the heartlessness of London – which is awful to think of – the most godless respectable thing – thing’s not the word but I can’t get it – I mean that world is base and prosperous and content, not unkind – very well bred – very unaffected in manner, not dissolute – clean in person and raiment and going to church every Sunday – but in the eyes of the Great Judge of right and wrong what rank will those people have with all their fine manners and spotless characters and linen? They never feel love, but directly it’s born, they throttle it and fling it under the sewer as poor girls do their unlawful children – they make up money-marriages and are content – then the father goes to the House of Commons or the Counting House, the mother to her balls and visits – the children lurk up stairs with their governess, and when their turn comes are bought and sold, and respectable and heartless as their parents before them.9

His words reveal how angry, disgusted and horrified he is at the cruelty of the City, at the ‘heartlessness’ of London where there is no room left for love and where its inhabitants are obsessed with ‘money-marriages’ for the sake of the respectability of their family. This world appears to him as ‘godless,’ low, amoral and shallow, a world based on appearance and where money has become the governing law, and respectability the governing code. In The Newcomes, then, Thackeray wanted to display effectively this, the ‘heartlessness’ of London, and the disastrous consequences that the desire for wealth and respectability could have within a family circle. Thus, he produced ‘a satirical parable on the Victorian marriage market’10 but he approached the problem with maturity and sensitiveness, focusing on the unhappiness and suffering of the couple, and especially of the women, forced into arranged unions. In the novel, adopting the narrative voice of Arthur Pendennis, he clearly conveys his hostile attitude towards marriages of economic convenience, as well as his belief that they can only cause suffering, as in the following passage, for instance:

This ceremony amongst us is so stale and common that, to be sure, there is no need to describe its rites, and as women sell themselves for what you call an establishment every day, to the applause of themselves, their parents, and the world, why on earth should a man ape at originality, and pretend to pity them? Never mind about the lies at the altar, the blasphemy against the godlike name of love, the sordid surrender, the smiling dishonour. What the deuce does a mariage de convenance mean but all this, and are not such sober Hymeneal torches more satisfactory often than the most brilliant love-matches that ever flamed and burnt out? Of

10 Loofbourow (1964), 67.
Course. Let us not weep when everybody else is laughing: let us pity the agonised duchess when her daughter, Lady Atalanta, runs away with the doctor — of course, that’s respectable . . .

This comment contains a mixture of reproach and sharp irony towards those people involved in the business of unions of economic convenience. Pendennis/Thackeray seems to suggest that men and women should have the courage to be ‘original,’ to avoid conforming to the rest of the world and thus to get married for love rather than for an ‘establishment,’ which would prevent much pain. Love is here given the status of a religious ideal, a principle that is profaned by the marriage of convenience, as the strong word ‘blasphemy’ clearly suggests. We easily perceive the author’s anger at the acknowledgement that wealth and respectability have become more important than the ‘sacred’ value of love. Paradoxically, when a marriage goes wrong and a daughter elopes with a lover, it is the mother who gets the sympathy and not the poor ‘disgraceful’ daughter who has been forced into a loveless marriage and then, unhappy, pushed to escape from it. The heavy ironic remark ‘of course, that’s respectable’ mocks the concept of respectability itself, to preserve which upper class people would do anything, even ‘sacrificing’ their daughters. There is no pity for the real victims of this business, the daughters, but only reproach for them for having brought dishonour to their family and pain to their mothers. If on one level arranged marriages may secure one family’s financial prospects, on another level, because they are loveless matches, they are the very cause of the couple’s unhappiness, and this is unacceptable in Thackeray’s view.

In the novel, indeed, every single marriage of convenience within the Newcome family turns out to be unhappy. It is the same old story being told, a pattern that repeats itself generation after generation and that brings no improvement. Just as Colonel Newcome had to renounce his sweetheart and marry another woman for economic reasons, so his son Clive is pushed into marrying a dull young girl, Rosey, whom he does not love. The union makes both husband and wife sad as they realise they do not enjoy each other’s company and as they see their repeated efforts to make their relationship work fail miserably:

Many and many a time did Clive try and talk with the little Rosey, who chirped and prattled so gaily to his father. Many a time would she come and sit by his easel, and try her little powers to charm him, bring him little tales about their acquaintances, stories about this ball and that concert, practise artless smiles upon him, gentle little bouderies, tears, perhaps, followed by caresses and reconciliation. At the end of which he would return to his cigar; and she, with a

11 The Newcomes, Works, XII, 369.
sigh and a heavy heart, to the good old man who had bidden her to go and talk with him. . . . They were not made to mate with one another. That was the truth. (XIII, 324-5)

Rosey is a delicate young woman who is genuinely trying hard to please her husband in any way. She is described in terms which are meant to arouse tenderness and affection, as the insistent reiteration of the adjective ‘little’ indicates. Her purity and ‘innocence’ are clearly suggested by her ‘artless’ gestures and talks, and by her gentle attempts to get closer to her spouse. Unfortunately her efforts are unsuccessful and make Clive more bored than ever. She, on the other hand, becomes utterly depressed. An economically convenient marriage is here represented as a union which lacks love, that fundamental binding agent, that complete spiritual and intimate connection and spontaneous harmony which is the real source of the couple’s happiness. Consequently, a money-marriage gives origin to boredom and sadness, but it can also have much more serious implications.

The catastrophic consequences that such a match can generate are exemplified by the relationship between Barnes Newcome and Lady Clara Newcome where the latter is increasingly made utterly miserable by her husband’s violent temper. In chapter 14 she is portrayed as an upset and lonely young lady:

More and more sad does the Lady Clara become from day to day; liking more to sit lonely over the fire; careless about the sarcasms of her husband; the prattle of her children. She cries sometimes over the cradle of the young heir. She is aweary, aweary. You understand the man to whom her parents sold her does not make her happy, though she had been bought with diamonds, two carriages, several large footmen, a fine country house with delightful gardens and conservatories, and with all this she is miserable – is it possible? (XIII, 189-90)

Treated as a commodity by her parents (they have ‘sold’ her) and cruelly bullied by her husband and with no one to talk to, she suffers in silence; completely unable to react, she is gradually consumed by her inner pain. Not even her own children can give her any kind of relief. Surrounded by immense wealth, she should be happy, according to ‘common sense,’ but the sad truth is that she is not. All the diamonds in the world could not give her the only thing she needed to be happy, and that money could not buy, love. Her hopeless situation calls for extreme measures: elopement with another man, which brings disgrace upon the Newcome family. Ironically, the story of the bad union between Barnes and Clara reveals how the highly coveted respectability can be easily destroyed by the very means that it was supposed to grant it and maintain it. From frequent endings like these people should realise how hard and painful to bear a loveless match can be, as the narrator observes: ‘It is not what you lose, but what you have daily to bear, that is hard. I can fancy nothing more cruel, after a
long easy life of bachelorhood, than to have to sit day after day with a dull handsome woman opposite; to have to answer her speeches about the weather, house keeping, and what not . . .’ (XIII, 24) – which is exactly what Clive Newcome feels towards his silly wife Rosey. The narrator seems to wonder why, if men as well as women cannot be happy, people do keep on arranging marriages. They should not value money over their children’s happiness, but unfortunately they do so for the sake of their family’s gentility.

This emerges even more strongly, for example, in a conversation between Madam de Florac and Ethel Newcome where the former expresses her regrets for how things are with regard to marriage: ‘But when I see a young girl who may be made the victim – the subject of a marriage of convenience, as I was – my heart pities her. And if I love her, as I love you, I tell her my thoughts. Better poverty, Ethel, – better a cell in a convent, than a union without love’ (XIII, 123). Her words reveal a sense of frustration and resignation for a ‘sacrificial ritual’ that can hardly be changed, but also for a lesson learnt too late, that one should marry for love. Throughout the story, either directly or indirectly, Pendennis/Thackeray repeatedly gives us the message that something radical has to be done in order to stop the misery caused by the Victorian marriage market, while trying to promote the idea that marriage should be based on love and free choice, not on financial matters.

In The Newcomes, Thackeray emphasises that upper class women are the real victims of this cruel marriage market. And he was not alone in this; the novelists and intellectuals of the age were becoming increasingly aware of and seriously concerned with the problem of women, their role in society and their state of ‘subjection.’ A typical upper class daughter was brought up with the idea that she always had to obey her parents’ wishes with regard to her decisions in life, including marriage. It was believed that marrying the husband chosen by parents was an essential part of a daughter’s sense of duty towards them. Forced into a loveless match, then, a woman had to assume the role of a submissive wife who had to love, respect, obey, and entertain her husband, as well as to take care of his children. She would often find herself ignored or abused by her worldly spouse, treated miserably and made extremely unhappy (this in truth was not limited to arranged matches). She had little choice at this point. She could live miserably until her death or, if unable to tolerate such a treatment, she could take the ‘unrespectable’ decision of eloping with a lover, leaving her children behind.

The debate on ‘the woman question’ was animated by the controversy between John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill. In his lecture ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’ in Sesame and Lilies (1864), Ruskin points out that men and women have opposite features and instincts, and they complete each other when they are united in marriage. For this reason, talking of the superiority of one sex to the other is absurd: ‘We are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in
speaking of the “superiority” of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other . . . ." If men are active and creative, women are passive and good for arranging things. If men are warriors, women are the angels of the house, the preservers of peace in the domestic environment. But Ruskin insists on the idea that women have the huge responsibility of helping their husbands to recover their humanity, which they seem to be losing when they are out in the modern world, and, more importantly, of ‘resurrecting’ the human instincts and feelings of the entire nation. Mill strongly disagreed with this idea and with the general public opinion that the natural vocation of a woman was that of a wife and a mother, and also that she was created for self-sacrifice. He thought that it was profoundly unfair to give women such a burden to bear on their shoulder, and was committed to reform the status and treatment of women in society. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869) he claims that it is not true that women accept their subjection voluntarily or that they are naturally predisposed to it. Indeed, this is only due to the fact that they are educated in a certain way: ‘All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others.’ Women submit entirely to their husbands not because they tend to it spontaneously, but because they have been forced into believing that it is their duty. Mill also argues that in a culture where man’s superiority is established it is impossible to determine if men and women have different natures indeed; their characters as evidenced in their behaviour in Victorian society cannot be taken as proof of their diverse natures because they have been ideologically conditioned: ‘. . . any of the mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are but the natural effect of the differences in their education and circumstances, and indicate no radical difference, far less radical inferiority, of nature.’ In order to demonstrate that men and women are not alike, people should be free and equal, and no privileges or prejudices towards the two sexes should exist.

The pattern of a woman’s ‘rise and fall’ recurs in several Victorian novels, including Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) and Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861). In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens conveys his opinion of the Victorian marriage market by showing the appalling and painful consequences that an arranged match can cause through the relationship between Mr. Dombey and his second wife Edith. Mr. Dombey is portrayed as a

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14 Ibid., 528.
cold, aggressive and controlling husband who suffocates his wife, who expects absolute obedience from her (he is 'set upon maintaining his magnificent supremacy'\(^{15}\)) and who soon begins to hate her when he realises she does not want to obey him. Indeed, Edith is a strong-willed woman with a rebellious nature who constantly fights against her husband’s abusive behaviour but who ultimately finds herself forced to submit to his wishes, which includes the alienation of Florence, her only comfort ('Be near me, Florence. I have no hope but in you'\(^{16}\)). The situation becomes extremely difficult to sustain and incredibly painful: ‘Now, she, with all her might of passionate and proud resentment, bent her dark glance from day to day, and hour to hour – from that night in her own chamber, when she had sat gazing at the shadows on the wall, to the deeper night fast coming – upon one figure directing a crowd of humiliations and exasperations against her; and that figure, still her husband’s.’\(^{17}\) Unable to tolerate her miserable life with Mr. Dombey, she takes the drastic decision to escape from that hell. *East Lynne* presents a similar situation. Here the protagonist Isabel, in the attempt to recover from her desperate position of poverty, 'sells' herself and accepts a marriage proposal from a man she does not love. But the match makes her unhappy, dissatisfied and frustrated, and she escapes with her lover abroad, which unfortunately brings even more misery upon her.

In Thackeray’s *The Newcomes*, we witness the ascent and descent of Lady Clara. But in chapter 15, we also see Lady Ann Newcome intent on teaching Ethel about a daughter’s duty to follow her parents’ wishes and warning her of the dangers of ‘rebellion’: ‘Every young lady in your position in the world had sacrifices to make, and duties to her family to perform. Look at me. Why did I marry your poor dear papa? From duty. Has you Aunt Fanny, who ran away with Captain Canonbury, been happy? They have eleven children and are starving at Boulogne’ (XII, 208). Lady Ann seems to suggest that if she is not totally happy, at least she has wealth and respectability, while Aunt Fanny’s example should not be followed, as it would cause even more misery due to lack of money. She refers to marriage as ‘a sacrifice’ and ‘a duty’ in a positive way, which clearly indicates that she has been ideologically conditioned and that, therefore, she has come to accept women’s role as wives and mothers as something natural.

The character of Ethel Newcome assumes a particularly significant role in this respect. Thackeray uses her as a vehicle of satire upon the marriage market but above all as a promoter of his ‘campaign’ for freedom of choice in marriage and, also, for the freedom of women from their state of subjection. In some respects he anticipates John Stuart Mill’s argument of liberal feminism in his essay *On the Subjection of Women* (1869). From the very beginning Ethel is shown as never at ease with the idea of marrying a man chosen by her parents. She

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 664.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 700.
initially mocks the system, as when she appears at dinner with the green ticket with 'sold' written on it 'pinned in the front of her white muslin frock' (XII, 366), which leaves the whole family puzzled. Growing weary of conforming to the rules and of being constantly treated as a commodity by her grandmother, she bursts out:

‘Oh!’ cried Ethel in a transport, ‘what a life ours is, and how you buy and sell, and haggle over you children! . . . We are sold,’ the young girl went on; ‘we are as much sold as Turkish women; the only difference being that our masters may have but one Circassian at a time. No, there is no freedom for us. I wear my green ticket, and wait till my master comes. But every day as I think of our slavery, I revolt against it more. (XII, 428-9)

The idea that in the marriage business women are treated with little respect, as if they had no feelings, as if they were objects rather than human beings, emerges clearly here. The fact that Ethel refers to women as slaves awaiting for a master to buy them emphasises their subjection and supposed inferiority, but also how tragically they may see their condition now. She lives women’s denial of freedom as something humiliating, unfair and unacceptable. Nevertheless, if mentally she refuses to accept her condition, practically she is not completely able to revolt against her ‘slavery.’ According to Edgar Harden, indeed, Ethel is a complex character who ‘faces daunting challenges, has the ability to understand the falseness of her position, to rebel, and to perceive, though with difficulty, the possibility of a more meaningful life than that posed by her family and by her own ambiguous ambitions. . . . Nonetheless, she feels intimidated by “a girl’s duty,” obedience to her parents, and by the financial welfare of relatives that depend upon her marital choice.’18 She is strong, fairly rational, coquettish and ambitious, but also generous, affectionate, sensitive and responsible. She likes material possessions and fashionable society but is ashamed of it at the same time. This emerges clearly in the following passage, where she appears to be caught in a field of conflicting forces:

And I, who pretend to revolt, I like it [society] too; and I, who rail and scorn flatterers – oh, I like admiration! I am pleased when the women hate me, and the young men leave them for me. Though I despise many of these, yet I can’t help drawing them towards me. One or two of them I have seen unhappy about me, and I like it; and if they are indifferent I am angry, and never tire till they come back. I love beautiful dresses; I love fine jewels; I love a great name and a fine house – oh, I despise myself, when I think of these things! When I lie in bed, and say I have been heartless and a coquette, I cry with humiliation; and then rebel and say, Why not? (XIII, 125)

18 Harden (2000), 79.
Her language reflects her inner struggle, how she is both attracted to social life and opposed to it. We may note how she alternates the use of expressions associated with pleasure ('like,' 'pleased,' 'love') with words which indicate exactly the opposite ('revolt,' 'rail,' 'scorn,' 'hate,' 'despise,' 'angry,' 'rebel'). She is sensitive enough to acknowledge her ambitions and vanity, and yet she feels guilty for her superficiality. Torn between two different sets of values, she finds herself in a situation similar to that experienced by young Pendennis, continually shifting from one side to the other, unable to establish a firm position. Like Pendennis, then, she embodies the Victorian conflict between wealth and love, social life and domesticity, restriction and naturalness, 'heartlessness' and generosity, as seen from a young woman's point of view. Furthermore, and more importantly, she represents, on the one hand, the general discontent that upper class women were beginning to become aware of and to react against, and, on the other hand, their moral uncertainties and their inability to break free from the attractive power of wealth. In the end Ethel seems to have renounced her ambitions when she marries Clive for love. However, the fact that she does so after he has retrieved a wealthy position makes us wonder if perhaps Thackeray was trying to reach a compromise with the money culture of the day. He seems to suggest that marriage should be based on love, but that no harm is done if it is accompanied by a good financial situation which ultimately helps the couple to face the practical aspects of everyday life.

Beside its strong satirical analysis of contemporary society, the novel is pervaded by sentimentality which prevails over the ironic mode and which aims at stressing the importance of personal feeling in a materialistic society. In this regard Edgar Harden observes that the book contains a criticism of the materialism and ambitions of Victorian society, while emphasising 'the crucial importance of human relationship, including marriage, of generosity – of giving, not just taking.' The novel also attempts to reinforce these as middle-class values. This is realised through the figure of Colonel Newcome, 'the worthy Colonel,' who, throughout the story, is portrayed as a fundamentally positive character, as a sensitive and emotional old man capable of giving and receiving love. Beside being the embodiment of the perfect gentleman as Thackeray intended it (a model of honesty, generosity, kindness and respectability), for his melancholic disposition and his 'tender and faithful heart' (XII, 69) he is also a constant source of sentimentality in the novel. This emerges particularly in the passages where he thinks or talks about his son Clive, whom he loves dearly, and who is the centre of his emotional life. A good example can be found early in the story: 'With that fidelity which was an instinct of his nature, this brave man thought ever of his absent child, and longed after him. . . .No friends went to Europe, nor ship departed, but Newcome sent

19 Ibid., 81.
presents and remembrances to the boy, and costly tokens of his love . . . . What a strange pathos seems to me to accompany all our Indian story!' (XII, 70). Paternal affection is here emphasised as a natural response and as another essential form of love. The bond which exists between father and son is as strong and as important as that which unites husband and wife, and, likewise, it should be cherished. The Colonel experiences a father’s natural impulse of affection for his son with particular intensity and is not afraid to show his emotion – and at times the reader tends to sympathise with him for his sweetness and sensitivity. At other times, though, his paternal love appears as a totally self-absorbing experience which arouses concern: ‘Let us hope those fruits of love, though tardy, are yet not all too late; . . . I am thinking of the love of Clive Newcome’s father for him . . . how the old man lay awake, and devised kindness, and gave his all for the love of his son; and the young man took, and spent, and slept, and made merry’ (XII, 248). Here we begin to witness the potential ‘dangers’ of loving too much and of being overemotional – an aspect that had already been explored both in *Vanity Fair* (through Amelia) and in *Pendennis* (through Helen). So, Thackeray values personal feelings and emotions while stressing the need to set a limit to them – he recommends moderation and balance. The Colonel is overwhelmed, and almost blinded, by his paternal feelings which push him to satisfy his son in any possible way, to devote himself entirely to his child. His whole world revolves around Clive and the desire to make him happy, nothing else matters. However, this generates another potential risk, that of becoming egotistical, of losing touch with reality and of focusing more on what a parent might want for his/her child rather than what the child would like for him/herself. In his mind the Colonel creates a dream world where he and Clive are the only inhabitants, and he unconsciously forms strong expectations with regard to his son’s career and to his future in general. But when he sees his desires unfulfilled, feelings of disappointment, disillusion and sadness overcome him:

So, as he thought what vain egotistical hopes he used to form about the boy when he was in India – how in his plans for the happy future Clive was to be always at his side; how they were to read, work, play, think, be merry together – a sickening and humiliating sense of the reality came over him, and he sadly contrasted it with the former fond anticipations. Together they were, yet he was alone still. His thoughts were not the boy’s, and his affections rewarded but with a part of the young man’s heart . . . . As the young man grew, it seemed to the father as if each day separated them more and more. He himself became more melancholy and silent. (XII, 267-8)

Paternal love is here represented in its most negative and ‘dangerous’ aspect, as a silly pursuit of ‘vain egotistical hopes’ and ‘fond anticipations’ about a son, which tends to divide rather
than to unite father and child, and which gives origin to the parent’s frustration. The Colonel’s sense of humiliation derives from the recognition that he himself is the very cause of his own disappointment and that he did not take into account that his wishes might not correspond to his son’s. The contrast between the illusions he has created in his mind and the reality is almost unbearable and makes him almost ill. If on one level we sympathise with him for loving his son so deeply and wanting the best for him, on another level we smile at him for being foolish and pathetic in his pursuit of an unobtainable dream, of an illusion. In this respect, as well as for his gentle and amiable disposition, and his increasing sense of isolation, he reminds us of the popular comic figure of Don Quixote. And indeed, in her biographical introduction to the centenary edition, Lady Ritchie, Thackeray’s daughter, notes that her father was re-reading *Don Quixote* when he started writing *The Newcomes* and found the protagonist delightful and full of vitality.\(^{20}\) Although this is no proof that Thackeray intentionally used Don Quixote as a model for the Colonel, it is probable that Cervantes’s character in some way gave Thackeray a few ideas for the creation of his character.

Interestingly, Colonel Newcome bears some of the traits of at least two popular comic figures in English literature of the eighteenth century. According to Gordon Ray, the Colonel was partly modelled on Parson Adams in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrew* and on Dr. Primrose in Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*.\(^{21}\) Ray observes that in the novel the Colonel progressively moves from a figure of gentlemanliness to a figure of manly simplicity (which is a feature of the personalities of both Parson Adams and Dr. Primrose) to a pattern of Christian humility.\(^{22}\) Furthermore, his physical appearance curiously resembles that of another comic personage, Don Ferolo Whiskerandos in Sheridan’s play *The Critic* (1779) – Thackeray must have liked this comedy as there are occasional references to it in *Pendennis*, *Philip* and even in *Denis Duval*. The narrator explicitly points out:

> Here the whiskered gentleman, Newcome’s father, pointing to a waiter to follow him with his glass of sherry-and-water, strode across the room twirling his mustachios, and came up to the table where we sat, making a salutation with his hat in a very stately and polite manner . . .

> Newcome’s father came up and held out his hand to me. I dare say I blushed, for I had been comparing him to the admirable Harley in the “Critic,” and had christened him Don Ferolo Whiskerandos. (XII, 9)

The resemblance is reinforced by the illustration (Fig. 6.1) that follows a few pages later, where the Colonel’s big whiskers and moustaches are perfectly visible and he seems almost to

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\(^{21}\) Ray (1958), 245.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 245.
Fig. 6.1. 'The effect of the General’s song,' *The Newcomes*
be showing them off proudly. Before giving Doyle the task of illustrating his novel, Thackeray had made this sketch of the Colonel (Fig 6.2). Amazingly, the two drawings are nearly identical, which clearly shows how closely Doyle followed Thackeray’s instructions. Nonetheless, the writer was not satisfied with the result; ‘they are not as good as mine’ he wrote in a letter to his mother.23 Again, although Thackeray certainly knew very well and admired all these comic figures, it is extremely difficult to establish the extent to which they might have influenced him in the creation of the Colonel. I judge that it is possible that he tried to combine all the good qualities of these past popular comic characters with his own idea of true gentlemanliness in order to create an unforgettable figure which could both be admired and laughed at, and, most of all, which could be loved despite his faults. The Colonel’s generosity, modesty and emotionality make him a noble and respectable character, as well as a model of moral behaviour, but his weakness and foolish illusions make him appear as silly and thus provoke our genuine laughter. In his Autobiography, Anthony Trollope praised Thackeray’s geniality in the portrayal of the Colonel: ‘It is not because Colonel Newcome is a perfect gentleman that we think Thackeray’s work to have been so excellent, but because he has had the power to describe him as such, and to force us to love him, a weak and silly old man, on account of this grace of character.’24 And, indeed, it is in the very ending, when we witness the Colonel’s decay into old age and eventually his death, that we do realise how much we have loved him.

In some respects, The Newcomes is close in spirit to Goldsmith’s The Vicar of Wakefield which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, had probably already had some influence on the creation of one of his early fictional stories, The Great Hoggarty Diamond. As Goldsmith does in his novel, so Thackeray in his story conveys the idea that love can give us strength and help us overcome moments of misfortune: ‘The two men [Clive and the Colonel] embraced with tender cordiality and almost happy emotion on the one side and the other. . . . Clive felt not one moment’s doubt but that they should be able to meet fortune with a brave face; and that happier, much happier days were in store for him than ever they had known since the period of this confounded prosperity’ (XIII, 409). Moreover, the two stories have in common the aim of appealing to the readers for their sympathetic response to the suffering of two ‘worthy’ men, and they are both successful in their intent. But, more significantly, the two novels share an interest in marriage; they both promulgate the belief that one should marry for love rather than money. In The Vicar of Wakefield, Mrs. Primrose is presented as an ambitious and proud woman who is concerned with social advancement and wealth, and is often deplored for it. She is always trying to make sure that her daughters Olivia and Sophia marry a rich man, if

23 Letters, III, 305.
Fig. 6.2. Early sketch of Colonel Newcome drawn by Thackeray
possible. Mr Burchell would be a perfect son in law, but unfortunately he is not wealthy: ‘My wife observing as we went, that she liked him extremely, and protesting, that if he had birth and fortune to entitle him to match into such a family as our’s, she knew no man she would sooner fix upon. I could not but smile to hear her talk in this lofty strain . . . ‘

Dr. Primrose does not seem to be very concerned with his wife’s naivety, yet he criticises people who prioritise money. Similarly, as we have seen, Thackeray repeatedly conveys his disapproval of matches of economic convenience both by showing the catastrophic consequences these could lead to and by attacking the marriage market openly through the narrative voice of Pendennis. Marriage is ‘sacred’ and therefore it should be based exclusively on love.

The sentimental aspect of *The Newcomes* is intensified by the recurrent powerful theme of separation. With the advent of industrialisation and modernity, society changed rapidly and became fragmented, ‘the old ties were snapped up, and men became acutely conscious of separation.’ The movement of people from the countryside to the city resulted in the permanent loss of the sense of community, which generated a sense of anxiety and a fear of solitude. As Walter Houghton has observed, the Victorians ‘felt isolated by dividing barriers; lonely for a lost companionship, human and divine; nostalgic for an earlier world of country peace and unifying belief.’ They lived ‘separation’ from a person, a place or even an object they loved, as something traumatic, and the death of a beloved one was a tragic event from which some hardly or never recovered. The sentence in *The Newcomes* ‘Parting is death, at least as far as life is concerned’ (XII, 206) effectively sums up the way the Victorians paradoxically felt distance as a kind of ‘death in life.’ This can also be seen in other novels of the time. In Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for instance, the ‘loss’ of Catherine (who has married another man) is what unleashes Heathcliff’s revengeful force; but it is her death that devastates him completely and provokes a profound desire for his own death, which will reunite him with her forever. In Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, first the death of Mrs. Dombey and then of Paul Dombey, the centre of Mr. Dombey’s love, hope and ambition, cause much pain and suffering to the father and sister. Mr. Dombey alienates his daughter not only from his affection but also from that of his second wife Edith. Florence is deeply upset by this ‘enforced’ estrangement which makes her feel isolated and lonely.

Thackeray too presents the theme of separation as an extremely emotional and painful experience. In *The Newcomes*, he explores it through the Colonel’s profound emotional attachment to his son Clive. On his return to England after seven years of absence from his child, the Colonel recollects the pain he felt the first time, when he had seen him leave India:

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26 Houghton (1973), 77.
27 Ibid., 77.
We forbear to describe the meeting between the Colonel and his son - the pretty boy from whom he had parted more than seven years before with such pangs of heart; and of whom he had thought ever since with such a constant longing affection. Half an hour after the father left the boy, and in his grief and loneliness was rowing back to shore, Clive was at play with a dozen of other children on the sunny deck of the ship. . . . What a sad repast their parents had that day! How their hearts followed the careless young ones home across the great ocean! Mothers’ prayers go with them. Strong men, alone on their knees, with streaming eyes and broken accents, implore Heaven for those little ones, who were prattling at their sides but a few hours since. Long after they are gone, careless and happy, recollections of the sweet past rise up and smite those who remain: the flowers they had planted in their little gardens, the toys they played with, the little vacant cribs they slept in as fathers’ eyes looked blessings down on them. Most of us, who have passed a couple of score years in the world, have had such sights as these to move us. And those who have will think none the worse of my worthy Colonel for his tender and faithful heart. (XII, 69)

The passage is extremely sentimental and is meant to move the reader. The first aspect that may strike us is the strong emphasis on the feelings of loneliness, emptiness and nostalgia that parents experience when they part from their children. The Colonel’s own natural affection for his son and his own suffering at the departure of Clive reflect the emotional response of all parents. Thus the narrator makes sure that readers can identify with a very common feeling and can be moved by it. The contrast between the two images of the suffering parents and of the cheerful and playful children is meant to raise the overall pathos of the passage. Directly connected to this is also the use of exclamation marks, and, above all, of powerful and evocative images – of conventional images that bear sentimental connotations – as a way of conveying the overwhelming (and almost melodramatic) aspect of these emotions: the ‘great ocean,’ ‘mothers’ prayers,’ ‘imploring’ men on their knees ‘with streaming eyes and broken accents,’ ‘Heaven,’ ‘vacant cribs,’ and ‘the fathers’ eyes looked blessings down on them.’ Furthermore, the reiteration of words which evoke affection, such as ‘pretty boy,’ ‘heart,’ ‘young ones,’ ‘little,’ ‘sweet past’ and ‘tender and faithful,’ certainly contributes to the almost exaggerated sentimentality of the passage. But on another occasion, when the Colonel departs again to India, the pathos is even higher: ‘Ah, pangs of hearts torn asunder, passionate regrets, cruel cruel partings! Shall you not end one day, ere many years; when the tears shall be wiped from all eyes, and there shall be neither sorrow nor pain? (XII, 342) The image of broken hearts serves the purpose of emphasising how tragically one can live a separation, which is always accompanied by sadness (‘passionate regrets’ and ‘tears’) and grief (‘cruel partings’ and ‘pain’), and often terribly unbearable. According to Russel Fraser, it is in moments like these that Thackeray’s own kind of sentimentality emerges clearly; he identifies three main
features in this regard: 'a) the delivery of commonplaces, either genial or sorrowful, by the
author, b) the use of stereotyped words and word groupings that by their very nature have
sentimental connotations, and finally c) the deliberate evocation of the pathetic image.'
This also applies to some of the illustrations in the novel, like the following one (Fig. 6.3), for
instance, where the Colonel leaving for India waves his hat as a sign of farewell, while, in the
background, a woman, overwhelmed by her grief, is fainting and another one, unable to cope
with the painful departure, is hiding her face away from the sight of the ship. Within this
sentimental picture it is difficult to establish the role of the strange figure in the lower left
hand corner which, with its mean and scornful look, is a disturbing presence indeed. Perhaps
it is there to remind us of the cruelty, coldness and threats of the modern world which leaves
little room for the expression and appreciation of human emotions. Separations occur
throughout the novel and until the very end, when the narrator himself departs from the reader
'with a rather sad heart' (XIII, 504). As Michael Lund has observed, Thackeray's farewell is
both trivial and tragic: 'trivial because no real pain is involved in this loss of an imaginary
world, but tragic because we go through the motions of parting, a real event that, in
Thackeray's and his age's view, is an inescapable fact of life outside fiction.' Thackeray's
own sentimental treatment of the familiar theme of parting has the aim of raising emotions to
the point of almost forcing the reader to be involved, to feed on his/her own emotions and to
be inevitably moved to tears.

*The Newcomes* does not have to be considered a 'real' story but rather an example. From
the very beginning of the novel we are explicitly invited to see the story as a product of the
imagination, as a parable that will help us find the universal pattern governing human
behaviour, and, also, as a comedic performance that will make us reflect upon human nature
and mankind in general. The novel, indeed, opens with a fable which has various animals
embodifying man's virtues and vices as protagonists. The front-cover illustration (Fig. 6.4),
which depicts popular fables such as that of the wolf and the lambs and that of the fox and the
crow, for example, has the function to anticipate not just the content of the story, but also how
we should read it and interpret it. And this is even explicitly revealed by the narrator:

There may be nothing new under and including the sun; but it looks fresh every morning, and
we rise with it to toil, hope, scheme, laugh, struggle, love, suffer, until the night comes and
quiet. And then will wake Morrow and the eyes that look on it; and so da capo.

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28 Russel A. Fraser, 'Sentimentality in Thackeray's *The Newcomes*,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3 (1949), 191-2
"Farewell."

Fig. 6.3. 'Farewell,' *The Newcomes*
THE
NEWCOMES

Vol. I.
EDITED BY

A. PENDENNIS ESQ.†

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD DOYLE.

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER & CO 15, WATERLOO PLACE

Fig. 6.4. Front cover, The Newcomes
This, then, is to be a story, may it please you, in which jackdaws will wear peacocks’ feathers, and awaken the just ridicule of the peacocks; in which, while every justice is done to the peacocks themselves, the splendour of their plumage, the gorgeousness of their dazzling necks, and the magnificence of their tails, exception will yet be taken to the absurdity of their rickety strut, and the foolish discord of their pert squeaking; in which lions in love will have their claws pared by sly virgins; in which rogues will sometimes triumph, and honest folks, let us hope, come by their own; in which there will be black crape and white favours; in which there will be tears under orange-flower wreaths and jokes in mourning coaches; in which there will be dinners of herbs with contentment and without, and banquets of stalled oxen where there is care and hatred – ay, and kindness and friendship too, along with the feast. (XII, 6)

The narrator suggests that, although fables are old and we are familiar with them and their protagonists, we can always discover something new every time we read them. Fables invite the readers to revise their vision of human nature and to look at it from a different perspective. Like old fables, then, this one too will have the aim of amusing by exposing the ridiculous, the absurd and the foolish, and by offering jokes and tears, love and hate, good and bad (respectively indicated by white and black), honesty and dishonesty, noble people and rogues; but there will be also room for generosity, gentleness and friendship. And the narration of history of the Newcomes opens with the well-known formula of fairy tales: ‘There was once a time when the sun used to shine brighter than it appears to do in this latter half of the nineteenth century . . .’ (XII, 7). Throughout the novel the illustrations often depict fairy tale personages, such as kings and queens, princes and princesses, bad witches, knights and so on. Although fables and fairy tales always contain a moral or a valuable lesson to teach us, this is hardly Thackeray’s intent. Indeed, as Edgar Harden has observed: ‘. . .surely Thackeray’s narrative invites us to be sceptical – to see fables like Aesop’s, or fairy tales like Perrault’s, with which he begins and concludes his narrative, as articulations of revealing archetypes of human motives, but not as convincing revelations or readily achieved human happiness.’30 Thackeray does not give us answers or a lesson to be learnt; rather, he tries to help us reach a better understanding of human nature and behaviour by unveiling common aspirations (wealth and luxury, but also true love and happiness) and common aspects of human life (marriage, death, friendship, joy, sorrow, struggle, and hope), and by forcing us to reflect on them. His intent is a good one; he explores and presents us with possibilities rather than revelations, leaving to us the responsibility and the freedom to choose for ourselves which ways of living will grant us that happiness we are looking for.

As well as a parable, _The Newcomes_ has to be read as a theatrical performance. This is made clear on several occasions and in different ways. The very first chapter, entitled ‘The

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30 Harden (2000), 93.
Overture – After which the curtain rises upon a drinking chorus,’ is a first indication. Then, in chapter 9 and 11 of volume 2 the dialogues are suddenly written in the way of a play; even stage directions are included. And this pictorial initial (Fig. 6.5), which depicts a master of puppets playing with one of his ‘dolls,’ is there to remind us that what we are witnessing is only a comedic performance. The numerous references, whether textual or figurative, to theatrical elements cause the readers to detach themselves emotionally from the characters and the story for a few moments, and to realise that they are reading a work of fiction not to be confused with reality. The abrupt and unexpected conclusion of the novel reminds us once again that the characters of the story just told are fictional, that they belong to Fable-land ‘where anything you like happens’:

Wicked folks die à propos . . . – annoying people are got out of the way; the poor are rewarded – the upstarts are set down in Fable-land – the frog bursts with wicked rage, the fox is caught in his trap, the lamb is rescued from the wolf, and so forth, just in the nick of time. And the poet of Fable-land rewards and punishes absolutely. He splendidly deals out bags of sovereigns, which won’t buy anything; belabours wicked backs with awful blows, which do not hurt; endows heroines with preternatural beauty, and creates heroes, who, if ugly sometimes, yet possess a thousand good qualities, and usually end by being immensely rich; makes the hero and heroine happy at last, and happy ever after. Ah, happy, harmless, Fable-land, where these things are! (XIII, 506)

Only in a fictional world can one decide freely the destinies of ‘people,’ punish the wicked and reward the good, manipulate events so that the hero and the heroines can be united and live happily ever after. The narrator has guided the reader until a certain point; it is now up to the reader to either imagine the rest of the characters’ lives or to forget them. As Andrew Sanders has pointed out, at the end of the story he frees his characters ‘for their journey either into oblivion or into the intelligences of his readers. . . . his readers are now left free to break through fictional and social conventions and prejudices. . . . Thackeray always disconcerts his readers. In The Newcomes he also enforces their complicity in his act of creation.’31 Fable-land is not only an ideal world, a coveted world where good always triumphs over evil and where harmony prevails, but also the world of creativity where one is free to play with characters and events.

To conclude, reading The Newcomes as a sentimental comedy shows how the promotion of the importance of human feeling and of sympathy in a society dominated by self-interest has now become Thackeray’s main preoccupation. The Newcomes emerges both as a critical

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Fig. 6.5. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 6, *The Newcomes*
study and as a satirical exposure of the Victorian marriage market. With its focus on the suffering of women cruelly forced into arranged marriages, it conveys a serious concern for the general unhappiness, and often catastrophic consequences, which loveless matches bring upon the couple. The complex attitude of Ethel Newcome towards the marriage market reflects the Victorian dilemma between worldly and unworldly values. On the one hand she fiercely rebels against ‘the subjection of women,’ thus being the promoter of Thackeray’s idea that women should be free to choose their own partner; but, on the other hand, absorbed by her own world, she is not completely ready to renounce the attractions of wealth and of social life. The novel, however, with its strong emphasis on people’s emotions, and its frequent appeals for the reader’s sympathetic response, is above all a sentimental comedy which revolves around Colonel Newcome’s emotional nature and intense paternal feelings, and which bears some influences from the comic literature of the eighteenth century. But Thackeray also highlights the necessity to set a limit to our emotions in order to avoid the danger of becoming egotistical and of being consumed by them. The sentimentality of the story is effectively reinforced by the recurrent theme of separation which the Victorians lived as a distressing experience. Although certainly very close to novels like *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes* lacks that cynicism that had characterised Thackeray’s previous works. It is presented as a parable, as well as a performance, which reveals archetypal human motives, but which does not give us answers or a lesson to be learnt. Thackeray offers possibilities rather than revelations, giving us the freedom to decide for ourselves which kind of life will make us happy. Despite providing a strong critique of contemporary society, the novel with its emphasis on personal feeling delivers a fundamentally positive message: that in this self-seeking world we can live a better life, if we learn to value our emotions over the temptations of materialism. But, ultimately, it is up to us to decide whether or not we wish to follow this advice.
Chapter 7

Old and New, Past and Present: *The Virginians*

It has been established that Thackeray while finishing *Henry Esmond* or, most probably, shortly after completing it, had already in mind the basic outline of the plot for another novel which would continue the history of the Esmond family. Although originally conceived as a sequel, at first *The Virginians*, which deals with the lives of Esmond’s grandchildren, and which was serialised (1857-59) and illustrated by the author, seems to have little in common with its prequel. With its remarkable dualistic pattern and its lack of a sense of structural unity, the novel does not have a very strong appeal, and generally it has always been regarded by scholars as one of Thackeray’s least successful stories, if not a failure. Only in the last decade has the novel been reassessed and given more value especially for the author’s treatment of its central theme: the relationship between England and America. In this chapter, I will argue that, despite its defects, *The Virginians* with its dense ideological content makes a significant contribution to our understanding of mid-Victorian culture.

First of all, I will consider the main interest of the novel, the comparison between the Old and the New World, where England emerges as ‘corrupt’ and America as ‘primitive’ and ‘innocent.’ Set in the eighteenth century but told from a nineteenth century perspective, the story also focuses on the relationship between the past and the present, between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century; the narrator identifies the main differences between the two centuries while pointing out a fundamental element of continuity: human nature, which remains unaltered through time. Two of the major themes of *Henry Esmond*, family and love, are here revisited, re-evaluated and ultimately reinforced; the Lamberts are presented as the ideal family; the importance of love is promoted both through the behaviour, lives and thoughts of the main characters and more explicitly through the narrator’s remarks. Thackeray’s tendency to intrude in the narration, to comment and also to moralise emerges stronger than ever in this novel. His observations are at times ‘Fieldingesque’ and at times more typically Thackerayan, as his angry outburst against Victorian prudery will show.

*The Virginians* immediately introduces the reader to its subject, the relationship between England and one of its ex-colonies, the new world of America. The frontispiece (Fig. 7.1) to the monthly part-issues is a clear anticipation and an emblem not only of the dominant theme of the novel, but also of its dualistic structure (as we have seen, this is a distinctive feature of Thackeray’s fiction, especially of *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, and, in some respects, *Henry*
THE VIRGINIANS
A TALE OF THE LAST CENTURY.

BY W. M. THACKERAY.

LONDON:
BRADBURY AND EVANS, 11, BOUVERIE STREET.
1857.

Fig. 7.1. Front cover for the monthly numbers, The Virginians
Esmond and The Newcomes). It depicts the twins, Harry and George Warrington, as military officers standing on opposite fronts. A defender of the American cause, Harry is on the left hand side where in the background the stars-and-stripes flag, the symbol of American independence, is floating. He is saying goodbye to his brother who, defeated, is departing and carrying away the flag of Great Britain from the American territory. Despite their differences, the twins (which represent America and England) are still emotionally tied somehow, as the symbolic union of their right hand suggests. Like many of his contemporaries, Thackeray had visited the United States twice, and had become increasingly intrigued by this new world and its inhabitants. But he had also developed a keen interest in the relationship between England and its ex-colony, which pushed him to investigate it in his fiction. Victorian intellectuals in general were fascinated by America as a country in rapid development, as a new society which was building itself and which was experimenting with a new way of governing itself, democracy.

Several writers travelled to the new continent recording their first impressions of American society and culture. Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens produced some of the most interesting works in this regard. In Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832), Frances Trollope conveys her enthusiasm for this new country and its potential, but also her irritation at the acknowledgement that 'America was neither a primitive nor a cultured society but a semi-educated world dishonestly boasting of its republicanism, its individualistic liberty, and its equality, while at the same time defending black slavery and worshipping the dollar.' Harriet Martineau's Society in America (1837) provides a good insight into the American social experiment of democratic government which the author was particularly interested in. According to R.K. Webb, she looked at this great attempt with excitement and confidence, and thought that even if it were to fail, America had demonstrated the capacity of mankind for self-government, which in her view was promising enough. A firm promoter of the anti-slavery movement and its abolitionist principles, Martineau saw America as a country 'sound in structure and hopeful in policy,' but still defective in political spirit.

In American Notes (1842), Charles Dickens gathered his thoughts on the American people. On one level, they are praised several times for their kindness and friendliness towards foreigners. In his concluding remarks Dickens writes: 'They are, by nature, frank, brave, cordial, hospitable, and affectionate. Cultivation and refinement seem but to enhance their warmth of heart and ardent enthusiasm; and it is the possession of these latter qualities in

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3 Ibid., 168.
a most respectable degree, which renders an educated American one of the most endearing and most generous of friends.\textsuperscript{4} On another level, he sees in them some dangerous and very worrying aspects - a 'Universal Distrust,' 'a love of "smart" dealing,' and 'a national love of trade' - as well as some unappealing characteristics: 'They certainly are not a humorous people, and their temperament always impressed me as being of a dull and gloomy character.'\textsuperscript{5} His impression of the state of Virginia, in particular, was that of an appalling wild and dirty place where ruin and decay prevail, where 'there is no look of decent comfort anywhere,' and where 'the negro children' roll on the ground with dogs and pigs.\textsuperscript{6} Dickens's account, then, reveals an interesting feeling of attraction and, at the same time, almost repulsion towards this new 'race.' In \textit{Martin Chuzzlewit} (1842), which is partly set in the New World, he develops some of his first perceptions of the Americans. When Martin leaves for America he is full of enthusiasm and hope, but his excitement soon disappears when he realises that the inhabitants of the new country care only about their dollars, measure everything by money, and would do anything to obtain it:

\begin{quote}
All their cares, hopes, joys, affections, virtues, and associations, seemed to be melted down into dollars. Whatever the chance contributions that fell into the slow cauldron of their talk, they made the gruel thick and slab with dollars. Men were weighed by their dollars, measures gauged by their dollars; life was auctioneered, appraised, put up, and knocked down for its dollars . . . Make commerce one huge lie and mighty theft. Deface the banner of the nation for an idle rag; pollute it star by star; and cut out stripe by stripe as from the arm of a degraded soldier. Do anything for dollars! What is a flag to \textit{them}?\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

The Americans are here viewed as a group of people who behave systematically in the same way, who are all indistinctly motivated by the same obsessive desire - hunger for dollars. They present themselves as firm believers and promoters of the principles of liberty and democracy, which their national flag is an emblem of, but in truth they are incredibly selfish, venal and corrupt. They are also hypocritical because they only pretend to apply democratic rules; in reality they always act in their self-interest. Compared to them, overall the English appear to be more honest, good and generous. Occasionally, and more or less implicitly, we even get the idea that England is not only better than America but also superior to it in terms of manners, culture and language. However, here Dickens is far from presenting England as an ideal country; he sees it (and especially London) as a creepy, dirty and menacing place

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[4]{Charles Dickens, \textit{American Notes} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 244.}
\footnotetext[5]{Ibid., 248.}
\footnotetext[6]{Ibid., 133-4.}
\footnotetext[7]{Charles Dickens, \textit{Martin Chuzzlewit}, ed. Patricia Ingham (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1999), 266.}
\end{footnotes}
where two opposing forces, virtue and vice, coexist uncomfortably. So, in truth, Martin Chuzzlewit is more a critique of the mother country than of its ex-colony.

As Dickens, Thackeray was unhappy with the present state of English society, but his first impressions of America and its inhabitants were more positive overall. In The Virginians, he offers a double view of the Americans: as fairly primitive and dull, but also, and more importantly, as fundamentally good and ‘innocent.’ The first idea emerges especially in the first half of the novel, which deals with Harry’s first visit to England, the home of his family’s ancestors, his expectations, and the way in which he is received by his English relatives. The young daughters of the Castlewood family are immediately charmed by Harry’s handsome appearance and kind manners, while their parents and relatives look at him with suspicion because he is an American. Their prejudiced view is conveyed clearly in the following passage where Madame de Bernstein tries to convince the young ladies that their American cousin, despite his supposed wealth and nobility, is not good enough to marry one of them:

‘You don’t suppose that I believe all the tittle-tattle and scandal which one cannot help hearing in town? But the temper and early education are sufficient. Only fancy one of you condemned to leave St. James’s and the Mall, and live in a plantation surrounded by savages! You would die of ennui, or worry your husband’s life out with your ill-humour. You are born, ladies, to ornament Courts – not wigwams. Let this lad go back to his wilderness with a wife who is suited to him.’

The Americans are negatively portrayed as untamed, rough and simple people whose impulsive nature and scarce education make them an inferior race. They are seen as a wild ethnic group living in an uncivilised environment and surrounded by even more savage people, black slaves, in contrast to the English who consider themselves highly civilised, educated and sophisticated. American life cannot offer anything exciting to a lady used to all the comfort and luxuries of England. Marrying an American would be like bringing upon oneself an unbearable life-sentence, a ‘painful’ renunciation to the social and civilised world, which ultimately could only cause a ‘fatal’ boredom. This is undoubtedly an exaggerated and almost racist view (the Americans are not seen as individuals but as a primitive tribe where all its members behave systematically in the same way), yet it effectively exemplifies the prevailing idea that the English upper classes probably had of America, as well as their attitude towards its inhabitants, which was mostly based on hearsay. Nonetheless, as Dickens’s impression of Virginia indicates, the image of the new world as a wild place was partly real.

8 The Virginians, Works, XVI, 179.
In contrast to this negative narrow-minded view, Thackeray also presents a more positive idea of America as an untamed, and, therefore, 'innocent' country, as a place that has not been corrupted yet. Like the majority of Victorian writers, he looked at the new developing continent with enthusiasm, hope and confidence. Sick of the widespread corruption he was witnessing in English society, he turned to America as an example of an ideal society governed by the principles of honesty, kindness and simplicity. In *The Virginians*, then, in various ways he shows a strong contrast between old corrupt England and new 'innocent' America with the aim of conveying and promoting his ideal while exposing the dissoluteness of the mother country. The twins look alike, but they have very different dispositions; if George is 'peaceful, studious and silent' (XVI, 32), but also jealous and vengeful, Harry is active, 'warlike and noisy' (XVI, 32), yet also very ingenuous. The relationship between the Warringtons in Virginia and the Castlewoods in England is a difficult one; they both look at each other with indifference if not with scorn. But it is through the account of Harry's experience of England that the contrast between the old and the new world emerges more strongly. Harry, who embodies America's innocence, leaves for England with high expectations of the country only to be soon disappointed by the coldness and selfishness of its inhabitants. For example, with regard to their hospitality he observes: 'Your welcome, you see, is different to our welcome, and that's the fact. At home we are glad to see a man, hold out to him and give him our best. Here you take us in, give us beef and claret enough, to be sure, and don't seem to care when we come, or when we go' (XVI, 153-4). Here the Americans are seen as warm and friendly people who appreciate the value of personal relationships, while the English, despite their generosity, are seen as cold and indifferent to their kin. As the story proceeds, the representation of the English assumes even more negative connotations: they appear as materialistic, proud, fond of gossips and false stories, disrespectful and addicted to all sorts of pleasures. The Castlewood relatives perfectly exemplify this image: 'Amongst that family into whose society he [Harry] had fallen, many things were laughed at, over which some folks looked grave. Faith and honour were laughed at; pure lives were disbelieved; selfishness was proclaimed as common practice; sacred duties were sneeringly spoken of, and vice flippantly condoned' (XVI, 253). They show disrespect for real values ('faith,' 'honour' and 'purity') and dedicate themselves to the cultivation of worldly values and vice. But Harry's good nature and ingenuity do not allow him to see beyond appearances or to perceive what is going on around him, and he easily becomes the prey of the wicked society he has come into contact with: 'The most alarming accounts of his own wickedness and profligacy were laid before him. He was a corrupter of virtue, an habitual drunkard and gamester, a notorious blasphemer and freethinker, a fitting companion for my Lord March, finally, and the company into whose society he had fallen' (XVI, 295). A
bunch of lies like these is enough to ruin an individual’s reputation; Harry’s ‘innocence’ is thus compromised by the false English society he is frequenting. Immersed in this world of ‘daily idleness, daily flattery, daily temptations’ (XVI, 296), he is progressively ‘corrupted,’ transformed into a rake and utterly ruined before being rescued by George; and the English are to be blamed for it. Throughout the novel Thackeray criticises England for its tainted society while presenting America as the preserver of ‘innocence,’ of those basic human values he believed in and which he saw gradually fading in his own country.

Thackeray was interested in investigating not just the relationship between the old and the new world, but also that between the past and the present, the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Like its prequel, The Virginians is set in the last century; it opens in the year 1756, approximately a year after George’s supposed death in military action, and ends roughly thirty-five years later. In Esmond, he had already explored the importance of revisiting the past through the life and experiences of an individual in order to understand not just oneself but also the present modern world. In its sequel, he reconsiders the past in order to achieve a more comprehensive view of mankind and of English society. Narrating the history of the twins from a mid-nineteenth century perspective, the narrator constantly compares the past and the present, commenting on their conflict and their close connection, and unveiling an extraordinary awareness of discontinuities and continuities. One of the major differences can immediately be seen in the environment: the desolation of the countryside in the nineteenth-century due to the mass movement of people to the city during the industrial revolution: ‘And the high-road, a hundred years ago, was not that grass-grown desert of the present time. It was alive with constant travel and traffic: the country towns and inns swarmed with life and gaiety’ (XVI, 8). The narrator seems to lament that atmosphere of joy, freedom and liveliness that once one could find in the countryside, and that now has been lost forever. With regard to eighteenth-century English society, he observes that people were more honest and frank, and children showed greater respect towards their parents; they used to salute them ‘with low and respectful bows,’ while ‘Nowadays, a young man walks into his mother’s room with hob-nailed high-lows, and a wideawake on his head; and instead of making her a bow, puffs a cigar into her face’ (XVI, 80). Nonetheless, the eighteenth century was also an age where men were more vulgar, swore openly, drank plenty of wine and dedicated themselves to all sort of pleasures, especially gambling. The following illustration (Fig. 7.2) entitled ‘the ruling passion’ clearly emphasises how playing cards was a common solace of the time and an absorbing addiction which was taken very seriously (losing a game could easily ruin one’s patrimony, which is exactly what happens to Harry). The players are shown as tense and thoughtful, carefully studying their cards, and almost looking suspiciously at their rivals.
Fig. 7.2. 'The ruling passion,' *The Virginians*
All of the narrator’s observations and comparisons between the past and the present, however, insistently point to one basic belief: environments, as well as manners and social behaviour, have developed and changed through time, but man is fundamentally motivated by the same aspirations; human nature has not altered a little. Andrew Sanders in this regard comments: ‘Like Fielding before him he [Thackeray] acknowledges that though clothes, manners and expressions change, man himself remains recognisable, physically and morally, in whatever century he is observed.’

Interestingly, Edgar Harden has pointed out that in *The Virginians* Thackeray ‘reiterates his sense of the sameness of human motives and the continuity of their re-enactments,’ emphasising the absence of any moral progress through his ironic comments. Man’s main concern in life is, of course, the never-changing pursuit of vain aims, including wealth, success, social advancement, and pleasure: ‘A century ago, and our ancestors, the most free or the most straitlaced, met together at a score of such merry places as that where our present scene lies, and danced, and frisked, and gamed, and drank at Epsom, Bath, Tunbridge, Harrogate, as they do at Hombourg and Baden now’ (XVI, 315). And people will do anything in order to obtain their goals, which emerges clearly in the following ironic comment:

A hundred years ago people of the great world were not so straitlaced as they are now, when everybody is good, pure, moral, modest; when there is no skeleton in anybody’s closet; when there is no scheming; no slurring over of old stories; when no girl tries to sell herself for wealth, and no mother abets her. (XVI, 180)

The apparent contrast between the past and the present serves the purpose of affirming exactly the opposite, that although time has gone by, people still behave in the same way and still covet the same things. They might have ‘improved’ their means of achieving their aims – marriage, as well as careful planning, have become essential tools to become rich – but they have certainly shown little moral advancement. It is a bitter, if not cynical, view of mankind. And the British seem to be particularly keen on money, as the narrator observes: ‘Ah, a proud thing it is to be a Briton, and think that there is no country where the prosperity is so much respected as in ours: and where success receives such constant affecting testimonials of loyalty’ (XVI, 207). In Britain the ‘shameful’ pursuit of wealth and success assumes the form of silly worship and excessive flattery in which the British distinguish themselves brilliantly. This idea is reinforced in the following passage, where Mr. Sampson is presented as the typical example of the supposedly ‘extinct race’ of the flatterer: ‘... and a great comfort it is

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9 Andrew Sanders, ‘Clio’s Heroes and Thackeray’s Heroes: *Henry Esmond* and *The Virginians,*’ English, 26 (1977), 194.
10 Harden (2000), 105-6.
to think (to those who choose to believe the statement) that in Queen Victoria's reign there are no flatterers left, such as existed in the reign of her royal great-grandfather, no parasites pandering to the follies of young men . . . (XVI, 308). This ironic observation conveys the idea that although the category of flatterers may be 'extinct,' the social phenomenon of flattery still survives, thus presenting it as an element of continuity in British society. By playing on the similarities and differences between the two centuries, while also emphasising the sameness of human nature and motives through time, Thackeray wanted to remind his audience once again that interpreting the past is central to our understanding of ourselves, but also of mankind and of the society we live in. Furthermore, as Edgar Harden has observed, 'he not only sought to stir the imaginative participation of his audiences in former times, but also to remind his contemporaries of their grounding in 19th century life – not always to its advantage.'

In *The Virginians*, two other major themes of *Henry Esmond* are retrieved, reassessed and ultimately reinforced: family and love. Domesticity is at the core of the novel, and the family is once again presented as a fundamental social unit, as a circle where the human values of honesty, generosity, mutual respect and affection are cherished every day, and as a shelter from the vanity and cruelty of the modern world. But here the ideal is promoted more openly and more effectively than ever before. As Gerald Sorensen has observed:

> Throughout Thackeray's fiction the family as a structural unit has great thematic importance. And if families are sometimes fragmented, or fail in their function (as they do in *Henry Esmond*), Thackeray insists in *The Virginians* on positing the ideal, and showing its functions first by dealing with it negatively (Madam Esmond and her sons) and also by providing two examples in which that unit functions perfectly: the case of the Lamberts and that of George and Theo Warrington.

The Lamberts certainly have a key-role in the novel. They are old family friends; Mr. Lambert served in the war with Colonel Esmond, and Mrs. Lambert was a school friend of Rachel's, the mother of the twins. They are presented as a model to follow, as the ideal family whose members are united by sincere affection, and live peacefully and in harmony in the countryside, somehow retired from the rest of the world and its vanity. The following illustration (Fig. 7.3) depicts Mr. and Mrs. Lambert as the good 'Samaritans' (they are explicitly addressed as such in the chapter title) succouring Harry who has just fallen from his cousin Will's horse. They have stooped in order to check the boy, while Madame de

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11 Ibid., 126.
Fig. 7.3. ‘Welcome,’ *The Virginians*
Bernstein and Lady Castlewood look amazed at their relative from a standing position, almost unable (or perhaps unwilling?) to take action. Their rigid posture and cold reaction contrast with the more natural attitude and affectionate response of the Lamberts. The idea that we should all be or become good Samaritans is central in the novel. Throughout the story, benevolence is promoted as an essential moral code and as a guiding principle of life (it is viewed both as a basic human value and as a middle-class virtue). Adopting a spirit of generosity becomes even more important in a society where self-interest prevails and where individuals are often victims of other people's egotistical actions. Harry himself cannot help but noticing (and appreciating) the goodness, warmth and kindness of the Lamberts, which differs from the restrained behaviour of the Castlewoods:

Here the lad found himself in the midst of a circle where everything about him was incomparably gayer, brighter, and more free. He was living with a man and a woman who had seen the world, though they lived retired from it, who had both of them happened to enjoy from their earliest times the use not only of good books, but of good company. The Lamberts were not squeamish. Their tales about this neighbour and that were droll, not malicious; the curtseys and salutations with which the folks of the little neighbouring town received them, how kindly and cheerful! their bounties how cordial! Of a truth it is good to be with good people. (XVI, 240-1)

The family is here presented (and promoted) as the social nucleus where one, adhering to simple principles, can find true happiness. Harmony, spontaneity, good humour, kindliness, 'good books' (which of course refers to the Victorian family's common practice of gathering near the fireplace and reading aloud in the evening), and 'good company' (which emphasises the importance of personal relationships in a person's life) are identified as the main sources of personal felicity, but also of other people's genuine respect and admiration. The small world of the family is like a small paradise on earth, a 'sacred' place of light, freedom and joy, which the insistent use of positive adjectives such as 'gay,' 'bright,' 'cheerful,' 'good,' 'free,' 'kindly' and 'cordial' clearly indicates. There is also an implicit suggestion that the outer world with its temptations, its selfishness and its maliciousness cannot offer all this. The family, however, could not give such happiness if it was not kept together by that fundamental binding agent called love.

As in Henry Esmond, so in its sequel the importance and value of love are constantly highlighted throughout the story. As Gerald Sorensen had pointed out, indeed, in The Virginians, Thackeray takes the opportunity to reconsider the theme of love and to question
the validity of Esmond’s conclusion: is it true that love vincit omnia?\textsuperscript{13} Undoubtedly the answer is yes. In the novel, Thackeray conveys this belief in two main ways: through the behaviour, lives and thoughts of the main characters of the story, and, also, through the narrator’s intrusions where he openly declares and tries to promulgate love as a fundamental human value. As we have seen, the Lamberts are the typical example of a life based on the principles of affection and benevolence – George and Theo will take them as a model for their own life as a married couple. George and Harry Warrington feel a strong natural bond between them. From the beginning, indeed, we get the sense that the twins are united by a mutual deep attachment which brings them to defend each other in hostile situations, and to help each other in moments of difficulties. In Chapter 5, Harry, unable to stand the idea of George being punished and thus hurt, assaults their tutor physically, and later declares: “I don’t care. I did it,” says Harry. “I couldn’t see this fellow strike my brother; and, as he lifted his hand, I flung the great ruler at him. I couldn’t help it. I won’t bear it; and if one lifts a hand to me or my brother, I’ll have his life,” shouts Harry brandishing the hanger’ (XVI, 55). The expressions that Harry uses to explain his violent and instinctive reaction suggest that he acted purely out of love for his brother: ‘I couldn’t see,’ ‘I couldn’t help it,’ and ‘I won’t bear it.’ This idea is highlighted very well in the illustration (Fig. 7.4) that accompanies the episode, which depicts Harry just after hitting the tutor, furious, proud of his deed, and sure that what he did was right, while his mother and the tutor, unable to understand the lad’s behaviour, look astonished and almost shocked. Harry’s response might be exaggerated, but what counts is his demonstration of strong sincere affection for his brother for the sake of whom he would do anything. And George too never hesitates to help his brother when in difficulty; when Harry is arrested for debt, and nobody seems to be able to succour him, it is George who immediately comes to rescue him. Despite their political differences which bring them to stand on opposite fronts in the war for American independence, they are always united by that powerful bond existing between them: ‘In the Revolutionary War, [they] found themselves on different sides in the quarrel, coming together at its conclusion, as brethren should, their love never having materially diminished, however angrily the contest divided them’ (XVI, 1-2).

But it is in the narrator’s intrusions in the story that the ideal of love is explicitly promoted against the materialism and utilitarianism of the world. One of the best examples can be found in Chapter 21 when the Lamberts take good care of Harry after his fall from the horse, and are shown as a loving family. The narrator’s comment sounds more like a sermon than a simple observation:

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 113.
Fig. 7.4. ‘The tutor in trouble,’ *The Virginians*
On thy knees, on thy knees, give thanks for the blessing awarded thee! All the prizes of life are nothing compared to that one. All the rewards of ambition, wealth, pleasure, only vanity and disappointment — grasped at greedily and fought for fiercely, and, over and over again, found worthless by the weary winners. But love seems to survive life, and to reach beyond it. I think we take it with us past the grave. Do we not still give it to those who have left us? May we not hope that they feel it for us, and that we shall leave it here in one or two fond bosoms, when we also are gone? (XVI, 220-1)

Love is presented and exalted as ‘a blessing,’ as a precious gift (‘prize’) that has been given to mankind, and as the greatest reward one could wish for. It is something we should cherish every day. It is a pure, ‘sacred’ and beautiful passion that protects us from the temptations and delusions of the world, and that gives us the necessary strength and courage to survive the difficult moments in life. Love is depicted as something we cannot live without, almost as the essence of life itself, as a force that never dies, as a bond stronger than death, which still unites human beings even after they have passed on. This passage strongly recalls Esmond’s concluding remarks where he affirms that love vincit omnia and highlights how it changed his life for ever. In The Virginians, then, from the very beginning Thackeray seems to confirm the validity of Esmond’s conclusion, but, also, the validity of the basic idea contained in The Newcomes, that only if we learn to value our deepest emotions, including love, will we be able to live a better and happier life. Furthermore, in this novel, Thackeray (like Dickens) is pleading for a ‘religion’ of humanity and benevolence; he is asking his audience to have faith in the power of love and to adopt it as a fundamental principle of life.

If with regard to content (and ideology) The Virginians is closely linked to its prequel, it is hardly so with regard to its narrative technique and style. First of all, it is divided into two parts and has two narrators; indeed, the first half of the story is told in the third person and concerns Harry’s life, while the second half of it is told in the first person by George and details his own experiences. Secondly, the influence of Fielding seems to be particularly prominent here. Thackeray clearly wants to establish a close relationship with the reader who is often addressed directly in affectionate terms such as ‘friendly reader,’ ‘kind reader’ and ‘gracious reader.’ Moreover, more than in his previous novels, he does seem to feel the urgent need to intrude in the narration, not just to comment on characters and events, but also, and more importantly, to express openly his opinions, to promote his ideals effectively as well as to convey his personal dissatisfaction with his world in general. Gordon Ray, indeed, has observed that in his later works Thackeray’s habit of moralising in his text becomes prevalent.
and that his narrator's point of view is identical to his own.\textsuperscript{14} This is not entirely true because, as we have seen in \textit{The Newcomes}, Thackeray often distances himself from his narrator, thus avoiding taking responsibility for the latter's insensitive judgements and changeable opinions on characters and events – and in \textit{Philip}, as we will see, he will be even more detached from his story-teller's point of view. Nonetheless, in \textit{The Virginians}, his presence as a moraliser is still strong and can often be easily perceived through the narrative voice. Thackeray always saw himself as a 'preacher' and a 'moraliser'; now fully aware of his rhetorical skills, he believed he could deliver powerful messages to his audience, and that if his words could not change the world, or provide a solution to its evils, they could at least offer possibilities and even suggest an alternative approach to life (see his observations on love, for instance). His intent was a good one, therefore, we should try to see his habit of lecturing and moralising as one of the author's strengths, as a positive rather than as a negative aspect of his narration.

Passages of commentary are often particularly extensive in \textit{The Virginians}, and vary from entertaining observations to serious and, at times, bitter statements; occasionally, they are typically Thackerayan outbursts against aspects of his contemporary society. Examples abound, so I have chosen two intrusions which I find very illuminating. In general they have the aim of revealing a universal pattern in human behaviour. This is visible in the following intervention, where the narrator comments on the novelist's subject pointing out his 'bill of fare':

\begin{quote}

The real business of life, I fancy, can form but little portion of the novelist's budget. . . . I say, in reply to some objections which have been urged by potent and friendly critics, that of the actual affairs of life the novelist cannot be expected to treat – with the almost single exception of war before named. But law, stockbroking, polemical theology, linen-draper, apothecary-business, and the like, how can writers manage fully to develop these in their stories? All authors can do, is to depict men \textit{out} of their business – in their passions, loves, laughters, amusements, hatreds, and what not – and to describe these as well as they can, taking the business-part for granted, and leaving it as it were for subaudition. (XVII, 101-2)

\end{quote}

As Fielding in \textit{Tom Jones} had declared that the subject of his story was 'Human Nature,' so Thackeray here emphasises that he is mainly interested in depicting and comprehending the motives governing human behaviour, therefore, he can only represent men and women '\textit{out of} their business.' As he had already done in \textit{The Newcomes}, he focuses on human passions with the intent to unveil that human life is a continuous reiteration of the same acts, that it is the same old story continually being told over and over, century after century. Manners and fashions change, but men and women remain fundamentally unaltered through time; they

\textsuperscript{14} Ray (1958), 373.
experience the same feelings and they covet the same things. And this is the 'moral' of his story. If we learn this important lesson, we will be able to reach a better understanding of ourselves and of mankind in general, and to approach life with an awareness of who we are.

My next example is what we could call a typically Thackerayan outburst against an aspect of contemporary society which the novelist found particularly irritating: Victorian prudery. This was the prevailing code of morality in Victorian society, which inevitably discouraged people to talk explicitly about certain private and social aspects of life, such as sexual matters and prostitution. Consequently, the writers and novelists of the age were forced to avoid descriptions of those ‘shameful’ areas of life. As Richard Altick has observed, ‘the best that novelists could do was cautiously to imply what they could not say outright.’ Thus Dickens, for instance, in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) in describing Kate’s experience at Madame Mantalini’s dressmaking establishment alluded to the sad situation that young needlewomen workers had to face every day; indeed, not only did they work in a dirty environment for long hours and at a very low rate, but they were often innocent victims of the sexual advances of men – at Madame Mantalini’s Kate is constantly harassed by Mr. Mantalini. Thackeray too could only hint at those private aspects of human life which he was not allowed to talk about explicitly; this gave him a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction. But in *Esmond*, as we have seen, he had presented love as a complex human feeling denoted by powerful sexual as well as emotional impulses. In the following years his hostility against Victorian prudery increased to the point that he could not stay silent any longer. In *The Virginians*, while narrating Harry’s progress as ‘a rake’ in English society he takes the opportunity to convey openly all his anger against the prudery of his time:

Suppose we were to describe the doings of such a person as Mr. Lovelace, or my Lady Bellaston, or that wonderful ‘Lady of Quality’ who lent her memoirs to the author of ‘Peregrine Pickle.’ How the pure and outraged Nineteenth Century would blush, scream, run out of the room, call away the young ladies, and order Mr. Mudie never to send one of that odious author’s books again! You are fifty-eight years old, madam, and it may be that you are too squeamish, that you cry out before you are hurt, and when nobody had any intention of offending your Ladyship. Also, it may be that the novelist’s art is injured by the restraints put upon him, as many an honest harmless statue at St. Peter’s and the ecclesiastical old women have swaddled the fair limbs of the marble. But in your prudery there is a reason. So there is in the State censorship of the Press. The page may contain matter dangerous to *bonos mores*. Out with your scissors, censor, and clip off the prurient paragraph! We have nothing for it but to submit. Society, the despot, has given his imperial decree. We may think the statue had been

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seen to greater advantage without the tin drapery; we may plead that the moral were better
might we recite the whole fable. Away with him – not a word! I never saw the pianoforte in the
United States with the frilled muslin trousers on their legs; but, depend on it, the muslin
covered some of the notes as well as the mahogany, muffled the music, and stopped the player.

(XVI, 426-7)

Prudery is presented as a negative aspect of contemporary society, and it is criticised as a
totally absurd attitude to life. The nineteenth century, which is ironically called a ‘pure’ age,
is personified, and mocked for its unjustified exaggerated reaction of panic when sexual
matters are alluded to or lightly mentioned in books. The allusion to the common Victorian
habit of covering the legs of pieces of furniture with fabrics is at the same time provocative
and ridiculous, and has the aim of reinforcing the absurdity of people’s prudish behaviour.
What Thackeray finds unacceptable is that one should ignore or be outraged at something that
is a part of human life after all, an idea that he had already tried to convey in *Pendennis*. He
laments the fact that novelists are denied freedom of expression and have little choice but to
submit to their tyrannical society, if they want to have their stories published. This is felt as a
deeply unfair situation, as an ‘injury’ to the novelist’s art which might demotivate the writer
to the point of exhausting his creative vein. Thackeray attacks prudery explicitly and
complains strongly about it, but does he suggest a possible ‘cure’ to it? Not really; he sees it
as a problem with no easy and fast solution because of its solid roots in the culture of his time.
But if he cannot offer a practical alternative, at least he takes the risk of openly disclosing his
opinion on the topic, using his rhetorical power to ‘open the eyes’ of his readers, to help them
realise how unnatural prudery is, and hoping that maybe his words could start a chain reaction
against it. Whether serious or ironic, all of Thackeray’s intrusions in this novel always contain
a ‘moral’ to be discovered rather than a solution to a problem, a universal message that the
reader has to acknowledge, reflect upon and learn from at his/her own advantage.

To sum up, *The Virginians* is probably one of Thackeray’s most ambitious novels. Its
main interest lies in the exploration of the relationship and conflict between the old and the
new world, England and America, where a double view of the inhabitants of the ex-colony is
presented. On one level, they are seen as primitive, simple and stupid people; on another
level, they are praised for their fundamental good nature and ‘innocence,’ while the English
are generally blamed for their irrecoverable corruption. Set in the eighteenth century, but told
from a nineteenth-century point of view, the novel focuses also on the relationship between
the past and the present age. By constantly comparing the two centuries the narrator is able to
identify major differences and similarities in English culture and society, and to reach the
conclusion that although tastes, habits and social behaviour change through time, human
nature remains unaltered in its pursuit of the same vain motives and ambitions. As he had done in *Esmond* and in *The Newcomes*, however, Thackeray offers the reader an alternative approach to life by reconsidering and reaffirming the importance of two Victorian values: family and love. Once again, through the portrayal of the Lamberts as an ideal family, he presents the family as the fundamental social unit where one can find true happiness, where personal relationships and love are highly regarded. The importance of Love as a fundamental human value, as a binding agent essential for mankind, is conveyed in two ways, through the behaviour, lives and thoughts of the main characters, and, more directly, through the comments of the narrator. Despite the thematic similarities of *The Virginians* with its prequel, the novel differs from it in narrative technique and style. Eager to deliver a clear message to the reader, the narrator intrudes in the story more insistently than ever before, at times to comment on the story in a way which recalls Fielding, at times to give voice to his personal anger against aspects of his contemporary society he does not like, such as Victorian prudery. Although *The Virginians* is not the best among Thackeray's novels, it still merits scholarly attention for its ideological content, for its way of promoting fundamental Victorian values, and especially for its treatment of the relationship between England and America.
Chapter 8

Towards the Tragicomic: The Adventures of Philip and Denis Duval

Thackeray's late works of fiction (from The Virginians onwards) are generally considered uninteresting by scholars because of their lack of originality and their 'weak' characters. Gordon Ray, for example, claims that 'deserted by his inventive faculty' the author went back to his earlier stories, looking for ideas, themes and characters that could be re-used and elaborated.\(^1\) In particular, the writer's last complete novel, The Adventures of Philip, is often regarded as a failure for its ill-constructed and unoriginal plot and its unpleasant protagonist. However, recently scholars (including Peter Shillingsburg and Judith Fisher) have begun to reconsider and reassess Philip (and Thackeray's late books in general), to look beyond its obvious defects, and to demonstrate convincingly that his creative vein was anything but exhausted. I too believe that this work deserves renewed academic attention and appreciation. Therefore, in this chapter I will attempt to prove that despite its striking similarities with other works by Thackeray (and with Pendennis in particular), Philip presents a different and new personal comic vision, one which often includes the tragic element of death as well as the comedic element of love. This is also true of the unfinished story Denis Duval. The study of these novels suggests that Thackeray was turning to a new direction in his fiction; he was moving towards the tragicomic.

In Philip Thackeray retrieves some of the plots, characters, types and even themes of his previous fiction. Though originally conceived as a continuation of an early unfinished story, the novel also presents many affinities with Pendennis in terms of story line and characterisation. Philip is not offered as a hero or a paragon, but as a representative of human nature and its defects; he too has some of the right moral qualities to become a true gentleman. Furthermore, two recurrent themes in Thackeray’s fiction are revisited: on the one hand, the vanity of human life, which is also accompanied by a feeling of the emptiness of the present, and, on the other hand, the importance of cultivating spiritual values (especially love and friendship) as real sources of inner harmony. Despite its closeness to previous works, Philip shows a new comic approach which incorporates tragic elements, especially death which the Victorians had an obsessive interest in and which here becomes a central theme. In the narrative death is presented as a sad and inescapable aspect of human existence, and as a common destiny. But in the illustrations Thackeray reveals a taste for the horrible and

\(^1\) Ray (1958), 372.
macabre, and creates a unique black humour which, on one level, constantly reminds us of our mortality and, on another level, mocks our fear of death. In *Philip*, Thackeray is nearly always detached from his narrator Pendennis who emerges as an unreliable, uncertain and inconsistent story-teller and is ridiculed for it. The ambiguous depiction of one of the main characters, Dr. Firmin, who is paradoxically a rogue and a gentleman at the same time, encourages the reader to distrust appearance, as well as any single view of a person. If in some respects the story of Philip lacks appeal and originality, the unfinished *Denis Daival* certainly proves that Thackeray had not yet lost his inventiveness, as he shows new interests in his fiction and even a freshness of approach. The historical religious struggle between Catholics and Protestants is always in the background, but it is difficult to establish whether this was to become a central theme. This fragmentary novel presents similarities with *Esmond* and *The Virginians*: it is set in the eighteenth century, the protagonist Denis, like Esmond, was to embody the figure of the true gentleman, and it emphasises the importance of love. But, unlike those historical novels, here the focus is on action rather than on love-making, and, as in *Philip*, the comic mood of the story is often threatened by the tragic elements of crime, war, murder and death.

In *The Adventures of Philip*, which was serialised in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1861-2, Thackeray returns to some of the plots, characters (including Pendennis as a narrator), types and topics of his earlier fictional works. *Philip* was envisaged as a sequel to the unfinished *A Shabby Genteel Story* (1840); it takes up the three characters of Brandon, Caroline and Mr. Hunt and continues their story with the aim of providing a clear explanation of the sham marriage between Brandon and Caroline. However, it revolves mainly around Philip, Dr. Firmin’s (alias Brandon) son. Indeed, the novel was intentionally conceived not just as a follow-on but also, and more importantly, as a Bildungsroman alike to *Pendennis*. In fact, it is very close in spirit to the earlier volume. First of all, as Gordon Ray has pointed out, the full titles of both novels (*The Adventures of Philip on His Way Through the World; showing who robbed him, who helped him, and who passed him by*, and *The History of Pendennis, His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy*) indicate a similar content: the story of an individual’s journey through life where he encounters several misadventures and enemies but where he is also succoured by those who love him. In *Philip*, for instance, the narrator exclaims: ‘Ah, thanks to Heaven, travellers will find Samaritans as well as Levites on life’s hard way!’ Secondly, the lives of the two protagonists follow the same pattern; they both experience the power of first love (and a bitter disappointment), the struggle to earn their living through journalism, poverty, a successful marriage denoted by

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true love, and a final reward with wealth. Moreover, they both embody the figure of the
gentleman trying to find his position in modern society. In this regard Judith Fisher has
observed that Philip dramatises ‘the problem of maintaining one’s identity as a gentleman in
an increasingly predatory commercial world,’ and also the problem of how one can be a
gentleman if one has to earn a living. The issue, however, is treated less effectively in the
later book; Philip is a prouder, much less charming, and, more importantly, less self-aware
character than Pendennis. Finally, the two novels are strongly linked by the fact that Arthur
Pendennis and his wife Laura reappear physically in Philip where they hold a fundamental
role: they are ‘the good Samaritans’ who offer genuine help, advice, comfort and affection to
Philip throughout his life. And Pendennis is also the narrator of Philip’s story.

As Pendennis, Philip is not presented as a hero or as a model to follow but as an example
of human nature and its imperfections. As the narrator points out, ‘Our friend is not Amadis
or Sir Charles Grandison; and I don’t set him up for a moment as a person to be revered or
imitated; but try to draw him faithfully, and as nature made him’ (XVIII, 331). Indeed, from
the beginning Philip is portrayed as a young man with many faults. He is a wild, strong and
obstinate boy whose behaviour closely resembles that of his father when he was young; he is
an egotist and ‘of a hot temper’ (XIX, 170). He does not know good social manners and
behaves badly when invited to distinguished houses: ‘... he made himself very arrogant and
disagreeable when he was asked; and he would upset tea-trays, and burst out into roars of
laughter at all times, and swagger about the drawing-room as if he were a man of importance
– he indeed – giving himself such airs, because his grandfather’s brother was an Earl!’ (XIX,
48) Here he is presented almost as an eccentric clown creating confusion, making a terrible
noise, and laughing loudly at everything, showing no respect for the hosts or their guests.
Such bad behaviour clearly indicates that he has not received any education with regard to
social conduct, and that he is desperately in need of one; he needs to be rescued from
becoming an irredeemable scoundrel. Indeed, as his father, he too does not seem capable of
learning from experience or from his mistakes, as the narrator clearly admits when he
observes that from his poverty Philip has not learnt ‘the least lesson of humility, or acquired
the very earliest rudiments of the art of making friends’ (XIX, 18). But, as Richard Pearson
has pointed out, his major defect, which makes him so irritating, is his lack of self-analysis.
This does not allow him to get to know himself or to understand his behaviour, and thus to
improve it, without external help. And his pride and obstinacy are certainly other major
obstacles to his inner growth. So, Philip embodies the imperfections of mankind, but, more
importantly, he is presented as a ‘paragon’ of bad social attitude as a way of showing the

necessity to provide people inhabiting a rapidly changing and unsettling world with a set of fixed rules in terms of conduct and morality that they can refer to. In this respect Laura and Pendennis assume a crucial role, as they live according to the principle of benevolence, and help Philip to correct and improve his behaviour and to become a more responsible and respectable person. Thackeray here shows a problem, a society inhabited by individuals in need of correction, and then offers a suggestion on how to overcome it, that is through the promotion of and adherence to spiritual values, including the fundamental lesson of love, as basic guiding principles of everyday life.

As Pendennis, despite his defects, Philip has the potential to become a true Victorian gentleman because he exhibits some of the essential moral virtues of this important figure (which, as we have seen, recurs constantly in Thackeray’s fiction). He is fundamentally good, honest, sensitive, and affectionate, especially in the presence of women and children. The following extract sums up the main traits of his personality: ‘Mr. Philip in some things was as obstinate as a mule, and in others as weak as a woman. He had a childish sensibility for what was tender, helpless, pretty, or pathetic; and a might scorn of imposture, wherever he found it. . . He hated hypocrisy on his own part, and hypocrites in general’ (XVIII, 198). The extract suggests that Philip has a natural sentimental side and a propensity to behave affectionately towards weak or helpless people, as well as a strong belief in the value of honesty. If in public he displays his fierce side, his arrogance and impulsiveness, in private he shows his natural tender side towards his close friends and the people he cares about, as Pendennis points out:

Before my wife this lion of a Firmin was as a lamb. Rough, captious, and overbearing in general society, with those whom he loved and esteemed Philip was of all men the most modest and humble. He would never tire of playing with our children, joining in their games, laughing and roaring at their little sports. I have never had such a laughter at my jokes as Philip Firmin.

(XIX, 179)

The passage conveys the idea that a person who knows or learns the value of friendship and love can benefit greatly from their mitigating power. Thus, Philip becomes docile, kind, loving and pleasant. This set of moral qualities, as well as his honesty, makes him a gentleman in Pendennis’ view, and progressively (though very slowly) helps him mature and ultimately emerge as a better person towards the last chapters of the novel. With the precious aid of his ‘good Samaritans,’ he gradually acknowledges the importance of cherishing his good qualities, and adopts them as guiding principles of behaviour. In the end we see him fond of his wife and children, grateful to God for blessing him with a happy family and true friends he can always count on. He has learnt the lesson of love – and we do like him more
now. Philip, then, is an example of how an individual with many faults and a bad behaviour can improve considerably under the influence of the calming and guiding forces of love and friendship, which will bring him/her to a recognition and cultivation of his/her personal 'virtues,' thus making him/her a better person both in private life and in society.

In Philip, two typically Thackerayan themes are revisited and re-explored. On the one hand, the idea of the vanity of human life, which coexists with a sense of the emptiness of the present, is constantly emphasised through the narrator's comments. In chapter II, the narrator, while revisiting the streets of London where he spent his youth, observes:

There were splendid thoroughfares, dazzling company, bright illuminations, in our streets when our hearts were young: we entertained in them a noble youthful company of chivalrous hopes and lofty ambitions; of blushing thoughts in snowy robes spotless and virginal . . . . See! along the street, strewed with flowers once mayhap — a fight of beggars for the refuse of an apple-stall, or a tipsy basket-woman reeling shrieking to the station. O me! O my beloved congregation! I have preached this stale sermon to you for ever so many years. O my jolly companion, I have drunk many a bout with you, and always found vanitas vanitatum written on the bottom of the pot! (XVIII, 137)

The past is referred to in terms of affectionate nostalgia, which is conveyed through the use of the possessive ('our street,' 'our hearts'); it is presented as a time of vitality, joy and happiness, suggested by the adjectives 'splendid,' 'dazzling,' and 'bright,' of spontaneity, and of innocence, insistently indicated by the whiteness of the young ladies' dresses, by their spotlessness and chastity. Nobility of thoughts and feelings, and the appreciation of unworldly values characterised the youthful past. This contrasts with the present, an age of emptiness, where the obsessive pursuit of worldly values has brought nothing but misery, squalor, dirt, desperation and unhappiness. The world appears in an irreversible state of decadence. The melancholic mood of the opening lines becomes a sad acknowledgement of the vanity of human life, and finally an absolute resignation. And in the following comment the narrator give us a similar view: ‘Yesterday is gone — yes, but very well remembered; and we think of it the more now that To-morrow is not going to bring us much’ (XVIII, 189). Again, the vitality of the past is presented in striking contrast with the depressing and almost hopeless present. Then, in Chapter 15, entitled 'Samaritans,' we find a very familiar biblical sentence: 'All is vanity, look you: and so the preacher is vanity, too' (XVIII, 331). Despite the cynical approach to life which these words unveil, the chapter conveys another parallel message, a much more positive one. As Harden has pointed out, indeed, it affirms that “all is vanity” while emphasising 'the mitigating power of human charitableness, dominated as the chapter is
by the theme of samaritanism.\footnote{Harden (2000), 169.} This may indicate that Thackeray had not lost hope completely, that he still believed that holding on to spiritual values could help us survive in a world pervaded by materialism. It may also suggest that the negative view of life as vain, although omnipresent throughout the novel, ultimately is not the dominant one.

Indeed, the second idea which the narrator communicates to the reader is that the essential human principles of love and friendship give meaning to our life and can guarantee happiness, a belief that, as we have seen, Thackeray had already strongly tried to promote in *Esmond*, in *The Newcomes* and more openly in *The Virginians*. The daily cultivation of love and friendship can restore that sense of inner stability and harmony which people seemed to have lost in an age dispossessed of religious faith and values. The accumulation of capital and possessions, on the other hand, can bring comfort and a stable social position, but cannot give spiritual happiness. Directly connected with this is the message that had already been at the core of *The Newcomes*, that marrying for money is wrong and that it can only cause misery to the couple – Agnes, Philip’s first love, is ‘sold’ by her parents to Woolcomb and is made extremely unhappy and miserable. Arthur and Laura Pendennis, and Philip and Charlotte Firmin, are presented as examples of the ideal couple who married for love, who can live their humble life in joy because they follow the principle of love. This pictorial initial (Fig. 8.1) representing the honey and the moon is the symbol of a happy marriage as intended by Thackeray; it is an image of sweetness, harmony, tranquillity and serenity. Just after the wedding tour of Philip and Charlotte, the narrator comments, ‘Life is earnest, Miss Sowerby remarks . . . Life is labour. Life is duty. Life is rent. Life is taxes. Life brings its ills, bills, doctor’s pills. Life is not a mere calendar of honey and moonshine. Very good. But without love, Miss Sowerby, life is just death . . .’ (XIX, 216). Life is presented as a combination of material and spiritual aspects, the latter being the more important. Love is life; it gives meaning to our existence filling it with peace and harmony every single day. This is all one needs to be happy. And the power of love can also redirect us to the right direction, if we lose our way – ‘O fortunate he, of whom Love is the teacher, the guide and master, the reformer and the chastener!’ (XIX, 225) – and helps us overcome the difficult moments – ‘Fortunate he, however poor, who has friends to help, and love to console him in his trials’ (XIX, 321). In the final chapter of the novel, the narrator’s ideology becomes even more explicit when he refers to love and friendship as ‘sacred’ values: ‘. . . Philip’s biographer wishes you some of those blessings which never forsook Philip in his trials: a dear wife and children to love you, a true friend or two to stand by you, and in health or sickness a clear conscience and a kindly heart’ (XIX, 378). This does seem to be the prevailing message of the novel.
Fig. 8.1. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 14, The Adventures of Philip

Fig. 8.2. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 23, The Adventures of Philip
Despite its affinities with *Pendennis* and the retrieval of themes that had been central in previous novels by Thackeray, *Philip* shows a fresh comic approach, one which often contains threatening tragic elements, such as death, violence and horror. The novel is referred to as a comedy several times; it is ‘our little comedy’ (XVIII, 389); the readers are repeatedly told not to worry when Philip’s situation seems desperate, because all will end well; and in the final chapter the narrator compares the ending of the story to the concluding scene of a pantomime, when the performers, just before ‘the Good Fairy ascends in a blaze of glory’ (XIX, 354), move around in a state of temporary confusion, and the audience experiences a moment of suspense. Thackeray loved to go to the theatre to watch pantomimes and was therefore very familiar with the staging techniques of this kind of performance. The pictorial capital (Fig. 8.2), which represents the easily recognisable figure of the Good Fairy in all her beauty and splendour, rising to the sky and holding her magic wand, the dispenser of infinite joy, anticipates the happy ending of Philip’s story and his entrance into ‘the realms of bliss’ (XIX, 354). Nevertheless, as Juliet McMaster has suggested in her article on *Philip*, the novel, despite its dominant comic mode, presents the alignment of love with death, and often shifts from the comic to the horrible and macabre; death becomes a prominent theme and concern here. Throughout the narration, Thackeray’s ‘haunting consciousness of mortality’ emerges clearly through Pendennis’s observations. But why was Thackeray concerned with mortality in this novel in particular? A possible explanation can be found in his letters which convey a sense of physical and mental exhaustion during the composition of *Philip*. In a letter to George Smith dated 6 March 1862, he wrote: ‘I dare say your night, like mine, has been a little disturbed: but *Philip* presses and until this matter is over, I can’t make that story so amusing as I would wish.’ He was also experiencing a lack of creativity which made him frustrated, as a letter to his mother reveals: ‘I am certainly much better in body. I think the novel-writing vein is used up though and you may be sure some kind critics will say as much for me before long.’

The Victorians were obsessed with death. As Michael Wheeler has pointed out, they considered it both an enemy who takes away a beloved person and a friend who gives the dead eternal rest and leads them to another world. If seen as a destroying enemy, the death of a dear person (a friend, a spouse, a parent, a child or a relative) was lived as an extremely traumatic event from which some were never able to recover. It made people feel isolated and lonely, and totally unable to react. In some cases, grief prevailed, while, in other cases,

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9 Ibid., 153.
10 *Letters*, IV, 257.
11 Ibid., 271.
melancholia was the dominant feeling. Examples in fiction abound. Amelia, in *Vanity Fair*, after George is killed in battle, cannot move on and becomes obsessed with his memory; Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, is deeply affected by Cathy’s death, which unleashes violence and anger on one level, and a profound longing to join her on another level; Mr. Dombey, in *Dombey and Son*, cannot accept little Paul’s passing away at such a young age and becomes extremely insufferable and cold, even towards his own daughter. At times fear of imminent divine judgement was the prevalent feeling. It was commonly believed that God could decide at any moment to take a person’s soul and to send it to Hell for eternal punishment and torment, or to Heaven for ‘resurrection’ and eternal peace, or to the intermediate state of Purgatory where the soul would wait for a long period of time before being sent to either Hell or Heaven. Others, however, did not believe in imminent judgement or in the existence of an after life; they thought that with death came complete annihilation.

If considered a kind friend who brings eternal repose, the death of a beloved person was lived as a more positive event, as the moment when the divine presence was revealed, and God embraced the dead with his mercy and with the promise of a future life rather than with the threat of an impending sentence. Seen in these terms, death was accepted as an aspect not to be feared; it was the smooth passage to a better and peaceful world. This emerges in *The Newcomes*, in the famous description of Colonel Newcome’s death where Thackeray places ‘emphasis upon God’s mercy and pity in his references to the future life.’ 13 In Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), the advent of death is accompanied by the hope of Heaven as a place of endless rest and peace. At the burial of little Johnny Reverend Frank Milvey tries to give words of comfort, hope and reassurance that a better life awaits us all to the grieved parents. Similarly, in *Jane Eyre*, the expiration of Jane’s friend, Helen Burns, is treated as a moment of transition to a place of eternal happiness and rest where God will receive you with his infinite love.

In Thackeray’s *Philip* death is represented as an inevitable aspect of human existence and as a common destiny. Wheeler has observed that in Thackeray’s novels ‘the death of a character can draw the reader into a recognition of a shared and fallen humanity’ (he uses old Sedley, in *Vanity Fair*, who dies a broken man, helpless and humble, as an example). 14 This sense of a ‘fallen humanity’ that the reader recognises is accompanied by a sense of the precarious nature of our life which emerges occasionally in Thackeray’s fiction but nowhere more evidently than in *Philip*. The narrator’s comments and, even more, the illustrations, rather than a character’s death, serve as an effective reminder of the unpredictability of human life and of its final destination. In Chapter 1, Pendennis observes: ‘Some who spoke on that

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13 Ibid., 111.
14 Ibid., 110.
summer evening are no longer here to speak or listen. Some who were young then have
topped the hill and are descending towards the valley of the shadows' (XVIII, 123). These
words are pronounced in a tone of sadness and profound resignation at the acknowledgement
of the inevitable end that awaits us all. Life is seen as a journey of ascent and then ultimately
of descent to darkness. There seems to be no sense of hope for a better life in the next world.
This pessimistic view should not be taken as a sign that Thackeray had given up the Christian
religion and faith, but rather as a reflection of the personal condition of physical and mental
exhaustion, of the frustration and the lack of creativity that he was experiencing at the time.
The tragic element of death is present in this novel until the very end, though it never seems
to prevail over the comic mode. In the last chapter, the narrator twice adopts the image of the
night falling as a symbol of death, which leaves us with an acute sense of our mortality. The
first instance is at the beginning of the chapter when he talks about the conclusion of a
pantomime and comments: ‘I tell you the house will be empty and you will be in the cold air.
When the boxes have got their nightgowns on, and you are all gone, and I have turned off the
gas, and am in the empty theatre alone in the darkness, I promise you I shall not be merry’
(XIX, 355). Death has negative connotations and is seen as an event that can only lead to a
world of coldness and darkness, emptiness and loneliness, and profound sadness. Death
means complete annihilation. And the last few lines of the story convey an even deeper
awareness of the precarious nature of life and of the inevitability of death:

Dance on the lawn, young folks, whilst the elders talk in the shade! What? The night is falling:
we have talked enough over our wine; and it is time to go home? Good-night. Good-night,
friends, old and young! The night will fall: the stories must end: and the best friends must part.
(XIX, 379)

The extract can be read metaphorically as the conclusion of life – where ‘night’ stands for
death. Death is presented as something that comes suddenly and unexpectedly (‘What? The
night is falling’), as a circumstance that interrupts the joyful moments of life and that forces
us to separate from the people we love. The reiteration of ‘night’ and of ‘must’ gives us the
idea that death cannot be avoided. We are left with a bitter feeling of resignation and little
comfort indeed.

If the narrator’s intrusions portray death as a sad and unavoidable fact, the illustrations,
where it appears more frequently than in the written text, depict it in a different way. Here
Thackeray shows that taste for the horrible and macabre that McMaster has pointed out in her
article. Following the contemporary conventional illustrations of death in literature -
skeletons, the deathbed scene, and the grave – Thackeray created a unique black humour in
his own drawings which function as a constant reminder of our mortality but also as a mockery of our fear of death. Death is trivialised in a way that recalls the grave diggers’ scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where the two clowns play with the skulls they find, throwing them up to Hamlet, and thus showing no respect for the dead. Among these numerous illustrations I have selected three which I consider particularly significant. The first capital initial (Fig. 8.3) depicts two children discovering ‘a skeleton in the closet’; this refers to Dr. Firmin’s secret ‘dead’ past about to be revealed – a skeleton in the cupboard – and also to a real skeleton which he had used when he was studying medicine. The following drawing (Fig. 8.4) represents a skull with a regal crown. The contrast between the pomposity of the crown and the nakedness of the skull is, as McMaster has suggested, an emblem of the basic message of the novel: that rich and poor ultimately reach the same end; they all come to dust.\(^{15}\) It also mocks effectively human pretension and vanity. Another pictorial initial (Fig. 8.5) portrays the deathbed scene where the angel of death, or possibly a little devil, is ready to take the dead away from this world to the next. His grim smile is particularly disturbing, as it clearly reveals his pleasure in doing his ‘job.’ The deathbed scene (as well as the grave) was the site where the double idea of death as an enemy and as a friend focused on; it was here that a series of anxieties and fears associated with death and burial, but also with imminent divine judgement (heaven or hell), emerged.\(^ {16}\) This illustration sarcastically plays on this complex of concerns. Thus, the tragic element of death, although a main theme in the novel, and a haunting presence indeed, is never really allowed to triumph.

The story of Philip is narrated by his friend Arthur Pendennis who emerges as an extremely intrusive and annoying presence. Being at the same time in and out of the story, at times emotionally attached and at times detached, the omniscient narrator gives the reader what he thinks is an accurate depiction of Philip and of his adventures. However, we do get the general impression that his ideas, his point of view and his comments are far more important than the account of his friend’s life. Pendennis had already been used as the narrative voice of *The Newcomes* where his defects – his frequent insensitive judgements and easily changeable opinions of people and events – had already been revealed. On many occasions, however, as we have seen, there he had spoken directly for Thackeray, especially when treating burning issues of the time such as marriages of convenience and the subjection of women. In *Philip*, Thackeray is nearly always detached from Pendennis who is presented, exposed and mocked as a bad story-teller who is unreliable, inconsistent and ambivalent, who judges people too quickly, and who is often wrong (and often forced to admit it). The purpose

Fig. 8.3. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 3, *The Adventures of Philip*

Fig. 8.4. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 3, *The Adventures of Philip*

Fig. 8.5. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 2, *The Adventures of Philip*
of such ironic treatment is double: on one level, as in *The Newcomes*, it allows the author to hide behind the narrative voice and to avoid assuming responsibility for his absurd statements; on another level, it comes as a warning to the reader to be vigilant and to avoid trusting immediately what people (and especially unprofessional and malicious writers) say.

Thackeray effectively makes fun of his narrator’s unreliability, inconsistency and uncertainty by showing how he constantly asserts the idea that novelists should always give a truthful account and yet admits he cannot always guarantee complete authenticity in his narration. The commercial world makes it hard for novelists to maintain their artistic and moral integrity, constraining their choices and creative vein, at times forcing them to compromise for money’s sake. This pictorial initial (Fig. 8.6) effectively illustrates the unhappy position of the writer by portraying him as a prisoner of society chained to a huge pen, a heavy burden to carry on his shoulders. The figure dramatises the contemporary writer’s lack of freedom in the creative act. Novelists can try to find a compromise with the restraints imposed by the commercial world, but they must always preserve their honesty: ‘But, even at the risk of displeasing you, we must tell the truth’ (XVIII, 196). This sentence suggests that telling the truth must always be the primary aim of a writer who should never sacrifice it in order to meet the demands of the audience or of business. Despite his firm belief in the necessity to report facts faithfully, Pendennis often seems to be incapable of fully adhering to his principle. Sometimes, he cannot promise total authenticity, as he admits openly:

> I could not, of course, be present at many of the scenes which I shall have to relate as though I had witnessed them; and the posture, language, and inward thoughts of Philip and his friends, as here related, no doubts are fancies of the narrators in many cases; but the story is as authentic as many histories, and the reader need only give such an amount of credence to it as he may judge that its verisimilitude warrants. (XVIII, 146)

Here Pendennis reveals that he was ‘forced’ to add some fictional marginal details in order to fill in gaps of information he did not have. He also defends his position by emphasising that this has not compromised the fundamental truthfulness of his story. This evidence of the narrator’s occasional lack of accuracy and information is in contradiction with the idea of narrative omniscience. As Judith Fisher has pointed out, the omniscient novelist ‘is difficult to reconcile with the seemingly uncertain writer who admits to moral relativity and incomplete vision.’

> How can we trust a story-teller who first tells us that he knows everything about his characters, and then admits his ‘ignorance’ of certain details? How can we trust a self-

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17 Fisher (2002), 245.
The Adventures of Philip

Fig. 8.6. Pictorial Initial, Chapter 19, *The Adventures of Philip*
contradictory story-teller? More than in previous novels by Thackeray, here the narrator emerges as a controversial figure, as an awkward and uncertain presence whose reliability fluctuates throughout the narration, and whose urgent need to explain his choices at any level reveals a basic insecurity. Thus, in Chapter 19, he affirms that the discrepancy between the text and the illustrations of the story is intentional – the events occurred more than twenty years before while ‘the costumes of the actors of our little comedy are of the fashion of today’ (XVIII, 389). He defends his anachronism by saying that it is necessary, ‘or you would scarcely be able to keep any interest for our characters’ (XVIII, 389). An explanation like this is no other than a cover up for his incapacity to be consistent and to pay attention to details, which inevitably invites us to distrust him. In addition to his uncertainties and insecurities, his ambivalent attitude towards the characters of the story makes his position even more problematic. At times he likes Philip’s wife Charlotte – ‘and as I am very fond of her, I do not wish to make fun of her’ (XVIII, 382) – but at other times he dislikes her, especially for her jealous attitude towards the Little Sister whose affection for her children is genuine. Even his depiction of the Twysdens is not impartial, as his resentment for their bad treatment of him and his wife strongly influences him. Perhaps the only character he seems to have a firm opinion of is the Little Sister (Caroline): ‘Except her h’s, that woman has every virtue: constancy, gentleness, generosity, cheerfulness, and the courage of a lioness!’ (XIX, 308) The unstable position of the narrator constitutes a constant challenge for readers who are at first puzzled by his attitude and then invited to distrust his views. But readers also get the sense that they should never trust any narrator completely, because many writers are unprofessional and deceitful like Pendennis. We are encouraged to be active when reading a novel, and to assume and maintain an independent point of view; we are encouraged to become critical readers.

Furthermore, the ambiguous portrayal of one of the main characters of the story, Dr. Firmin, Philip’s father, strongly invites us to disbelieve not only appearances but also any single interpretation of a person. Dr. Firmin is a rather controversial and complex figure that, paradoxically, is intentionally depicted as a rogue with a true gentlemanly behaviour; this makes it difficult for the reader to form a stable view of him. In the unfinished prequel, where he was known under the false name of Brandon, he had been described as an incorrigible and ruthless scoundrel. There he was the embodiment of the traditional stereotype of the rake who seduces and then abandons a young girl. But in Philip he is also a gentleman with a respectable profession (he is a doctor) and social reputation. His physical description is particularly illuminating in this regard: ‘Dr. Firmin had very white false teeth, which perhaps were a little too large for his mouth, and these grinned in the gas-light very fiercely. On his cheeks were black whiskers, and over his glaring eyes fierce black eyebrows, and his bald
head glittered like a billiard-ball' (XVIII, 125-6). His face is denoted by a contrast of black and white; his threatening dark features, his angry smile and penetrating glance reflect his roguish nature, while his sparkling white teeth and bold head may suggest that there is something good in him after all. The fact that he has big (and threatening) 'false' teeth is interesting; it might be a subtle suggestion of his greatest defect, telling lies, and of the basic connotation of his personality, aggressiveness – ‘Firmin was bold and courageous, hot in pursuit, fierce in desire, but cool in danger, and rapid in action’ (XVIII, 255). His impulsive behaviour reminds us of another hothead (and a popular type in Victorian literature), the adventurer Barry Lyndon; and indeed the two characters are very similar. They are both arrogant, proud, adventurous men who are always in debt; they both seduce women, deceive other people in order to achieve their aim, assume false identities to escape from tricky situations. Nonetheless, they both unveil a good side – and they both force us to adjust our first impression of them. Barry Lyndon is a sentimentalist, while Dr. Firmin is a gentleman and a very kind and caring doctor: ‘... Dr. Firmin has careered through the town, standing by sick-beds with his sweet sad smile, fondled and blessed by tender mothers who hail him as the saviour of their children, touching ladies’ pulses with a hand as delicate as their own, patting little fresh cheeks with courtly kindness...’ (XVIII, 246). As we have already seen in previous chapters, sweetness, delicacy, affection, and kindness were all fundamental moral qualities of the Victorian gentleman. In the first third of the story Dr. Firmin appears to have changed for good. He tries hard to re-bond with his son Philip, whom he has estranged, and does seem to feel genuinely guilty of having been an absent father. Philip, however, cannot forgive him and is always very hostile towards him:

For years and years he [Dr. Firmin] has known that his boy's heart has revolted from him, and detected him, and gone from him; and with shame and remorse, and sickening feeling, he lies awake in the night-watches, and thinks how he is alone – alone in the world. Ah! Love your parents, young ones! O Father Beneficent! strengthen our hearts: strengthen and purify them so that we may not have to blush before our children! (XVIII, 247)

Dr. Firmin is presented as a man who has a conscience after all, who seems to have come to terms with his shameful and selfish behaviour, and who is now deeply tormented. His sense of guilt is consuming him and almost making him ill. The fact that the narrator clearly takes Dr. Firmin’s side and disapproves of Philip’s unfriendly attitude towards his father is puzzling. The neglected son rather than the neglectful father should deserve the narrator’s (and our) sympathy. This is because the emphasis here seems to be more on the importance of cherishing the bond existing between parent and child, a bond which should be always kept
alive no matter what. We should always follow the guidance of love through which we could forgive and be forgiven. Therefore, Philip here is blamed for his unwillingness to open his heart to his father. We might find this idea extreme, but it is coherent with Thackeray’s strong belief in the mitigating power of love. But as the story progresses the readers are forced to revise their positive view of Dr. Firmin; he gradually unveils himself as an irredeemable scoundrel who is constantly after money (and constantly losing it), who has not altered a little, who has not learnt his lesson. After escaping to America he sucks from his son’s finances ruthlessly, thus becoming a painful burden on Philip’s shoulders, as this pictorial initial (Fig. 8.7) clearly emphasises. The illustration ironically refers to an episode in the classical epic, the *Aeneid* when Aeneas leaves the city of Troy carrying off his father on his shoulders. It is at this point that the narrator’s attitude towards Dr. Firmin changes considerably. He is now totally on Philip’s side and has to admit that a rogue remains a rogue for life (an idea that Thackeray had conveyed repeatedly in all his fictional writings, especially in *Barry Lyndon*). Despite his gentlemanly ‘virtues,’ then, Dr. Firmin ultimately emerges as a selfish, calculating and deceitful person; he dies of yellow fever three months after marrying a rich woman (this being his third marriage). Contrarily to his son, he has not been able to allow his good qualities to predominate over his faults.

When Thackeray died in 1863 he was writing another novel, *Denis Duval*, which remained unfinished. He had written the first eight chapters of the story, which were published posthumous, together with some of his notes, in *The Cornhill Magazine* in May and June 1864. This material is enough to give us a general idea of what sort of novel this would have been, but unfortunately many details remain obscure. It was to be another historical novel set in the eighteenth century (we are told that Denis was born in 1763) for which Thackeray spent several hours of study. According to John Sutherland, he undertook his research mainly in the Reading Room of the British Museum where he collected historical materials especially about ‘the necessary local history of eighteenth-century Sussex (where the early action is set) and details of the naval service (where the hero was intended to encounter his major adventures).’ He also gathered information about historical figures, criminals in particular, from the annual records of *The Gentleman’s Magazine* where, for example, he found details of the crimes of the Westons and of De La Motte, of their conviction and of their executions. These rogues, and especially the latter, were to have a prominent role in the novel and were meant to receive their deserved punishment for their crimes at the end of the story. Thackeray’s careful research and attention to detail suggest

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19 Ibid., 231.
Fig. 8.7. Pictorial Initial, volume 2, Chapter 18, The Adventures of Philip
that for the first time he wanted to make his historical novel as real and credible as possible. Therefore, this may be seen as an indication that he was not only moving towards a fresh approach to historical fiction but also towards a more careful and methodical planning of plots and contexts in general. Indeed, John Sutherland has pointed out that the new story shows how ‘Thackeray’s whole method of works seems to have been redesigned,’ how instead of using huge historical volumes he consulted journals, indexes, calendars, compendia and registers, progressively building up the framework for his novel. He was now determined to re-emerge from that intense feeling of loss of creativity he had experienced during the composition of Philip. He was trying to re-invent himself through a thorough revision of his narrative methods and techniques.

The story opens with a reference to the historical religious conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics in France, and the persecution of the former by the latter, which forces Denis’s family to escape to England (they settle down at Winchelsea, in Sussex). This immediately sets the historical context. Although this religious struggle is always in the background, it is difficult to establish whether the issue was to become a central theme or if it was to be developed in some way. Denis’s first remarks can be a good starting point; they certainly reveal resentment for the cruel treatment his ancestors received in France:

As a boy, I have tasted a rope’s end often enough, but not round my neck; and the persecutions endured by my ancestors in France for our Protestant religion, which we early received and steadily maintained, did not bring death upon us, as upon many of our faith, but only fines and poverty, and exile from our native country. The world knows how the bigotry of Louis XIV. drove many families out of France into England, who have become trusty and loyal subjects of the British Crown.

The passage draws our attention to the problem of religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics and to how these have caused great suffering and have even brought death. Thus, French Protestants have first been reduced to a state of poverty and then forced into exile. The cruel persecutions they have been subjected to have had an enormous emotional impact on Denis since he was a boy. Interestingly, if there is a sense of regret for being expelled from France, the home country, there is almost a sense of gratitude to England for welcoming French Protestants refugees, for allowing them to maintain their faith and to lead a normal life. This may suggest that perhaps the conflict between the two churches would have been intertwined with an insight into the historical relationship between France and England. However, we do not have enough material or any clear evidence to help us determine this,

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20 Ibid., 232.
21 Denis Duval, Works, XXI, 3.
only a few indications around which we can only form hypotheses. It is worth pointing out
that in his early non-fictional writings Thackeray had already shown an interest in the
relationship between the French and the English, and to a certain extent he had explored the
attitudes the two nations had towards each other. In works like *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840)
and *The Second Funeral of Napoleon* (1841) he had clearly conveyed his country’s double
perception of the French as people to be admired for their amazing cheerfulness, but to be
despised for their insatiable thirst of blood and blind hero-worship. But maybe this time it was
to have only a marginal role within the account of Denis’s adventures. I have the impression
that religious issues, however, might have had some importance. The conflict between
Protestants and Catholics is embodied in the main characters of the story. Despite being good
friends, the count De Saverne and Monsieur De La Motte belong to two different churches,
the former being a Huguenot, the latter being a Catholic, and ‘night after night’ they ‘have
religious disputes together’ (17). The Protestant Clarisse marries the Count De Saverne, but
the match is a disaster; utterly desperate, in the attempt to find some consolation, she runs
away and converts herself and her daughter Agnes to Catholicism by baptism; the Huguenot
Ursule, Denis’s mother, has her son made a member of the Church of England; and, more
importantly, in the end the Catholic Agnes marries the Protestant Denis (Denis anticipates that
she is his wife towards the end of Chapter 1). I am tempted to think that their union was to be
not simply the happy ending of the story, as well as the hero’s final reward, but that it had
some significance. Perhaps their marriage was to symbolise the hope for a re-union of the two
churches; perhaps it was meant to suggest that some people can overcome their differences of
faith through the power of love, and their examples should be followed; or that love
ultimately is more important than which religion one adheres to. Thackeray’s notes on *Denis
Duval* cannot help us much, as they do not contain any commentary but only details of the
events that were to occur in the story. Denis’s final comments could have enlightened us in
this regard, but unfortunately we do not have them, thus we will never know what his
marriage to Agnes would have meant for him and for the story as a whole.

Interestingly, in many respects, this fragmentary novel has much in common with the two
other historical novels by Thackeray, *Henry Esmond* and, to a minor extent, *The Virginians.*
Firstly, like them, it is set in the eighteenth century. Secondly, as Esmond, Denis was to
embody the perfect gentleman; despite his humble origins (his grandfather was a barber, and
his family are tradesmen), morally speaking he has a truly gentlemanly heart. In the only
chapters of the story we have, he emerges as an honest, kind, loving and incredibly generous
and sensitive young man who does not hesitate to help people in need and who believes in the
values of love and friendship. When the poor family of Hookham cannot pay Denis’s
grandfather the rent, Denis donates them his three guineas: ‘I should only have bought a toy
with it, and if it comes to help you in distress, I can do without my plaything’ (97). Moreover, from the beginning, although less insistently than in previous novels, the narrator promotes love as an essential value which filled his life with joy. In Chapter 8, for instance, Denis compares his relationship with Agnes to that of Romeo and Juliet: ‘How old, my dear, was Juliet when she and young Capulet began their loves? My sweetheart had not done playing with dolls when our little passion began to bud: and the sweet talisman of innocence I wore in my heart hath never left me through life, and shielded me from many a temptation’ (129). Love is presented as a pure passion that gives happiness while protecting men and women from the temptations of the world – the typically Victorian view of love. And once again, marriages of economic convenience are shown as not working, and as causing much unhappiness to the couple; this is exemplified by the disastrous match between Clarisse and the Count De Saverne. Nonetheless, love-making was not to have a prominent role in the novel.

Thackeray’s notes and the fragments of Denis Duval make it clear that the story would have contained some love-talks but would have mostly been full of action. The account of the protagonist’s life was to be characterised by various adventures and misadventures in war, dangerous and almost hopeless situations, fights of any kind (both personal confrontations like school disputes and duels, and battles of war), and was to include the dark elements of crime, murder and execution associated with a group of criminals, including De La Motte, the Westons and Lütterloh. In Chapter 8 Denis clearly anticipates this: ‘Little did either of us know what a long separation was before us, and what strange changes, dangers, adventures, I was to undergo ere I again should press that dearest hand’ (131). Perhaps it would have developed into a picaresque novel with a fundamentally good protagonist, with amazing adventures and a ‘love-story’ somehow similar to that of Fielding’s Tom Jones, but with the addition of more threatening aspects which would have menaced but not prevailed over the fundamentally comedic mood of the story. The narration breaks at the point where Denis enters his majesty’s navy where he would have had a career and where his big adventures would have begun: ‘How well I remember the sound of the enemy’s gun of which the shot crashed into our side in reply to the challenge of our captain, who hailed her! Then came a broadside from us – the first I had ever heard in battle’ (139). These are Denis’s last words; the story is abruptly interrupted just as big action was about to take place. Despite thematic and ideological similarities with other novels by Thackeray, the unfinished Denis Duval shows an amazing freshness of engagement and simplicity of narrative style and technique. Abandoning a tendency which had characterised his latest works, Thackeray presents a narrator who rarely interrupts his account to add personal comments, leaving more room for action and good dialogue. This suggests that Thackeray’s creative vein and capacity to re-
think his writing method was anything but exhausted. He was moving towards a new direction in his fiction.

In conclusion, Thackeray’s last novel Philip has many defects and is certainly not the best among his novels. Nevertheless, it is still worth studying for many reasons. The retrieval of plots, characters, types and themes of previous novels shows a line of continuity in Thackeray’s fiction. In many respects Philip is particularly close to Pendennis: life is viewed as a journey where one encounters difficulties but also help; the two protagonists’ lives follow a similar pattern; both Philip and Pen are presented not as heroes or models but as representatives of human nature and its imperfections (and Philip’s wild behaviour draws attention to the necessity of establishing clear codes of behaviour one can refer to); finally, they both display some of the fundamental ‘virtues’ to become true Victorian gentlemen (honesty, sensitivity and affection), and, in the end, they emerge as improved men who have benefited from the mitigating power of love and who have adopted the cultivation of spiritual values as a guiding rule in life. Moreover, two typically Thackerayan themes are revisited. On the one hand, we find the idea of the vanity of human life, which is also accompanied by a sense of the emptiness of the present which contrasts with the vitality of the past. On the other hand, love and friendship are promoted as essential values which give meaning to our life and which can give true happiness; this does seem to be the dominant view. But if Philip presents affinities with previous novels, it also offers a new and different comic vision which often includes tragic aspects. Although the novel is referred to as a comedy, and although from the beginning we are told that all will end well, on the whole it emerges as a darker novel where death becomes a central theme and concern. It is true that the Victorians were obsessed with it, but in none of his previous novels had Thackeray shown a particular interest in the issue. A possible explanation can be found in his private letters which indicate that in this phase of his career as a writer he was feeling mentally and physically exhausted, and was experiencing a distressing lack of inspiration. In the text the tragic element of death is represented as a sad and an inevitable aspect of human life, and as a common destiny. However, in the illustrations, which remind us of our mortality and, at the same time, mock our fear of death, Thackeray reveals a taste for the macabre and the horrific, and a unique black humour never exhibited before. More than in other novels, here he detaches himself from the narrator who emerges as very intrusive, irritating, faulty and also extremely uncertain. Pendennis is exposed for his lack of consistency and his inattention to detail; his alleged omniscience vacillates when he admits his occasional lack of information and authenticity. Thackeray’s ironic treatment of the narrator allows him to hide comfortably behind him and to avoid taking responsibility for his observations and opinions. But it also invites the reader to be cautious, to distrust unprofessional, unreliable or deceitful writers like Pendennis, and to keep
an independent and critical point of view when reading a novel. The ambivalent portrayal of Dr. Firmin also forces us to assume an active role, to disbelieve in appearances and in any single interpretation of an individual. Dr. Firmin is generally presented both as a rogue and as a gentleman. Although a great liar and a strong-willed man, he is a kind and caring doctor, which makes it hard for us to form a stable opinion of him. But in the last part of the story he unveils himself as an incorrigible rascal who, contrarily to his son, has not been able to let his good qualities prevail over his roguish behaviour. If *Philip* can be criticised for having an ill-constructed plot and unappealing characters, the fragmentary *Denis Duval* indicates that Thackeray was rediscovering his inspiration in writing fiction and was even thoroughly revising his narrative methods and techniques. His interest in the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants in France could have become a theme in this story which presents similarities with his two previous historical novels, including the settings in the eighteenth century, a truly gentlemanly protagonist, and the emphasis on the importance of love. But this time action (adventures and misadventures, fights, crimes, and death) rather than love-making was to be the dominant feature, and the narrator was to have only a marginal role. A careful study of *Philip* and *Denis Duval* demonstrates not only that Thackeray’s creative vein was not yet exhausted, but that he was turning to a different and new direction in his fiction. He was developing a more complex and sophisticated comic perspective, one which would contain both love and death. He was elaborating a tragicomic vision where the elements of tragedy would never be allowed to prevail over that comic spirit that had always characterised his fiction.
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