



0. A CLOSED SOCIETY - Story Preface

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Franz Xaver Winterhalter painted this portrait of the young Queen Victoria in 1843. Victoria commissioned the work as a gift for her husband, Prince Albert. Victoria was 24 years old at the time (and intended the portrait for Albert's eyes only). The painting is part of the Royal Collection Trust. Image online via Wikimedia Commons.

By the time of the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain itself was beginning to change. Money then, as money now, mattered. From distant colonies, producing significant goods and income, His Majesty's kingdom was becoming an international power. His subjects were growing more wealthy. As the wealth increased, so did the middle class.

But what significance did Britain's increasing wealth mean to someone not born into an aristocratic family? If a person was defined by one's birth, or by one's marriage, what chance was there to improve one's place in society?

It is hard to imagine, by today's standards, that life in Britain before Queen Victoria's accession in 1837, was totally rigid. It was a time when "high society" was essentially closed to all not born into the upper class.

The rarefied world of money and privilege existed only for those born into it. But for women, even in that strata of society, "privilege" was a relative term. Economic opportunities were controlled by husbands while sophisticated career opportunities, outside the home, were filled by men.

With the shallowness of society in mind, William Makepeace Thackeray wrote his indictment of British life. He called his book *Vanity Fair*. He named his lead character Rebecca (Becky) Sharp.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-CLOSED-SOCIETY-Vanity-Fair)

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Media Stream



The Crowning of Queen Victoria

Engraving online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. Image of Victoria Regina, online courtesy the [Tate Museum and Galleries](http://www.tatemuuseum.org) website.

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A Portrait of Queen Victoria

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