



0. BECKY SHARP - Story Preface

1. NAPOLEONIC WARS

2. NAPOLEON ABDICATES

3. WATERLOO OVERVIEW

4. WATERLOO ILLUSTRATED

5. WATERLOO HIGHLIGHTS

6. A CLOSED SOCIETY

7. BECKY SHARP

8. ILLUSTRATIONS in VANITY FAIR

9. EAST INDIA COMPANY

10. BRITAIN AND INDIA

Among other things, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* examines the differences in social standing during Victorian times. He uses the way people speak and dress to compare and contrast class distinctions. This image appears [opposite page 242](#) of the online version of *Vanity Fair*; online via [Archive.org](#).

Becky Sharp was born into the wrong class if her goal in life was to live in "high society." Lower-class girls needed wit and guile to break through the nearly impermeable barriers imposed by 19th century London society. Thackeray's creation was such a girl.

A sweeping satire, which examines the drive for upward mobility in a kingdom flush with wealth from its growing [colonial empire](#), *Vanity Fair* sets up Becky (and others like her) for a fall. And it exposes upper-class status as tainted by hypocritical snobbery not worth the effort to achieve.

If the desire of one's heart is behind a locked door, which seems permanently closed, is the price of the key worth *everything*? Is it worth, for example, giving up one's own virtue or betraying one's dearest friend? What is the value of being "elite" when that status is self-described?

Becky's best friend at boarding school - Amelia - has the lifestyle Becky desires. Before the effects of the dead at Waterloo permeate the fabric of Amelia's life, Becky has an overriding objective: to marry her friend's brother. When he fails to propose, because of their differences in class, Becky is forced to take a job she does not want.

Settling in as governess at a remote country house, social-climbing Becky finds an unexpected stepladder when Sir Pitt Crawley, and his younger son Rawdon, both try to court her. Is she really on her way up - or - is she about to totter?

Some [reviewers](#) claimed [Margaret Mitchell](#) used Becky Sharp as a model for Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, although Mitchell denied it. Despite parallels between the two stories, the focus is different:

- Southern society, as it had once been, was blown away - "gone with the wind" - during the American Civil War.
- English society remained firmly in place - populated with vain people - during and after the Napoleonic Wars.

The story narrators are also different:

- In *Gone With the Wind*, the narrator infuses the story with some pity for society's plight.
- In *Vanity Fair*, the narrator's caustic voice (and ironic wit) poke fun of pretentious people whose priorities are skewed.

When Becky and Rawdon's son leaves for boarding school, for example, Rawdon is devastated but Becky could care less. Thackeray's [narration](#) (in chapter 52) paints the scene:

It [the child's departure] estranged Rawdon from his wife more than he knew or acknowledged to himself. She did not care for the estrangement. Indeed, she did not miss him or anybody. She looked upon him as her errand-man and humble slave.

He might be ever so depressed or sulky, and she did not mark his demeanour, or only treated it with a sneer. She was busy thinking about her position, or her pleasures, or her advancement in society; she ought to have held a great place in it, that is certain.

Thackeray, the narrator, reveals explicit disdain for the preening foolishness and snobbery of "high society." He despises the crass relationship between money and aristocracy (and how one could "buy a way" to the top).

How have critics reviewed Thackeray's book?

- When the writer was alive, critics found *Vanity Fair* to be cynical and depraved.
- Today, critics find the book to be sentimental and cloying.

As culture changes, so does one's perspective.

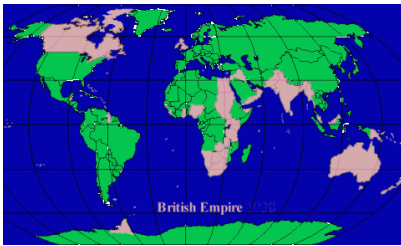
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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/BECKY-SHARP-Vanity-Fair>

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Media Stream



A Map of the British Empire

Image online, courtesy [freespace](#) blog site.

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Margaret Mitchell

Portrait of Margaret Mitchell

Image online, courtesy the Georgia Women website.

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