Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and Commodities in Circulation

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Abstract

While William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* is a satire, a humoristic account of the vanities of the different characters in the fictitious society of Vanity Fair, it is also a social criticism of early nineteenth century British society. The essay examines Thackeray’s social critique, which is sometimes explicitly expressed and sometimes more implicit. His criticism is aimed both at the new commodity culture where everything is reducible to money—even people and human relations—and at the class system of the up-and-coming middle classes and the established gentry and aristocracy. When Thackeray sends Becky Sharpe off in a vain pursuit of wealth and social status, he also uses her to expose the vanities of the other characters in Vanity Fair. Their vanities derive from the prevailing commodity culture and are mainly connected to wealth and social status. The essay discusses Becky’s progress from a sociological perspective through the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. His concepts of *field*, *habitus*, *capital* and *distinction* deal with the power structure in society and what distinguishes different social classes. Here his theories are used to demonstrate how the different characters in Vanity Fair engage in competition for social status, by using their different forms of capital, and the essay emphasizes the convertibility of these kinds of capital. Bourdieu’s theories contribute to the understanding of how Becky who comes from nowhere, manages to climb to very top rung of the social ladder, but they also demonstrate that her chameleon-like ability to fit in everywhere is an exception to Bourdieu’s general model.

**Keywords:** Thackeray; *Vanity Fair*; commodity culture; social critique; *field*; *capital*; *habitus*; *distinction*; Bourdieu
Therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, gould, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*

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William Thackeray calls *Vanity Fair*, “a novel without a hero”. His aim is to depict life realistically, and as real life is not heroic¹, his novel is void of conventional heroes. Therefore, none of the characters escape his cynicism, but all have their allotted share of vanities. Despite the satirical tone and puppet show frame, there are gloomy and dismal undertones brewing beneath the surface, representative of many Victorians’ views that the new society, in which they lived, was a “menacing world”, as critics have suggested². The title *Vanity Fair* comes from the fair called “Vanity Fair” which “is kept all the year long in the town of Vanity” in John Bunyan’s Christian allegory from 1678, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1:23). A description of the merchandise sold there is found in the epigraph, and almost every word of it represents a scene in Thackeray’s novel. By demonstrating the vanities of the different characters, Thackeray takes the reader on a tour round his “Vanity Fair”, a “very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falseness and pretensions” (VF 83), where he, as Barbara Hardy observes, both “reveals and criticizes the profound and central corruptions of Victorian society” (21).

¹ A. E. Dyson. “Vanity Fair: An Irony Against Heroes” (29-30).
² David Morse. *High Victorian Culture* (ch 3).
The story is set between the Napoleonic Wars and the First Reform Bill of 1832, which was a time of great economic, social and political changes, including the ascension of the new middle class of wealthy merchants, and a new commodity culture. In Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* people are obsessed with money and only interested in making a quick profit. It is the typical example of a reified economy where everyone has a price and everything is for sale. In the society of *Vanity Fair*, a certain aggression is discerned as the different characters engage in a struggle for social status. The key to the vivid accounts of his contemporary society is perhaps found in the fact that Thackeray is more than just a novelist and a satirist. I agree with Hardy who suggests that Thackeray is a great sociologist as well (20). With the eye for detail of a journalist, “the historian’s concern for documentation and the painter’s eye for the visible world” (111), Thackeray’s tour of society is both instructive and entertaining.

For the above mentioned reasons, I suggest that French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *field, habitus* and *capital* provide a useful way of looking at this novel from a sociological perspective. In his surveys from the 1960s and the 1970s, Bourdieu combines sociological studies with empirical research about what distinguishes people from different social classes and how the class system still prevails today—in our modern and equal society—through different modes of social domination. In his articles in *The Field of Cultural Production* he propounds the idea that society consists of different social spaces, or fields, where people act as agents with different positions. There are various kinds of fields: economic, educational, political and cultural fields for instance (6), and in each field the agents compete for control. In the economic field, they compete for economic capital and in the cultural literary field, they compete for recognition and prestige (6-7). In brief, I will examine Thackeray’s social critique, which is directed at the commodity culture and the hierarchy of the class system. Furthermore, I will use Bourdieu’s theories as a method to analyse the structure of the social field presented in *Vanity Fair* to see how the different characters engage in competition for social status thereby making use of their habitus and economic, cultural and social capital.

Agents in the same field, who participate in the same power game, are distinguished by the “feel for the game”, or habitus, that they have in common (*Field 5*). The habitus can be described as a system of socially acquired dispositions, or a set of principles and practices, and it “is the result of a long process of inculcation,
beginning in early childhood” which “inclines agents to act and react” in a certain manner in specific situations (5). People from the same social class tend to have the same habitus as they have similar experiences and perceptions, having grown up in similar circumstances. People with an upper class habitus for instance, usually have a certain “elegance, ease of manners” and confidence, which is not found among the lower classes (150). In other words, habitus defines the person’s social class and we can therefore distinguish between different kinds of class habitus.

The habitus determines the way in which a person will participate in the power game of a specific field, but how well that person will succeed depends to a large extent on the person’s capital. Bourdieu extends the concept of capital from mere economic capital to cultural and social capital. The concept of capital is developed in his article “The Forms of Capital”. Capital in any form, “takes time to accumulate”, and it is a power, which can be used to make a profit (83-84). Economic capital consists of money and material assets such as landed property (84). Cultural capital is composed of three main parts: Bildung, manners and language; educational qualifications such as degrees and diplomas; and cultural goods which act like class markers and can be any object ranging from paintings to ornaments and books (84-85). Social capital is best described as a social network of important and useful connections, and it often includes a membership in the nobility (84, 89). Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of all three forms of capital if you want to succeed in society and advance on the social scale. Hence, two persons with the same skills and university diplomas will contrive differently in life, depending on what other forms of capital they possess.

Apart from the three forms of capital mentioned above, there is what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital and closely connected to that, symbolic violence. Bourdieu discusses this concept in Outline of a Theory of Practise. Symbolic capital is not a capital per se, but it is a condition of the other forms of capitals. It is an indication of the person’s actual capital, and a way to make use of that capital. Economic power, for example, “lies not in wealth but in the relationship between wealth and a field of economic relations” (184). More specifically, simply to have money in the bank that nobody knows about, does not generate any economic power. It is only in its symbolic form, when used in a field that a person can profit from it. The most obvious forms of symbolic capital are seen in the strategies of honour. With wealth and status normally also comes a reputation of honour, which the person can use to his advantage (185).
Symbolic violence is when a person in the possession of symbolic capital, exerts his dominant position and oppress those who are in the possession of less capital. Symbolic capital and symbolic violence are both what Bourdieu calls “modes of domination” (183-197). Thus, the former is a way to employ the capital for one’s own benefit, whereas the latter is a way to exploit it by dominating those less fortunate.

In a way, all of Bourdieu’s theories deal with power relations and the modes of domination of the ruling class. In addition to the habitus and the different forms of capital, he presents an additional class-marker, the concept of refined taste, or distinction, as he calls it in the book with the same name (1). Bourdieu’s empirical research about distinction is based on French society in the 1960s and 1970s, but I will apply it to British society in the early nineteenth century. Some of the actual examples of status symbols vary, for example, but nevertheless, I argue that the concept as such, is applicable. Bourdieu asserts that people “distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” since “[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (6). Then, since all cultural practises and “preferences in literature, painting or music” are, in fact, linked to upbringing and education (1), a person’s “taste” is just a sign of his cultural capital, which in turn is a symbol of his social class. Bourdieu also suggests that distinction includes people’s eating habits. People from the lower classes tend to opt for quantity, whereas the upper classes opt for quality, and with the latter, emphasis also shifts “to manner”, i.e. how the food is presented, served and eaten (6). Bourdieu finds that meals “served on special occasions” are of particular interest as they are “a very good indicator of the image they wish to give” (79). People of “middle or working-class origin more often offer ‘plentiful and good’, which is never the case with those of upper-class origin, who by contrast, are very inclined to the ‘original and exotic’” (79). Consequently, distinction is a class-marker which defines, not only what books we read and what music we listen to, but also how and what we eat.

This kind of class distinction belonging to food, is one of the first things that the still quite unpolished Becky Sharp experiences as she leaves Miss Pinkerton’s academy and is introduced to Amelia’s family and invited to have dinner with them. The Sedleys, who belong to the wealthy middle class, show their distinction by serving the exotic dish of an Indian curry, which Becky has never even heard of. Her lack of distinction is further emphasized in this scene where she mistakes a “chili” for something “chilly”. Becky is asked if she enjoyed the curry:
“O excellent!” said Rebecca, who was suffering tortures with the cayenne-pepper.
“Try a chili with it, Miss Sharp,” said Joseph really interested.
“A chili,” said Rebecca gasping—“o yes!”—she thought a chili was something cool, as its name imported, and was served with some.
“How fresh and green they look!” she said, and put one into her mouth.

The Sedleys are experienced in the ways of the world and when Joseph, and his father—who suggested she tried the curry in the first place—make fun of Becky, they use symbolic violence. By doing so, they do not trigger the reader’s sympathies—Becky may be vain in her ambition to become “a respectable woman” and “a fine lady” (475), but who can blame her? After all, it is not Becky’s fault that she is the “[o]rphaned daughter of a dissolute artist and a French opera-girl”, belonging to no class, as Ina Ferris notes (28). Nor is it her fault that she was not fed distinction with her mother’s milk. However, Becky is firmly resolved to make it in this world, and she quickly learns that class markers, such as distinction, are everywhere present in society, and that they are obstacles that need to be broken through.

Then, how does she proceed? We know that she makes it to the very top, albeit, for not too long a time—but she marries a baronet’s son, becomes the mistress of a marquis, and is introduced at court. At a first glance she seems completely void of any means to even enter the social field of Vanity Fair, as she lacks economic capital—having no money—and lacks social capital—having no family or connections. As regards the cultural capital, we can discard cultural goods immediately, as she has no possessions in this world. With reference to Bildung, manners and language, a girl brought up in a home which is neither refined nor affluent, would normally not be in the possession of such capital. However, Becky’s family circumstances are not like those of ordinary people. Thanks to her mother Becky speaks fluent French, sings beautifully and plays the piano, which are considered signs of cultivation, and her actress skills enable her to adjust her manners and speech. As far as education is concerned, she is an autodidact and a natural talent, and she also spends two years at Miss Pinkerton’s academy as an articled-pupil, teaching French for board and bread. For these reasons—and in spite of her humble background—she is quite an accomplished young woman, much more so than both Amelia, Miss Swartz and many of the other girls at the academy. Her accomplishments are not recognized, however, which Becky thinks is most unfair:
‘What airs that girl gives herself because she is an Earl’s granddaughter,’ she said of one—‘how they cringe and bow to that Creole because of her hundred thousand pounds! I am a thousand times cleverer and more charming than that creature for all her wealth: I am as well bred as the Earl’s granddaughter for all her fine pedigree… (14)

This quote expresses Becky’s indignation over the injustice of a society, in which a person’s accomplishments and qualifications are always overshadowed by money and class. It also displays Thackeray’s humoristic streaks as he places the skills of an artisan’s daughter on an equal footing with those of heiresses and aristocratic young ladies. Thus, even for a lady of a peer it is enough to be able to sing, dance and play the pianoforte to be considered “accomplished”.

Despite being such a talented young woman, Becky now needs to work for her living, whereas Amelia can enter the fashion scene of London, while waiting to be married. On the other hand, the post as governess with the Crawleys proves to be an excellent place for an “intern” like Becky, who needs to polish her social skills and pick up what she can of distinction. So, when she gets Rawdon on the hook, she is not likely to let go of him easily, bearing the loss of her first catch—Jos Sedley—in recent memory. Marriage, as it turns out, is her strategy. But it is not as easy a she thinks to marry into the gentry. Bourdieu states that marriage is just another social institution, like shootings, hunts or select clubs, which are “designed to favor legitimate exchanges and exclude illegitimate ones” (“Capital” 89). Becky then, is definitely an “illegitimate exchange”. By marrying Rawdon, Becky expects to acquire economic capital, which turns out to be a miscalculation as Miss Crawley decides to disinherit him. However, she does acquire a great deal of social capital by marrying a baronet’s son. The name of Crawley opens many doors, and she soon learns to make use of the symbolic capital that it entails. To sum up, the only secure way for a woman at this time, to advance on the social scale is, to make a good catch in the marriage market.

In the marriage market, as in Vanity Fair in general, everyone has a price. Some persons are priced in detail, which is not uncommon in novels from this time. Miss Swartz is priced at two hundred thousand pounds, old Miss Crawley at seventy thousand and Amelia at ten thousand pounds. Jos’ life is worth a life insurance and Mr. Sedley’s life is worth nothing at all after his bankruptcy. I maintain that Thackeray’s scrupulous registration of the characters’ wealth shows his concern about the fact that people are seen as commodities, and consequently are estimated by their wealth rather than by their qualities. He does not criticise people for being this way,
but suggests that it is an innate phenomenon in a consumer society: “people in Vanity Fair fasten on to rich folks quite naturally” (206). He adds that it is impossible, “if you are told that the man next to you at dinner has got half a million, not to look at him with a certain interest” (206). This is yet another example of how the prominent position of economic capital overshadows not only social and cultural capital, but everything else in society.

The most highly priced person in *Vanity Fair*, and therefore the most explicit case of this obsession with money, is the heiress Miss Swartz. Thackeray uses George to enlighten the reader on her poor accomplishments, as he explains to his father why he does not want to marry her: she only “knows three songs”, she can only “play two pieces on the piano”, and she cannot spell. In addition, she is the daughter of a Jewish “slave-owner”, a “Mahogany Charmer” from the “Cannibal Islands” (204, 208). George even declares to his father: “I don’t like the colour, sir.... I’m not going to marry a Hottentot Venus” (214 original emphasis). This might be a way for Thackeray to illuminate the racist tendencies permeating Victorian society at the time. However, a closer look at Thackeray’s less than flattering engravings of Miss Swartz (210-211), rather indicates that George’s views are in fact Thackeray’s own. Nevertheless, Miss Swartz’s shortfalls do not discourage Mr. Osborne, who is blind to all but the economic wealth and social status that such an alliance would bring:

> Old Osborne thought she would be a great match, too, for his son. He should leave the army; he should go into Parliament; he should cut a figure in the fashion and in the state. His blood boiled with honest British exultation, as he saw the name of Osborne ennobled in the person of his son, and thought that he might be the progenitor of a glorious line of baronets. (207)

The satire with which Thackeray reveals Mr. Osborne’s vanities—which include money and titles—reflects the ambition of many merchants in England of that time. They have the money, but in order to advance on the social ladder, they need a noble title, which such money can actually procure. Implied in the quote is also Thackeray’s condescending view of a society in which status and titles can be purchased for money, just like everything else. Besides, it provides an example of how the different forms of capital work together. Miss Swartz has no social connections, she is not of noble birth, she is poorly educated, she lacks *Bildung*, to say the least, and she is not even pretty. But she reigns over the marriage market, because money rules society.
While Miss Swartz enjoys the attention that her economic capital brings her, Amelia learns what loss of such money brings. She learns the hard way that friendship is transient in a world ruled by Mammon. When George’s sisters turn their back on her to spend time with Miss Swartz, George tries to comfort her by explaining the plain facts of the “ready-money society”: “they would have loved you if you had had two hundred thousand pounds . . . [t]hat is the way in which they have been brought up” (204). Thus, when her father faces financial troubles, Amelia learns her own price. Mr. Osborne tells his son that unless he sees “Amelia’s ten thousand down”, George will not marry her, because he will have “no lame duck’s daughter” in his family (134). This, despite the fact that it was “the lame duck”, Mr. Sedley, who helped Mr. Osborne to make his fortune in the first place (134). Nevertheless, friendship, like much else, is transient in Vanity Fair. Less explicit than the previous sum mentioned, is the allusion to Amelia’s impending fate, by the “chronometer which was surmounted by a cheerful brass group of the sacrifice of Iphigenia”, and which summons the Osbornes to dinner (129). It refers to the Greek story of Agamemnon who sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia for good winds, but it is also a fitting description of how Mr. Osborne “sacrifices” his future daughter-in-law for money and status. When Mr. Osborne learns that Amelia’s father is indeed bankrupt, he repudiates her, and calls off the engagement. She is of no use to him any more, as she no longer can bring the money and status required to become his daughter-in-law. He, therefore, “sacrifices” her for heiress Miss Swartz.

Mr Osborne breaks the engagement between Amelia and George, because he wants to make a better match for his son, one that will bring both economic and social capital, which his vanity will profit from in turn. Thus, when George defies his father and secretly marries Amelia, his father cannot forgive him; he decides to eradicate the memory of his son for good and takes down the family Bible:

There was a frontispiece to the volume, representing Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Here, according to custom, Osborne had recorded on the fly-leaf, and in his large clerk-like hand, the dates of his marriage and his wife’s death, and the births and Christian names of his children. Jane came first, then George Sedley Osborne, then Maria Frances, and the days of the christening of each. Taking a pen, he carefully obliterated George’s names from the page; and when the leaf was quite dry, restored the volume to the place from which he had moved it.

(233-234)

3 *Mammon*, God of Wealth. Worshipped by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia.
The atrocity of what Mr. Osborne is about to do mirrors Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of his son. Not only does he obliterate his son’s name from the Bible, but he disinherits him and never speaks to him again. Hence, in his vain pursuit of economic and social capital, he loses not only his judgement, but also his one and only son.

After George’s death Mr. Osborne seems to relent, as he takes in his grandson. His motives for doing so, however, are debatable as he seems to transfer the hopes that he had for his son to his grandson: “He would make a gentleman of the little chap... He saw him in his mind’s eye, a collegian, a parliament-man,—a Baronet, perhaps” (557). Thus, the charitable act of providing for his grandson turns out to be a rather dubious one.

Amelia, who experiences Mr Osborne’s denunciation of both herself and her husband for economic and social profit is not likely to “sacrifice” her son, little Georgy. Nonetheless, after years of struggling with most limited means, and faced with no resources left to support them, she gives him up to Mr Osborne as earlier mentioned. In the biblical story of Abraham, an angel interfering saves Isaac’s life, but that does not happen in real life. Thackeray writes: “No angel has intervened. The child is sacrificed and offered up to fate: and the widow is quite alone” (497). The parallel is striking and brings the thought to Mr. Osborne’s sacrifice—but the motives are different. Whereas Mr. Osborne sacrifices his son for his own benefit of economic and social capital, Amelia sacrifices herself for her son’s benefit of economic, social and cultural capital that she cannot provide. The question remains, though, whether her sacrifice is indeed necessary. Does she enjoy making a martyr of herself as some critics have suggested? Does her sacrifice complete her image of the faithful and mourning widow? I believe she could have married Dobbin years before—or even the school teacher—in order to secure a better financial situation for herself and her son. Whatever her reasons, she gives him up because the only capital that she can supply him with is motherly love, and that is not enough for a person if he is going to succeed in Vanity Fair.

The three sacrifices demonstrate many Victorian’s anxiety about “the decline of Christianity” and “the danger of atheism”, which Walter E. Houghton discusses (58). There was a fear that the “collapse of faith would destroy the sanctions of morality” (58), and that people would be guided by personal greed rather than Christian values. A. E. Dyson highlights that “[a]lmost every sin in Vanity Fair can be traced, beyond personal weakness, to the fundamental laws of money and class” and
“to fawn upon the rich and kick the poor is a Christian law of the land” (20). In the ungodly society of Vanity Fair there are many false gods. Mammon is worshipped and even material goods are idolized, such as Amelia’s shrine—“her Lares⁴”—with pictures of her two Georgies (VF 678). Dobbin has a similar shrine—his fake magazine picture of Amelia, glued into the lid of his desk (VF 434-435). Friedrich Engels also comments on false gods and lost values. He writes that “[t]he middle classes in England have become the slaves of the money they worship” (qtd in Herbert 188). He continues and adds that “[t]heir sole happiness is derived from gaining a quick profit. They feel pain only if they suffer a financial loss” (188). This may seem harsh, but there is definitely some substance to it, at least in Thackeray’s novel. Not even the Bute Crawleys, that “are supposed to be Christian” are very pious, as they plot against Becky and Rawdon for their own economic gain (Dyson 20), and the Reverend Bute Crawley is definitely more interested in shooting than writing sermons. This spiritual emptiness that permeates Vanity Fair, is also what most prominently distinguishes Thackeray’s novel from The Pilgrim’s Progress. The pilgrims in Bunyan’s Christian allegory have to pass through the market of Vanity Fair and all its snares and temptations, on their way to the Celestial City, whereas Thackeray’s characters live in the society of Vanity Fair without the assurance of reaching a “Celestial City”. David Morse maintains that while “Christian [the pilgrim] is helped by the clarity with which he sees the obstacles and believes that God is with him” the Victorian traveller “has no conviction that there is any sort of safe passage to be had through the minefields of contemporary capitalism” (129). Evidently, in the godless society of Vanity Fair, the religious field is losing ground as many people are more interested in playing the game of capitalism.

Becky is a megastar in the game of capitalism. As Andrew Miller puts it, she “has a keen eye for those moments . . . when something may be had for nothing” (Novels 39). She certainly has a way of fitting in everywhere. Like a chameleon that changes shades to fit into the environment, she changes habitus to fit into the field. She does not seem to have a typical class habitus, but collects different kinds of habitus as she goes along. It is not real of course—it is all pretence. As the skilful actress she is, she simply acts different roles. She seems to be as comfortable with the

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⁴ Lar, Roman goddess. Statues of domestic Lares were worshipped in ancient Rome.
vagrants at the shabby hotel in Pumpernickel as she is with the aristocracy in the London world of fashion:

She was at home with everybody in the place, pedlars, punters, tumblers, students and all. She was of a wild, roving nature, inherited from father and mother, who were both bohemians, by taste and circumstance; if a lord was not by, she would talk to his courtier with the greatest pleasure. (652)

This passage gives us a hint that among these people she might actually be herself, and not acting a role. The only reference to any kind of play-acting is the allusion to what might be if “a lord” were present. When Becky is in the company of Lord Steyne, however, her performance is on a high level of artistry. Apart from profiting from his economic capital, as he gives her money and jewellery, she can draw on the symbolic social capital that comes with being friendly with a marquis. Bourdieu explains that “the possessors of an inherited social capital, symbolised by a great name . . . are sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known” (“Capital” 90). Thus, to have Lord Steyne as her custodian not only brings her into the circles of aristocracy, but it also legitimatizes her position there. Her social position is further strengthened when Lord Steyne bestows on her the honour of being presented at court. Honours have a price, however, like everything else in Vanity Fair. We do not know with certainty the true nature of Becky’s and Lord Steyne’s relationship, whether it was of an adulterous art or not. The truth is only hinted at by Thackeray: “Was she guilty or not? She said not; but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips” (535). But we can establish that their connection is based on a mutual exchange of vanities. Becky swaps her entertaining company, her youth, good looks and charms (and perhaps sexual favours), for Lord Steyne’s economic and social capital.

Becky is not the only one in Vanity Fair who is obsessed with money and that which money can buy. As a result of the Industrial Revolution there was a shift “from traditional structures of wealth” based on “landed property to new ones based on the liquidities of manufacturing, commerce, speculation, and credit” (Herbert 188). Suddenly there was a whole new class of extremely wealthy people with money to spend, not only on necessities, but on luxury goods. Miller states that *Vanity Fair* (1848) was written “during the triumphant moment of free-market capitalism” when people’s hunger for commodities seemed insatiable (*Novels* 7). It was a frightening
scene for many people, and Thackeray was not alone in his concerns about the changes in society, as Miller illuminates here:

[Among the dominant concerns motivating mid-Victorian novelists was a penetrating anxiety, most graphically displayed in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, that their social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others. (6)

Miller elaborates on the significance of the new glass-making technology in the 1830s, and its role in the rising commodity culture. Small pane glass windows were exchanged for mass-produced large glass sheets, which drastically altered the business areas of London (1). These display windows “became the occasion for elaborate fantasies of consumption, sensuous experiences of imagined acquisition” unheard of before, and thus promoted the new consumer culture (1). Miller argues that “the windows cease to be transparent media for display and become items of display themselves” (2). Lit up at night by the new gaslights, they present what Miller calls “the commodity fetish in all its glory”, using Marx’s terminology (4). This is a fitting description of the reified economy in *Vanity Fair*, where people and human relations are regarded as merchandise, which can be sold and bought at any time.

Like the desired objects in the shop windows, which can be seen but not touched, the vain characters on the social ladder strive for what they see on the next rung. There is always something better to aim for: a richer fiancée, a more influential friend, more expensive jewellery, the possibility of a knighthood, “and what not” (Bunyan 1:23). However, Thackeray’s novel ends with a feeling of dejection: “Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?” (689). This brief summary of the sense of vanity, brought to my attention by Miller, seems to say that once acquired, the “objects of desire”—in the shop windows or on the social ladder—turn out to be “unsatisfactory” (“Plate Glass” 1052). They are “unsatisfactory” because they are transient and without a true value.

To experience “the commodity fetish in all its glory” was obviously not granted everyone—it was not granted the working classes, for instance. And among those who made their fortunes during the booming economy, there were also many who lost them. Bankruptcies are frequent events in *Vanity Fair* and houses and goods are sold at auction. After his bankruptcy, Mr. Sedley’s house and all his possessions are auctioned off. Later on when his son Jos returns a prosperous man from India, we
learn that he buys carpets, sideboards and mirrors from the bankrupt Mr. Scales. Raggles buys his house fully furnished from a financially ruined family, and it is most likely sold at auction, after Raggles ends up in debtor’s prison. These bankruptcies imply more than economic loss. They are personal tragedies, and Thackeray gives detailed accounts of the insolent behaviour of the people who attend them:

Old women and amateurs have invaded the upper apartments, pinching the bed curtains, poking into the feathers, shampooing the mattresses, and clapping the wardrobe drawers to and fro. Enterprising young housekeepers are measuring the looking glasses and hangings to see if they will suit the new ménage. (171)

This passage, which demonstrates the intrusion of complete strangers into the private sphere of the Sedleys’, shows how the tragedy of the family is laid out for public display. It is almost as if the Sedleys’ were criminals, and this is part of their punishment. The loss of status is not only shameful—it is scorned. At this time, poverty and “any contact with it . . . carrie[d] danger, as though it were an acutely contagious disease” (Herbert 199-200). The last sentence in the passage indicates how the objects that have outlived the Sedleys, are set in motion and end up serving those who now benefit from the disgrace of the Sedleys. For people from the middle class, like Mr. Sedley, there is nothing left in the social field when the money is gone, since their social status is built exclusively on economic capital, unlike people from the aristocracy who at least have their name and noble birth to rely upon. What Thackeray seems to say is that status and wealth are transient commodities in circulation, because in the arbitrary economic game of Vanity Fair, some people win, while others lose.

The scene just described here is permeated by the kind of “aggression” that is present throughout the novel: “on the battlefield, in the marketplace, in the drawing room”, as Robert E. Lougy points out (260). I agree that “the novel’s central section”, which “focuses on the Napoleonic battles”, is in fact a symbol of “the larger war waged throughout” the novel (260). What is not explicitly or implicitly said in the text, is sometimes found in Thackeray’s own illustrations, as in the engraving of Becky as Napoleon (637), which is an overt symbol of her aggressiveness. Less overt, but certainly implied, is the meaning of engraving of the eavesdropping Clytemnestra behind the curtain, who holds a knife-like device in her hand (686). It shows Jos’ impending fate, and the extent, to which Becky is willing to go in her pursuit of a quick profit.
There are others who also look for a quick profit and seize the opportunity, when provided. Thackeray dedicates a substantial amount of time to the relationship between master and servant: for instance, that between Becky and Fifine, and that between Jos and Isidor. After the scene between Rawdon and Lord Steyne, Becky wakes up the following day to find her home a changed place. The servants refuse to answer the bell, and when she alludes to her husband, they all just laugh, as they know that he is not likely to return. In other words—the normally submissive servants have turned into “odious rebel[s]” (VF 545). Miller draws our attention to the fact that “one of William Thackeray’s obsessive concerns in the late 1840s” (14) was the fear that the European political revolution of 1848 would lead to a servants’ revolution in England, and that the British servants would start questioning their situation and even demand democracy. This episode in *Vanity Fair* takes place in chapter fifty-five, which first appeared in the sixteenth instalment in April in 1848 (Dyson 29). Experiencing the beginning of the European Revolution from across the Channel—it started in France in February 1848—it is not so strange that Thackeray adds a servants’ revolution to his novel. The domestic insurrection in Becky’s establishment is encouraged by the fact that Rawdon and Becky are not only ruined themselves, but have ruined Raggles as well, and the fact that Rawdon has left Becky. A corrupt woman who is poor and has no husband to care for her, is worth nothing but contempt in the eyes of the servants. When Becky’s maid Fifine seizes the opportunity to turn Becky’s misfortune into her own fortune, she only does what Becky would have done herself, had she been in the same situation.

The game, in her opinion, was over in that little domestic establishment . . . she secured not only her own property, but some of her mistress’s (if indeed that lady could be said to have any property at all)—and not only carried off the trinkets before alluded to and some favourite dresses on which she had long kept her eye, but four richly gilt Louis Quatorze candlesticks, six gilt Albums, Keepsakes, and Books of Beauty, a gold enamelled snuff-box which had once belonged to Madame du Barri, and the sweetest little inkstand and mother-of-pearl blotting-book . . . (544-545)

The resemblance between Becky and Fifine is striking. “The game… was over”, echoes of Becky’s own little performances. The detailed account of all the goods that disappear with Fifine displays Becky’s own vanity, since the objects are dearly acquired cultural capital, or status symbols. Vanessa Warn declares that these “conspicuous luxury items” represent the link between “Becky’s social ambition and
aristocratic aspirations” (161), as they are representative of the class she aspires to belong to. Now that they are gone, they only represent her scattered dreams. AS Miller says: the objects may be lost to Becky, but “they will endure and will briefly support other people”, like Fifine, “as they have supported her” (Novels 31). In brief, Thackeray’s quote shows how Fifine makes herself noticed in the social field of Vanity Fair, takes control of the game and wins—as she manages to get away with the cultural goods—and will therefore climb the ladder of social status, while Becky falls down the same ladder, as her time is out.

Another servant who would love to get hold of some valuable cultural goods is Jos’s valet Isidor. In the following scene he is scheming to appropriate both George’s and Jos’ belongings, once the English are defeated and driven out of Brussels during the war:

Isidor, the valet, had looked on very sulkily, while Osborne’s servant was disposing of his master’s baggage previous to the Captain’s departure: for in the first place he hated Mr. Osborne, whose conduct to him, and to all inferiors, was generally overbearing . . . and secondly, he was angry that so many valuables should be removed from under his hands, to fall into other people’s possession when the English discomfiture should arrive. (303)

This passage sums up Thackeray’s view of the master-servant relationship. If a servant, like Isidor, is “treated with insolence” (303), we can understand why he feels the urge to revenge himself on his master—like George or Jos—by stealing from him. The criticism, thus, is aimed not only at the fact that a servant is stealing, but rather at the upper classes’ use of symbolic violence as a way to oppress their servants. If a master exploits his servant, the servant will eventually seek to exploit his master. However, what Thackeray (who had servants himself (Hardy 17)) seems to say is that it is acceptable to have servants, as long as you treat them well: “Amelia’s attendant was much less selfishly disposed. Few dependants could come near that kind and gentle creature without paying their usual tribute of loyalty and affection to her sweet and affectionate nature” (304, emphasis added). By the choice of the word attendant, Thackeray describes this relationship as one based on care, rather than on obedience. Because Amelia does not employ modes of domination, her servant is more amicably disposed towards her. This episode describes the subtle ongoing power game between a dominated agent (servant) and a dominant agent (master).

Becky goes from being a dominated agent (governess) to becoming a dominant agent (Mrs Crawley), with her own servants. After Rawdon’s aunt
disinherits him, Becky and Rawdon have no money. But as the industrious woman she is, Becky knows how to make use of the social capital still in their possession, and specifically then, the symbolic capital, which the name of Crawley entails. Bourdieu insists that honour is one of the most important forms of symbolic capital. “(B)y drawing on the credit and the capital of trust which come as much from a reputation for honour as from a reputation of wealth” it is said that a man can “come back with the whole market even if he left home with nothing in his pockets” (Outline 185, original emphasis). This kind of honour is most evident in the episode in Curzon Street, where Becky and Rawdon perfect the art of “liv[ing] well on nothing a year” (361). They live in Raggles’ house and eat his food for four years, without paying for it. Eventually the scam is exposed:

“O Mam,” said Raggles, “I never thought to live to see this year day. I’ve known the Crawley family ever since I was born. I lived butler with Miss Crawley for thirty years; and I little thought one of that family was a goin’ to ruing me—yes, ruing me”—said the poor fellow with tears in his eyes. . . . And all he said was true. Becky and her husband had ruined him. He had bills coming due next week and no means to meet them. He would be sold up and turned out of his shop and his house, because he had trusted to the Crawley family. (546)

This passage demonstrates Becky’s and Rawdon’s cruel exploitation of these unfortunate people, but it also reveals the vanity of Raggles and his wife—who are “proud” to have such “noble” people as the Crawleys living with them as it elevates them in the estimation of their friends. But most of all, it is a demonstration of the Victorian concept of “deference”, which historian Richard D. Altick discusses in Victorian People and Ideas (18). This “willing acknowledgement that people in the classes above one’s own were justly entitled to their superiority” was so deeply rooted among the classes that it prevented them from thinking differently (18). Behind this reasoning lies centuries of feudal rule. Consequently, by using the symbolic capital of honour, and relying on deference, Becky and Rawdon not only live on “credit”, but they manage to “live well on nothing a year” for four years.

Becky and Rawdon do not work; the very idea of working most probably never crosses Rawdon’s mind, as he is a man of the gentry, and they do not work. After the war Rawdon resigns from the army and sells his commission as an officer (VF 362), and they are left without an income. This does not seem to bother either of them, and apart from living off Raggles, they do not do much. However, we learn that Rawdon is skilled at playing cards and billiards—for money, and we know that Becky
is skilled at playing on the vanity of Lord Steyne—for money. After Rawdon leaves her, Becky makes her way through Europe and is eventually spotted at the roulette table in Pumpernickel. Roulette is a suitable game for Becky. In Bourdieu’s terms, roulette “holds out the opportunity to win a lot of money in a short space of time, and therefore changing one’s social status quasi-instantaneously” (“Capital” 83), which is what Becky aims for. That it is a game, in “which the winning of the previous spin of the wheel can be staked and lost at every new spin” (“Capital” 83), only makes it more alluring to her. Becky lays her trust in chance, but Miller pinpoints the fact that somehow she “manages to manipulate fortune so that she gains while others lose” (Novels 39). She makes a good profit on Raggles for years, and she makes a handsome purse for herself with the help of Lord Steyne, but then suddenly—“the winning of the previous spin of the wheel is lost”, and Becky is left without both a home and a husband, and with neither Lord Steyne nor his money to sustain her. The game of roulette which “appears to subordinate rational calculation to chance” (39), is a fitting description of Becky’s way of living.

Becky’s gambling habits bring us to Pumpernickel. By highlighting the arbitrary way in which the principality is governed, Thackeray also criticises the way in which England was run and has been run for centuries. Thackeray’s calling Pumpernickel a “moderate despotism” (631), echoes the feudal way England was governed until the end of the eighteenth century. The fact that “everybody in Pumpernickel knew everybody” (625), and that “not one of these, however poor they might be, was under the rank of a Baroness” (627), reminds the reader of how England was ruled by some three hundred landowning families in early Victorian times (Altick 20). Their principal merit was that they were members of the nobility. Rather than governing their principality, the aristocracy of Pumpernickel dedicate their time to leisure: there are “festivals and entertainments going continually on”, and when they tire of gormandizing, dancing and going to the opera, there are always “shooting-parties and battues” for the gentlemen and gambling for the ladies to engage in (631-634). Whereas a great deal of Thackeray’s social criticism is aimed at the rising merchant classes and their vain ambitions to try to fit into the society of nobility, it is also aimed at ridiculing the gentry and aristocracy, by pointing at their futile existence as “idle, game-preserving dilettantes” (Altick 21). Thackeray’s
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satirical depiction of life in Pumpernickel, presents it as a microcosm of British society and the nobility’s engagement in the political field of ruling the country there.

Thackeray shows a great interest in the hierarchy within different groups of power in society. In *Vanity Fair*, as in Victorian society, everyone has a given place in the hierarchy. At the top are the landed aristocracy, here represented by Lord Steyne, who is a marquis. Beneath the aristocracy are the landed gentry, such as the Crawleys—Sir Pitt Crawley is a baronet. However, Thackeray points to the fact that there is hierarchy also among the middle-classes, as shown in the scene at Dr. Swishtail’s academy. George’s father, who is a rich banker, is at the top of the middle class hierarchy. Under him are various merchants, such as the other boys’ fathers, and beneath them are large retailers and grocers, such as Dobbin’s father. There is also the class of the “nabobs”, consisting of businessmen, professionals and military officers in India (Altick 30), such as Jos who distinguishes himself as a tax collector in Boggley Wollah. As a result, Dobbin, is at the bottom of the social hierarchy at school, and his agony is further enhanced by the fact that his father pays part of his son’s tuition in groceries:

A dreadful day it was for young Dobbin when a poaching excursion for hardbake and polonies, espied the cart of Dobbin & Rudge Grocers & Oilmen Thames St. London at the Doctor’s door discharging a cargo of the wares in which the firm dealt.

Young Dobbin had no peace after that. The jokes were frightful and merciless against him. . . . “If a pound of mutton-candles cost sevenpence halfpenny how much must Dobbin cost?” and a roar would follow from the circle of young knaves, usher and all, who rightly considered that the selling of goods by retail is a shameful and infamous practise meriting the contempt and scorn of all real gentlemen. (38)

This passage illustrates the ongoing power struggle among the young students. As Dobbin finds himself at the bottom rung of the social ladder, the other children feel free to bully him. However, Dobbin, who goes under the name of Figs, due to his father’s profession, eventually manages to re-establish the balance of power, when he bravely stands up for George by beating the school’s biggest bully and tyrant in a fist fight. The irony in the last sentence of the quote demonstrates Thackeray’s own contempt of a society where even children are aware of the social hierarchy and feel free to use symbolic violence to harass and humiliate those less fortunate.

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5 Robert E. Lougy suggests that Gaunt House is a microcosm of society as it was then (261). I do not agree, but I believe that Pumpernickel is more appropriate for that definition.
There are different ways for a person to establish himself in the social hierarchy, by different modes of domination. Children may use physical coercion and jeers, whereas adults may resolve to the use of symbolic capital. For those who have economic capital there is always the possibility to make use of it as symbolic capital and thus purchase a title or a career for money. Mr. Osborne, for instance, hopes to secure a title of gentry for his son with the money of the heiress, Miss Swartz. It was common practise among the gentry and nobility, to buy the second son—who would not inherit the estate and title of his father—an officer’s commission. That is how Rawdon came to pursue a career in the army for a while. There were two ways of promotion in the army. In the time of war, you could be promoted for your services—like Rawdon who became a colonel, and Dobbin who became a major—and in peacetime, an army promotion could be purchased for money. That is what Mr. Osborne proposes to do when he realises that Dobbin has provided for Amelia and little Georgy for years, out of his own pocket. In his will Mr. Osborne therefore entreats Dobbin “to accept such a sum as may be sufficient to purchase his commission as a Lieutenant-Colonel” (610). By drawing our attention to this matter, Thackeray exposes the system in society which allows even trades and promotions to be purchased with money, and which excludes all those do not have the required economic capital.

There is another form of capital that can be used to secure a title or promote a career—namely social capital, in the form of membership in the nobility. Rawdon’s brother, Sir Pitt Crawley, is granted two seats in the House of Commons, in spite of the fact he only presides over a small electorate. He disposes of one seat himself, but can distribute the second parliamentary seat to whom he likes, and Becky hopes that this can be an opening for her husband. As she is a cunning woman and knows exactly what Sir Pitt’s vanity is composed of, she flatters his ego and political ambitions by telling him that “the Ministry” has noted his qualities and that he is “the finest speaker in England” (450). What she is suggesting is that he should be knighted for his political activities, and become “Baron Crawley of Queen’s Crawley” and thus be eligible for the House of Lords (450). Finally, towards the end of the book, we find out what really happened to his dreams. “After the passing of the Reform Bill” in 1832, Sir Pitt lost his two seats in Parliament and with that “all idea of a Peerage was out of the question” (684). With his political power withdrawn, Sir Pitt not only lost his career, but also all hopes of climbing the social ladder and enter the aristocracy.
These scenes illustrate Thackeray’s criticism of a social system where political power is distributed according to wealth and lineage—economic and social capital—but he also directs the reader to the fact that constitutional changes are in progress. As a result of the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society, and with the consequent rise of the new merchant class, parliamentary seats were taken from small boroughs and distributed to the large industrial cities in the north. Sir Pitt’s dispersed dreams are thus, representative of many men of his class who saw their social and political influence being reduced.

Just as Sir Pitt never becomes a baron, Becky never becomes a lady. She does not get a noble title when she marries Rawdon, as they are only bestowed on first-born sons, and it is Rawdon’s brother, Sir Pitt, who inherits both estate and title. At the very end of the novel, however, when Sir Pitt dies, the title and estate would devolve upon his brother Rawdon, as Sir Pitt has no living son, and Rebecca who is legally still his wife, despite the separation, would then become Lady Crawley. However, fate decides otherwise, and Rawdon dies of yellow fever only “six weeks before the demise of his brother, Sir Pitt” (689). As Rawdon dies before his brother, the estate and title are passed on to Becky’s and Rawdon’s son, little Rawdy, and Becky is thus “swindled” out of her ladyship: “She never was Lady Crawley, though she continued so to call herself” (689).

In conclusion, Thackeray’s social critique, which is mainly directed at the commodity culture and the hierarchy of the class system of his contemporary Victorian society, is best understood in relation to its historical background. As a result of the industrialization, the British society that had been ruled by the Church, the king and the nobility, since the Middle Ages, was now facing a great transformation in both the economic, social and political spheres. Suddenly, the opportunity rose for people to make their own fortune, and change their position in the social hierarchy. Hence, with the new society came the prospect of making money and becoming rich, and with the ascending new classes of wealthy merchants and manufacturers with their “ready-money”, came the commodity culture. Thackeray’s concern with the new money-oriented society where everyone has a price and everything is for sale, is shown in *Vanity Fair* in his way of depicting people as commodities.

As Thackeray takes the reader on a tour of this “vain, wicked, foolish place” we can follow the different characters as they engage in competition for status in the
social field of Vanity Fair. Some characters rise on the social scale, while others fall down, and some of them get to experience both, as Becky and Amelia do. Despite her lack of both economic and social capital and distinction Becky manages, not just to raise herself above her humble origins, but to reach the top rung of the social ladder. This is due to her intelligence, wit and actress skills, but also to her habitus, or her “feel for the game”. She makes good use of all the forms of capital that she comes across. However, she never really acquires the properties characteristic of the aristocracy, as she is just playing-acting all along. She has an amazing ability to adapt to any given situation and to bounce back from the deepest abyss. As Becky is such a resourceful woman she quickly learns to make use of the symbolic capital bestowed upon her when she marries a man from the gentry. In short, she draws on both the credit and the capital of trust, which the name of Crawley entails, and she excels in the art of “liv[ing] on nothing a year”.

Despite the many characters in this novel, the prominent position of Becky, and what some critics say, I argue that the main protagonist in this novel is society itself. When Thackeray ridicules the different characters, he does not criticize them as individuals, but what they represent—namely a corrupt society, which is governed by money and class. As much as Thackeray’s novel about the corruptions of Victorian society is a product of its time, it is also a contemporary piece of art. Vanity, social ambition, pretence, and life as a commodity are issues that are both timeless and universal. Thackeray’s narrative fits well into today’s consumer society where people raise loans to buy conspicuous cultural goods such as exclusive cars, designer kitchens and even holidays to Thailand. And his accounts of Becky’s life on credit is a reminder of the economic situation in Sweden today, where people can, or could until just recently, buy exclusive apartments and villas with one hundred percent mortgages—having no money in the bank. That—is life on credit. Thus, the vanities described in The Pilgrim’s Progress from the seventeenth century, that inspired Thackeray to write his novel in the nineteenth century, were as current as they are today in the twenty-first century.
Works Cited


