

Self-prepared Study Material

Dickens and Thackeray: A Comparative Study

If the Elizabethan Age is the golden age of drama, the Victorian age can be safely called the golden age of novel. And the two doyens of Victorian novel were Dickens and Thackeray. Of the two Dickens was (is) more popular and more celebrated. When Thackeray became a novelist, after the successes of *Barry Lyndon* and *Vanity Fair*, he hoped to be as well-regarded as Dickens. Even Thackeray's children kept naming their pets after Dickens's characters. However, they are undoubtedly great novelists in their own rights and they offer an interesting comparison.

Both worked in the looser and more accessible comic mode, the mode of social realism. However, Dickens's talent casts the realistic stuff in a very different mold from that of Thackeray's. Dickens's powerful imagination is fascinated by and fascinates with one single detail of social observation on which he can construct a whole theme that make up his novels. Such is the case, for instance, in his symbolically intense fictional emblems called Podsnappery (in "Our Mutual Friend") or Department (in "Bleak House"), Thackeray's social comedy, by comparison, has the value of simile, as compared to metaphor or symbol: it offers a purely didactic judgment on the facts of social or human behaviour observation.

Most of Thackeray's life he had to contend with the dust Dickens kicked up as he raced towards immortality and greatness. In Dickens's limited defense, it wasn't just Thackeray; every writer in the nineteenth century had to figure out how to survive in a world in love with Little Nell. What makes Thackeray's also-ran position even more confounding is how much of an overlap there is between Dickens's life and Thackeray's. Both saw early success with comic literary creations

(Dickens with the great naturalist and tittlebat expert Samuel Pickwick, Esq.; Thackeray with the footman Yellowplush, who reviewed books on etiquette for Fraser's Magazine). Both ran in the same social circles (though not always as friends). Both were, and continue to be considered, rightly or wrongly, social critics. Both were horrible husbands..

The significant difference may be in each writer's approachability. Not in the sense of how each approached the task of writing; Dickens was far more disciplined than a hundred Thackerays- i.e. in the sense of how each writer invited the reader to come closer, to be a confidant. Dickens soothed the Victorian middle class with stories that celebrated family and perseverance while picking easy targets — Chancery, treatment of the noble poor, the French — towards which to aim his critiques. Thackeray, though, took aim squarely at the middle class itself, and the middle class wasn't comfortable being the target.

Thackeray's 1848 novel, *Vanity Fair*, provides an interesting example of this point, and also happens to be the January book the Bethesda Library's Classics in Context discussion group will be reading (18 January 2011).

To be a success in nineteenth century England involved a complicated series of steps. The Victorian Middle Class was a new experiment, arising from the ashes of the end of the aristocracy, and wanted to believe that morality, rather than inheritance, conveyed respectability. The polite fiction, explicitly expressed (with a hint of Calvinism), claimed that good people succeeded because they were good: a circular argument that gave structure and comfort and a seemingly solid place from which to judge those who weren't successful.

While we can't call *Vanity Fair*'s Amelia Sedley the hero(ine) of the novel — Thackeray calls *Vanity Fair* “A Novel Without a Hero” — she is one of the few characters with whom our sympathies remain through most of the novel. When we meet her at the beginning, she's leaving finishing school for home with all the accomplishments one could hope for: rich, blonde, lovely, and loved. She sings beautifully, blushes appropriately, and is the very model of Victorian respectability.

Later, and without giving too much away, Amelia finds that she has to strike “rich” from her list of accomplishments — and this, Thackeray argues, is where Victorian Middle Class hypocrisy replaces Victorian Middle Class morality. Once Amelia is no longer rich, it's as if, to the world at large, she's no longer respectable, regardless of the fact that she's still the model of Victorian womanhood, sings beautifully, blushes appropriately, and conducts herself morally. Without money, none of those accomplishments are visible.

Thackeray tightens the screws even more. Amelia's is affianced to George Osborne — an engagement that's threatened when Amelia's family hits tough economic times. George's parents try to convince him to end the engagement, especially with the arrival on the scene of an incredibly wealthy and thus (as Jane Austen has taught us) incredibly marriageable heiress. This heiress, however, has none of Amelia's accomplishments. She has no conversational art. She has no artistic talent. She only knows one song to sing along with the piano, but needs the sheet music to remember the words. And yet, because of her immense wealth, society, according to Thackeray, is willing to overlook all of her shortcomings. Morality is a commodity, and it's expensive.

Dickens rarely indicts the Middle Class at all in his fiction, or at any rate, never this baldly or directly. Social ills in Dickens aren't the result of class hypocrisy, but the result of a bureaucracy that's metastasized. This is also a good time to mention the differences in background between Dickens and Thackeray, and how this might influence their treatment of class. Dickens grew up outside of the Middle Class, poor and marginalized, with a father who waltzed in and out of debtors' prison and a mother who needed her son to continue working in the soul-crushing blacking factory for any kind of financial security. Thackeray grew up relatively privileged within the Middle Class, attending public school and hobnobbing with the sons of the wealthy and well-to-do. Dickens struggled his whole life for a seat within the Middle Class, not even recognizing when he had achieved his goal. Thackeray, having grown up Middle Class, could never see the big deal. Dickens could never deal a direct blow to the stratum he wanted to achieve. Thackeray saw the Middle Class as paper tigers, not worth any special consideration.

While *Vanity Fair* enjoyed some success in its time*, Thackeray never became the beloved patriarch of Victorian fiction the way Dickens had. Those critical of Thackeray's writing pointed to his heightened sarcasm and unrelenting irony. Dickens was recognized as humorous; Thackeray was simply considered mean.

But maybe for a modern reader, with enough distance and an appreciation for a solidly wicked (and wickedly funny) antihero like Becky Sharp (who cuts through some of the sentimentality that can cloy things up in the Amelia storyline), we can appreciate Thackeray's accomplishments. This isn't to suggest that we've somehow transcended the class/caste system. Thackeray's thesis that money forgives a host of social ills is as true and pointed today as it was then. What our modern society has transcended, however, in a way that the Victorians weren't

quite able to do, is shame. We have a thick armor of “Real Housewives” and 10-Minutes-of-Fame-Too-Long celebrities to protect us from Thackeray’s keen-eyed aim. Instead, we can simply enjoy the desperate scramblings of a far-distant group of money-grubbers who bear no relation to us at all.

Another difference between Thackeray’s and Dickens’s realism’s is to be derived from their different brands of conversationalism, or different brands of “comic mode garrulousness”. A charming convivial_conversation_of ‘table talk’ genre among genial, refined interlocutors, engaged in the skilfully conversational cooperation of equally well-educated gentlemen pervades virtually any part of a Thackeray novel. This kind of conversation is replaced in Dickens’s novels by the more accessible, heartier genial sharing of **humour** often modulating into more privately **sentimental** apartés

The merit of Thackeray’s prose comes from its fictively deliberative character or fictive rationalism, the merit of Dickens’s prose comes from its emotionally fictive intensity, the intensity of pure, unchecked imagination which is necessarily more monological.