

Vanity Fair

William Thackeray



About the author

Thackeray was born on July 18, 1811, in Calcutta, India. His father was a wealthy merchant. At age 18, Thackeray entered the University of Cambridge but he left without taking his degree. He worked first as an editor of a journal then became an art student in Paris. He produced *The Paris Sketchbook* and *Comic Tales and Sketches*. He joined the staff of the satirical magazine *Punch* in 1842 and in 1847, began work on *Vanity Fair*. Published in three parts, it was an immediate success, and Thackeray became an instant celebrity. Towards the end of his life, Thackeray worked as the editor of *Cornhill Magazine* from 1860 to 1862 and had begun work on his last novel when he died on December 24, 1863, in London.

Character summary

Rebecca (Becky) Sharp: The central character. She is Amelia Sedley's friend, and later Rawdon Crawley's wife. She is from a poor background but is clever and cunning.

Amelia Sedley: Rebecca's friend and the wife of George Osborne, and mother of Georgy. She is nice but naïve.

Joseph Sedley: Joseph is Amelia's older brother. He is rich, worries about his health a lot and exaggerates his limited achievements.

John Sedley: Father of Amelia and Joseph, he was very rich, but loses all his money.

Old John Osborne: Father of George, John is a mean and calculating man. He is upset and angry with his son. He tries to be good at the end.

George Osborne: George has a long relationship with the Sedley family and with Dobbin. He is a good-looking, self-centred, proud, free-spending, gambler. He marries Amelia and dies in a war.

Sir Pitt Crawley: Sir Pitt is a wealthy nobleman who is uneducated, dirty, a womaniser and mean with money.

Rawdon Crawley: Son of Sir Pitt Crawley and husband of Rebecca. He is a socialite, gambler and an opportunist.

Miss Crawley: Miss Crawley is the sister of Sir Pitt Crawley. She is old and eccentric but also very rich.

William Dobbin: Dobbin is a soldier and is the only real nice person in the book, apart from Amelia, who he is in love with.

Summary

The story revolves around Rebecca Smart. Born into a poor family, she is determined to better her life through marriage and money, even if this is at the expense of the people close to her. She is ruthless. Sometimes her plans are successful and sometimes not, but she and her husband go through life leaving debts and ruined lives in their wake. She finally gets what she deserves, when a scandal of her own making, nearly destroys her. Her friend, Amelia Sedley, an innocent and loving person, suffers also, but her downfall is due to circumstances and fate, and not vanity and greed.

Chapters 1–5: Rebecca leaves school to start a job as a governess at Sir Crawley's house, but before she starts work she spends a week at her best friend Amelia's house. There, she flirts with Joseph Sedley, Amelia's unattractive but rich brother. We are then introduced to George Osborne, a handsome army Lieutenant and his friend Captain Dobbin, a normal looking man of good character. The group attend a party where Joseph disgraces himself by getting drunk. The next day, he leaves for Scotland and Rebecca starts her job at the home of Sir Pitt Crawley and his two sons, Pitt and Rawdon Crawley. She is an effective governess and learns a lot about the family. She lies about her own, supposedly rich, family. Miss Crawley, Sir Pitt's sister, comes to visit. She is a rich old woman. She adores Rawdon Crawley, a fun loving gentleman who enjoys gambling. Miss Crawley pays his debts. Rebecca makes sure Miss Crawley likes her because she realises how rich and influential she is. She also starts flirting with Rawdon.

Chapters 6–9: Amelia is in love with George Osborne. He likes her but is not in love. George's father had originally told his son to marry her, but has now changed his mind because Amelia's family has lost all their money. Meanwhile, Sir Pitt visits Rebecca in London. She is in London looking after the sick Miss Crawley. He asks Rebecca to be his wife and to come back to his home, Queen's Crawley. She tells

Vanity Fair

him she can't because she is already married. Miss Crawley is angry that a mere governess, Rebecca, has married her favourite man, Rawdon. The new couple worry that she might not give them any money. Meanwhile, the Sedley family is ruined and their things are sold. Old Mr Osborne tells Amelia that the wedding is cancelled. Dobbin, who only has Amelia's interest at heart, makes arrangements so that the couple can get married. George, Rawdon and Dobbin then go to war in Brussels. The ladies and Joseph Sedley go with them. George flirts with Becky, but Amelia doesn't know. Joseph, who is a coward, wants to leave Brussels but he hasn't any horses. Rebecca sells him two for a huge price. A battle takes place and George is killed.

Chapters 10–13: After the battle of Waterloo, Colonel Rawdon and Becky go to Paris. Mrs Becky Crawley is popular with the Paris elite. When she gives birth to a baby boy, Miss Crawley is so enraged that she orders Rawdon's brother, Pitt, to marry Lady Jane to stop Rawdon getting money from the family. Rawdon and Rebecca live well in Paris with no money. They cheat hotel owners and have debts. They then return to London. Meanwhile, George's father is in torment over his dead son. He sees Amelia and Dobbin one day in Brussels while visiting the place where his son died. Dobbin tells him that Amelia is ill, pregnant and in need of money. Old Osborne refuses to see her. Dobbin is then deployed. Rawdon and Becky rent a house from an old friend and servant of the Crawley's, Mr Raggles. They don't pay the rent and Raggles goes to prison because he can't pay the loan on his house. We learn that Dobbin gave money to Amelia and pretended it had come from the army, and that old Mr Osborne was told his grandson was beautiful, just like his father.

Chapters 14–18: Old Sir Pitt Crawley dies and his son, the new Sir Pitt, invites Rawdon and Rebecca to the house. Rebecca is already making plans. She wants Rawdon to get a job as governor, using the help of Sir Pitt and Lord Steyne. Meanwhile, old Mr Osborne has made Amelia an offer. He will pay her money, if she allows her son to live with him. She reluctantly agrees. Later, Rawdon goes to prison for debt. When he leaves prison unexpectedly early, he finds Rebecca and Lord Steyne holding hands. He challenges the Lord to a duel. Later he discovers that Rebecca has secretly hidden money from him, and that is enough to end their marriage. He is offered a post of governor and dies four years later. Amelia, her son Georgy and Joseph travel to Europe and meet up with Rebecca at a dance. She is leading a terrible life of poverty and is

pursued by the scandal about her and Lord Steyne. They take pity on her, except Dobbin who leaves, apparently for ever. Rebecca tells Amelia some unpleasant truths about her dead husband, and produces evidence that he was unfaithful to her and that she should accept Dobbin's affections. They are later married. Rebecca looks after Joseph Sedley till his death and receives half his money. She is never spoken of again.

Background and themes

Vanity: The title tells us the main theme. Almost every character in the book is vain. They make false boasts to better their image; they are obsessively concerned about their physical attractiveness and social standing, or view money as the only means of expressing their worth. Joseph Sedley invents stories of bravery in India to impress Becky and later implies he was at Waterloo. George Osborne is vain about his looks, and Becky relishes the attentions of men and is desperate to appear to have money, even if it means ruining other people's lives to obtain it.

Money: The subject of money runs throughout the book. The people with money are portrayed as manipulative, repulsive characters. Sir Pitt is a dirty, old man, John Osborne uses his money to buy Amelia's child and Miss Crawley is a spiteful person, using her money and position to influence someone's inheritance. The people who haven't money are always in debt and sometimes go to prison.

Fate: The novel asks a question 'Do the things we do determine our fate?' Becky goes through life leaving a lot of misery in her wake, but she finally gets her just deserts. Amelia, on the other hand, is an innocent and good-hearted person, but her fate is not exactly happy. Her husband is killed, her child is taken away from her and her family goes bankrupt.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- Pair work:** Write *Vanity* on the board and check students understand the meaning by referring them to the word list. Tell students that the adjective of *vanity* is *vain*. Put students in small groups and ask them to discuss the things people can be vain about. (See discussion key for suggestions.) Write their suggestions on the board. Ask them if they are vain in any areas of their personality.

Vanity Fair

Introduction

After reading

- 2 **Write:** Ask the students to write answers to the following questions about the author: *When was he born? Where was he born? What did his father do? Which University did he go to? What was his first wife's name? Which magazine did he write for? When did the book come out?*

Chapters 1–5

While reading (p. 5, after 'Or that I nearly died of fear:')

- 3 **Group work:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to discuss a situation they have been in that was frightening. Consider the following: *When did it happen? Where did it happen? Were you alone when it happened? What happened in the end?*

After reading

- 4 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 1–5. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

Chapters 6–9

While reading (p. 21, after 'The four friends often spent the evening together:')

- 5 **Role play:** Put the students in groups of four and ask them to act out the conversation between Amelia, Becky, George and Rawdon. Remind them that George is worried about his father's reaction to his marriage, and Rawdon is worried about Miss Crawley's attitude to him.

After reading

- 6 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *cheque, Lady Crawley, silver knife, war, note, horses, heart.* Ask the students in pairs to talk and write to say how these words were used in Chapters 6–9.
- 7 **Research:** Tell the students to look for information on the Internet about the battle of Waterloo. Students then give an oral presentation of what they have found.

Chapters 10–13

Before reading

- 8 **Quiz:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to answer some questions about Paris and London. Then read out the following question and answer options, giving students time to talk about the answers. *How long does a flight from Paris to London take? How far is it between P and L? What is the population of London? When was the Eiffel Tower built? What money do people use in London? What is the name of the river in Paris? What is another name for the Metro/underground in London? Where is the Louvre museum?* See discussion key for answer options.

After reading

- 9 **Write and guess:** Write 'Becky and Rawdon spent the winter of 1815 in London.' on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (Paris, not London). Now students choose a sentence from Chapters 10–13 and rewrite it changing one word. Students mingle, reading out their sentences and other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Chapters 14–18

While reading (p. 43, after 'Lord Steyne had her hand in his:')

- 10 **Role play:** Put the students in groups of three and tell them to act out the scene between Rawdon, Becky and Lord Steyne. Remind them that Rawdon is angry, Becky is embarrassed, and Lord Steyne is frightened.

After reading

- 11 **Act and guess:** Put students in small groups and ask them to choose one scene from the book. Tell them they have to mime the scene. Give them time to practise and then get them to perform it for the class. The other students have to say what is happening.
- 12 **Discuss:** Draw the following table on the board and ask students to write down the names of the characters and a number to show how good or bad they think they are. Now put students in small groups to compare what they have put, giving reasons for their choices.

	bad				good
Rebecca Sharp	1	2	3	4	5
Amelia Sedley	1	2	3	4	5
Miss Crawley	1	2	3	4	5
John Osborne	1	2	3	4	5
Rawdon Crawley	1	2	3	4	5
John Sedley	1	2	3	4	5
William Dobbin	1	2	3	4	5
Sir Pitt Crawley	1	2	3	4	5
Joseph Sedley	1	2	3	4	5
George Osborne	1	2	3	4	5
Mr Raggles	1	2	3	4	5
Lord Steyne	1	2	3	4	5