

THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY AND REBECCA SHARP AS AN ANTI-HERO

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the quest for social mobility and concept of Anti-hero by examining the nuanced character of Becky Sharp written by William Makepeace Thackeray in Vanity Fair. Unlike the conventional hero who may be upright, virtuous and noble yet powerful; the anti-hero has qualities which are mixed morally. These qualities are embodied by the character of Becky Sharp, who makes way through strictures of Victorian society by manipulations using her charm and cleverness. This paper explores how Becky Sharp deviates from traditional heroic virtues and highlights the socio-economic dynamics of her times.

KEYWORDS

Anti-hero, Social mobility, Manipulation, Becky Sharp, Vanity Fair

1. INTRODUCTION

The characters of Becky in William Makepeace Thackeray's "Vanity Fair"(1848) definitely set forth the trend of an anti-hero movement . Central to the novel, she is an anti-hero in its truest form. Anti-heroes tend to be, less hero-like than their generic counterparts in that they are flawed or morally ambiguous. Leaving behind her humble background, searching for power and stability in her life she resorts to any misdeeds necessary. She is determined secure a higher social footing and to make the best life for herself using every part of her charisma, intellect, and sex appeal to achieve that end. In the end of novel, we find her becoming something she dislikes but at least find the soothing arms of luxury which she has always wanted. This paper examines her character and her longing for higher social status.

Becky subverts the typical expectations of victorian society from women. She uses those same expectations for her personal gain. As her actions are in opposition to her gender, we find her being through to the peripheries of society by the end of the novel. She is an extremely intriguing character who criticises the society and its oblivious nature who tends to forget that women have the power, but they choose not to exercise it often. We see the development of her character negotiating the limitations imposed on her.

2. THE CONCEPT OF ANTI-HERO AND BECKY SHARP

An anti-hero is a protagonist who lacks the conventional characteristics of an idealised hero, which may include bravery, honour and generally good intentions. Anti-heroes incorporate more cynical and worldly systems than the classical hero, but with hidden ideals underneath their ruthless façade This intricacy permits the reader to connect with actual human defects and also social worries, such as in character.

One of the quintessential anti-heroines, Becky Sharp is an intelligent performer who relies on her quick wit to charm others. A poor orphan, Becky is set up from the beginning as an outcast striving to climb her way into society by means of class and wealth [1][4]. Her actions and relationships show how little she thinks of the traditional moral norms of her society.

Her anti-heroic nature lies in manipulation. Employing her beauty and keen intelligence, Becky advances herself through engagements: governess for Sir Pitt Crawley then wife of his son Rawdon. Her constant adaptation to circumstances, and manipulation of those around her, also adds to her being a 'performer par excellence [2].

For example, Becky's connection with Rawdon Crawley was based on a well thought plan rather than love. Although Rawdon has no fortune, she knows that this marriage will elevate her social position – and possibly give her entrance to his rich aunt Miss Crawley which can bring the fortune from inheritance .[1][3] Becky is always pragmatic in relationships, considering them transactional rather than having any emotional components.

3. HER RUTHLESS AMBITION

Becky's secret affair with Lord Steyne only underlines her importance as a cunning and scheming figure. Becky, an orphan with humble beginnings realized that the only way to advance in society is by making relationship. She romantically backs up her hopes on aristocrats who can raise up her rank. This should be the first allusion as it not only depicts/pathologically jumps to end of page) her willingness for using her looks and seduction but also goes on to reinforce how ambitious she was [1] one of her major flaws that is clearly visible is that she is ready to compromise any sense of morality at the drop-of-a-hat, a problem that cursed all aspects of who she is as an anti-hero.

Due to her ambitions, she walks a path more adventurous – and often ruthless. Her affair with Lord Steyne is one of the most focal examples offered by Thackeray, which shows that she can forget her integrity for personal and financial gain. This affair was seen as necessary by her to establish herself and her son on a solid footing within society [4].

Becky is not content merely establishing herself in a stable position; she aims to rise above; she controls and dominates the people around her. Her interactions with other characters, like Amelia Sedley and Jos Sedley expose her manipulations. In addition to leeching off Amelia's naivety and Jos's infatuation, She tries to harness for her own cause. Her interactions display her cold determination to rise socially over the bones of others [4].

4. THE PRICE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Becky's life shows the losses and moral compromises which are inherent to pursuit of status within the society for a woman. Although her manipulation and strategies frequently brought her temporary victories, they also bring major personal setbacks and societal scorn.

Through any rank she climbs, Becky's ascent in life is characterized by wins that never last (thanks to her cutthroat tactics). While her cunning and charm help her to work herself into a higher social circle, this is contrasted with the fragility and fleeting nature of those achievements. She becomes exposed as a courtesan after news of her infidelity with Lord Steyne reaches society, leaving her ostracized and financially ruined which highlights how flimsy the ground was, on to which she had momentarily climbed [4].

Becky's falls from the grace, reflects the nature of social mobility of women in Victorian society which is unstable and volatile. Her conniving and moral trade-offs ultimately catch up to her resulting in her downfall. At the end of the book, we see her seeking out a living with any fantasy of social advancement shattered. It makes perfect sense as he makes a comment on the society that rewards and punishes ambitious individuals [1].

The picture of Becky Sharp painted by the author leaves an ambiguous impression on our minds. But her audacity, intelligence and her ability to spot a double standard gives her an underdog appeal that makes it hard for us not to root for her on some level. As the reader are taken on an anti-heroic journey of Becky observing the customs and fashions of the Victorian society it becomes clearer to us that this critique serves as a catalyst for provoking self-reflection on the similar injustices done by social structures [4].

What makes a character so much more engaging is, when you can never decide whether to root for them or not, and Becky lies deep in morally grey area. She is not the typical bad guy; she does what she has to do for survival and success in a world where women cannot get very far. Her portrayal by Thackeray is such that the reader empathises with her in her troubles and also condemn her for her deeds [5].

5. ANTI-HEROINES IN LITERATURE

For a more nuanced understanding of Becky's character, a comparison with three similar heroines will help to highlight the repetitive themes of ambition, moral ambiguity and manipulation in female characters who defy the typical heroic ideals.

Some of Becky's similar traits can be found in Scarlett O'Hara the protagonist of "Gone with the Wind". Both of them are ambitious and resourceful and resort to manipulations to get what they want. At the same time we find that, Scarlett's effort to survive through the American Civil War and Reconstruction resembles the high ambition of Becky for social mobility in Victorian England[6].

Just as Becky forms a series of strategic alliances, marrying where love is secondary to the economic and social considerations, Scarlett divvies herself out over generations. Using beauty and charm-this is the pivotal point for both characters as they utilise dishonesty or cross that moral grey area. Becky's resilience and pragmatism is in a sense parallel with Scarlett 's fighting spirit, which is perturbation in traditional setup representing these females as quite another sets of heroes [3].

Emma Bovary in the novel "*Madam Bovary*" (Gustave Flaubert) is another tragic hero whose longing for social and personal fulfilment results in sorrow. Along the lines of Becky, Emma also hated being classified in a certain social status and wanted to liberate herself from her small-town upbringing [7].

The manipulative ways in which Emma uses people and make the moral sacrifices (if not in style or type) reminisces of Becky. In the same vein, both of them – put their personal ambitions over societal expectations and thereby meet their eventual downfall.

The character of Undine Spragg in "*The Custom of the Country*" written by Edith Wharton represents the anti-heroine with a desire to climb the social ladder. As it can be seen from the character of Undine, she, like Becky manipulates the society and rises in the social ladder at the cost of others around her. Her strategic connections and marriages tell us of her manipulative, ambitious and calculating personality [8].

Thus, the character of Undine highlights similarity in the social stratification between America and Britain in the quest for social mobility. Her behaviour, like Becky's, portrays the moral complexities and price of navigating social hierarchies in the society. Both characters do not conform to the conventional heroic qualities as both prioritise personal gain over all the ethical considerations.

In addition to being a social satire of the Victorian period and an ironic look on women's place in the society, the novel raises questions about the concept of an anti-hero and its relevance in the literary context through the character of Becky Sharp. Characters such as Becky taught the readers different aspects of society and morality which are not easy to decipher as black and white, simple meanings of good and evil, hero and villain [9].

Anti-heroes challenge the readers with the uncomfortable realities of life: they express negative aspects of human nature and psychological predispositions of the society. The immoral actions of Becky depict the materialistic side of society that approves dishonesty keeping in mind the status of a person. Her character compels the readers to question the conformities of life that compel people to become deceitful and corrupt in society [10].

Thus, her quest for social mobility reflects right on the conditions and opportunities of women within the standards of Victorian era. Her actions were only driven by a desire to escape poverty and attain stability in her life. In a world of limited opportunities for women, she tries to find her own agency.

6. CONCLUSION

Becky Sharp is one of the most well-defined anti-heroes in the literature. Her journey reflects her desire for changing her social status by cunning and manipulation. Distorting the Victorian concepts of a heroine, she highlights the cruel and hypocritical nature of Victorian society. Becky Sharp is Thackeray's complex heroine, and her portrayal as an anti-hero is one of the most intriguing features of the novel, as she offers for a nuanced critical view of the socio-economic dynamics of that period.

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