

## Becky Sharp's Commodified Interpersonal Relationships in *Vanity Fair*



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**ABSTRACT:** *Vanity Fair* is a masterpiece by William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), which is centered on the lives of two young women, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, presenting the life of extravagance and rivalry of the aristocratic bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century England. In the novel, Thackeray ruthlessly exposes the shameless and degenerate nature of the feudal aristocracy and the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie in their pursuit of fame and fortune. During the Victorian period, consumerism prevailed. The circulation of commodities was well developed, and people at that time indulged in the revelry of the material world. As long as capital exists, commodities are bound to be an eternal element in the development of human society. This paper focuses on the female protagonist Becky in *Vanity Fair* by adopting the methods of literature research and textual analysis, revealing Thackeray's portrayal of commodified interpersonal relationships in the novel as well as the karmic consequences of such aberrant relationships in order to warn contemporary people on the Fair.

**KEYWORDS-** *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray, Becky Sharp, Victorian, commodified interpersonal relationship.

### I. INTRODUCTION

*Vanity Fair*, known as a novel without a hero, is reputed as one of the gems of English literature in the 19th century, demonstrating people of every description who dwell amid fame and fortune. This novel is written in a derisive manner, unlike the intensified and direct narration of criticism in Dickens's writings. Since its publication, *Vanity Fair* has drawn the attention of a wide range of scholars both abroad and at home, producing numerous research and analysis annually. In this full-length novel, Thackeray depicts a picture of the changing English society in the first half of the 19th century with his keen and detailed observation, humorous and pungent language, precise and sharp portrayals, and profound insights, reflecting the actual historical situation of different classes either declining, rising or struggling, satirising, and criticising the ugliness in society at that time. What Thackeray wants to convey to us is that money and position are desirable but transient. When a man dies, it all leaves him.

Previous studies of *Vanity Fair* mainly focused on characteristics of the author's writing style, feminism, personalities of characters, and ethical choices. Only in modern times have domestic and foreign scholars successively analysed the novel from such a realistic perspective — commodity culture, nevertheless, these studies are not specific enough. This paper will examine Becky Sharp's commodified interpersonal relationships before and after marriage. Then the paper will discuss the adverse effects accompanying, based on the perspective of commodification. As a microcosm of our real society, it is believed that further exploration of Becky in *Vanity Fair* will provide profound reflection and meanwhile awaken people in contemporary commodity society, helping people to see clearly the secret behind all fame and material wealth, and establish correct values in life.

### II. BECKY'S COMMODIFIED INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BEFORE MARRIAGE

Becky has encountered people of every description at an early age, mostly debt collectors and affluent buyers, which significantly contributes to her precocity, urgency for change, and worshiping money. After her father's death, she studies at Chiswick as an articulated pupil, for in this way, she could afford her tuition and make extra money. In Becky's mind, the only way to change her destiny is to follow up with the upper class, possessing substantial wealth and improving her social status. She believes that commodities can also represent her prominent status along with demonstrating her beauty (Zhang, 2016). Bearing a cunning characteristic and a reified mind, she "exploits erotic relationships for personal gain, profiting from the expenditure of others" for achieving her ultimate goal (Miller, 1995, p. 1049).

#### Friendship

Among all who have interacted with Becky on her way of climbing the social ladder, Amelia Sedley is the one that Becky had treated with genuineness. As Thackeray mentions, after Amelia's constant trying of changing Becky's "hard-heartedness" and "ill-humour", "by a thousand kind words and offices, overcome, for at least, her hostility to her kind" (Thackeray, 2003, p. 10. Hereafter

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only the page number of this textbook referred to in parenthetical citations). "The gentle tender-hearted Amelia Sedley was the only person to whom she could attach herself in the least" (p. 12). Becky adores Amelia since she is sincerely trying to do what is best for her, meanwhile, the huge discrepancy between them also makes her jealous of living such a carefree life. In order to survive, Becky learns to help her father manage various affairs as a child avoiding bills, thus, she has been polished into a calculating person since childhood, whereas Amelia never does have these worries. The vast difference between the two girls forces Becky to succumb to the harshness of reality: if she wants to stand out in the male-dominated Victorian society, she has to sacrifice her friendships. From Becky's perspective, though a genuine friend, as long as Amelia comes from a prominent family and bears a helpful character, she can also be taken advantage of.

Following Amelia home, she saw attractive things that she has never seen and thought about before. Amelia shows her over every room in her house and every pricy thing she owns: "her piano, her dresses, her necklaces, brooches, laces, and gimcracks", and she good-heartedly presents "a white cornelian, a turquoise ring and a sweet, sprigged muslin" to Becky (pp. 14-15). Every piece of commodity greatly refreshes her existing perception. Being able to receive such expensive items indeed ignites her craving for possessions.

Becky certainly does not want to leave this "paradise". Since Amelia is a girl of good nature with solid family background, Becky manages to win her sympathy over so that she can stay longer with Amelia, experiencing the life of those fair ladies. In chapter 2, when Becky sees Amelia's Cashmere shawls given by her brother, she said that "it might be delightful to have a brother" (p. 15). The illocutionary act of this utterance is that I'm alone in the world with no relatives giving me this kind of pricy gift, which successfully arouses Amelia's compassion. Knowing that Amelia's brother is so generous to his sister, Becky becomes curious about this man she has never met. Having confirmed the fact that Joseph is well-fixed, she says that "Is your sister-in-law a nice pretty woman?" (Thackeray, 2003, p. 15). Ostensibly, Becky is complimenting Joseph's wife, but in fact, she is beating around the bush to inquire whether Amelia has a sister-in-law. As Thackeray put it, the meaning behind the series of inquiries is that "If Mr Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him?" (p. 16). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, intermarriage was one of the main means of achieving social mobility (Wang, 2020). Marriage to a rich man is the shortcut for Becky to move up. Henceforth, Becky doubles her care towards Amelia in every situation, hoping to obtain her assistance for her fateful plan. She kisses the neckless given by Amelia before she put it on, she armed around Amelia's waist like other ladies, and she said things that would make Amelia feel commiserative. It is clear that Becky's primary objective is to marry Joseph, and therefore, an interpersonal relationship between Becky and Amelia is commodified. As time goes by, the fragile friendship between them is further strengthened, and they are like sisters. As a result, Amelia tries every means to advance Becky's plan by creating occasions for her and Joseph to be alone.

Miss Crawley is another woman with whom Becky established commodified interpersonal relationships, owning an asset of 70 thousand pounds. For Becky, Miss Crawley is more aristocratic than her employer Sir Pitt, not only because of her huge fortune and the extravagant life she leads, but also because she is a London townie, coupled with her nephew, a single gentleman, which to Becky is of crucial importance whether she can turn the table or not. Becky sees too many behoof that she could reap from this relationship. She understands that befriending Miss Crowley would benefit her both materially and socially, which would serve as the stepping stone for her to step into the upper echelons of society. Spending some time with Miss Crowley, Becky gets to know her personality and needs well, and it does not take long for the quick-witted lady to win Miss Crowley's heart. Imitating others' comical mannerisms while complimenting at the same time, Becky often amuses Miss Crowley. In addition to this, she also engages in conversations with Miss Crawley on topics of interest to her, such as French novels, French cooking, French wine, divorce issues, and women's rights. The old lady is very pleased with Becky, considering her to be a well-bred, amusing, and witty girl, willing to take Becky with her everywhere she goes, indeed, Miss Crawley is even more fond of Becky than her closest servant Firkin and Briggs. As such, Becky returns to London with Miss Crawley as a matter of course. For the sake of money, she takes great care of Miss Crawley. When the old lady feels ill and becomes ill-tempered and difficult, Becky, with her patience, watches over the vulgar old lady, smiling however tired she may be. At this point, Becky has gradually succumbed to the temptation of wealth, and has become a slave to it. Becky regards Miss Crowley as a labelled commodity, from whom she can reap profits. Becky would make any pleasing gesture in order to obtain benefits from her. Yet their interpersonal relationship is mutual, and in the eyes of Miss Crowley, Becky is also seen as an object. Even though Miss Crawley now values Becky owing to the comfort and convenience she has gained from her presence, she would return Becky to Queen's Crawley when she is of no avail (p. 122).

### Intimate Relationship

Becky is far behind, compared with other young ladies in Miss Pinkerton's academy, the particular reason for the circumstance is that she had no parents, not to mention a wealthy pair. The easiest way for her to become wealthy and respectable was to marry a man of wealth and status. Being resourceful and cunning, it is no accident that Becky is adept at using her sexual appeal to allure men who either unwittingly help her progress up the social ladder or pay for her youth and beauty (Zhang, 2016).

In Becky's grand plan, Jos Sedley was the first candidate who was decorated opulently with expensive commodities on a daily basis, for instance, "buckskins and Hessian boots with several immense neckcloths" (p. 17). Not only that, Jos is also respectable and loaded, as a collector in the East India Company's Civil Service, a man of extreme vanity who would spend hours on his

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everyday dressing. The only defect of Joseph must be his big person, however, to Becky, his appearance does not matter at all, and all that matters is Joseph's wealth and status and how to catch his attention and rock the boat, becoming Ms Sedley. Becky compliments Jos very loudly on his good looks in front of her sister the very first time they met (p. 17) since she knows Amelia would tell his mother, which would put their mother in a good mood for receiving good words on her son. When they dine together, Becky keeps flirting with Jos, showing her strong interest in India, however, she knows nothing about India (Thackeray, 2003, p. 21). For money and fame, she is capable of saying anything, even lying. To convince Jos that she is genuinely interested in Indian food, Becky also ate curry and chillies, which caused her great torment (p. 21). In the Victorian context, women were iconised to be "Angel in the house", same as the portrayal of Amelia Sedley, referring to as an adjunct to males' endeavor (Langland, 1992, p. 3). Men, therefore, prefer to have a gentle and virtuous woman attached to them. Additionally, the intrinsic qualities of the aristocracy, such as educational attainment and seniority, cannot be developed within a short period of time, but some characteristics externalised by the aristocracy can be emulated (Wang, 2020). Wanting to be the wife of a rich dandy, Becky has to cater for men's needs and bridge the gap with the aristocracy in her speech and behaviour. Hence, she pretends to be a gentle, ladylike and cultured woman, and would take him by the arm to go down to dinner and snuggle with him in the carriage (p. 44). Becky's gracefulness, dulcet voice, and adoration for him attract Jos and made him want to marry her. With Becky, he achieves great satisfaction in terms of his vanity and self-confidence. Furthermore, Becky's proficiency in French will undoubtedly help him to stand out in various social situations if he marries her (p. 31). In an invisible way, a reciprocal commodity relationship has been established between the two. Becky is just one option for Jos, compared to others as a commodity for sale.

In Becky's castles in the air, a husband is a prior consideration (p. 77), preferably a powerful one. There has been a commodification of the interpersonal relationship between Rawdon and Becky from the beginning (Zhang, 2016). After her first unsuccessful attempt with Jos Sedley, Becky continues availing herself of astuteness, unique charm, melodious singing voice, and playful conversation style to lure another single gentleman. Since Miss Crawley is very fond of Becky and always takes her by her side, Becky and Rawdon often bump into each other during the days in Queen's Crawley. He is deeply beloved by Becky in that he would inherit half of Miss Crawley's legacy after her death. Apart from this, he spends years running around the aristocracy as a young officer, being adept in various kinds of entertainments fashioned by the British aristocracy, mostly those related to money (p. 81). Rawdon has all the attributes that appeal to Becky. Marrying him would not only give her access to share the large inheritance, but would also offer her the opportunity to blend in with the aristocracy, with the title of Mrs Rawdon. Consequently, due to Rawdon's large amount of inheritance, friend circle, and simple-mindedness make him a pawn on Becky's chessboard. Becky's lustful tactics, coupled with her musical talent, make Rawdon easily fall in love with her.

### **III. BECKY'S COMMODIFIED INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP AFTER MARRIAGE**

In the word, to achieve the purpose of transferring and redistributing wealth, marriage is one of the most efficacious ways (Mingay, 2013). Becky thinks that her hidden marriage to Rawdon Crawley would successfully entitle her to share in Miss Crawley's vast inheritance. But eventually, it is all in vain, Becky's scheme fails once again. But the positive side is that Mrs Rawdon's status actually brings her closer to the upper echelons of society (Chang, 2021). Additionally, Becky is becoming ever more focused on material possessions and downright being reified. With an increasing number of expensive accessories on her body labelled one after another, her value in other people's eyes is raised, like commodities with ever-increasing prices.

#### **Friendship**

After marriage, Becky's network of commodified interpersonal relationships continues to expand outward, ranging from bourgeoisie and generals to servants and sergeants. Anyone who can recruit capital for her is targeted. And of these people, George Osborne is the most typical one. The particular reason that Becky does not successfully marry Jos Sedley for the first time is that George would not allow someone of Becky's low status to marry into the Sedley family. Accordingly, Becky holds a long-standing grudge against Osborne. However, after marriage, the Rawdon couple is left without Miss Crawley, their hope of luxury life, and struggles to make ends meet. The lavish lifestyle of Becky and Rawdon has left them in debt, and one of the sources of their income is George. Henceforth, Becky regains her smiling face and flatters George Osborne by her aristocratic temperament and sociability. It must be untrue to say that Becky does not hate George. Has it not been for George stirring up trouble, Becky might have long been the wife of a tax collector, sleeping on countless fortunes. But reality forces Becky to become ruthless, no longer with personal feelings. Becky could not but puts aside personal emotions in an environment of commodity society due to the irresistible lure of wealth. Becky fawned on George Osborne every time she saw him for getting him to play more cards and billiards with her husband. The more Becky toadies Osborne, the more money the couple wins over from him. Eventually, George's gambling bill to Captain Crowley for billiards and cards almost empties his pocket (p. 232).

#### **Marital Relationship**

Becky's marriage to Rawdon Crawley is not a solid one; after all, what really appeals to her was the vast inheritance he could inherit. Besides that, Becky's status as "Mrs Rawdon" is much more dignified than ever. Rawdon is no different from Jos in Becky's perspective, equally seen as a pawn in her plan. The material world is too much for Becky to resist that she makes her desire for

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money plainly clear in her letters to Rawdon: "Dearest! You shall leave that odious regiment and be a good boy, and we shall all live in Park Lane, and ma tante shall leave us all her money" (p. 137). Rawdon is no match for Becky in scheming, and everything is under her control. After marriage, Rawdon is so generous that he bought Becky a whole host of goodies on credit to satisfy her obsession with all kinds of commodities: "a piano, shawls, cappa, stick stockings, golden-French watches, bracelets and perfumery" (p. 139). These new adornments are exactly what Becky wants, commodities that highlight her distinguished status. Rather than being Becky's husband, Rawdon seems like a mobile property. In addition, while Rawdon loses his inheritance, he also gradually loses his status as a husband and a man, totally becoming Becky's tool for money-making by his power of manipulating money on the gambling table. Becky is no longer the little woman behind her husband's back, but the breadwinner of the family, manoeuvring between the rich and the nobility. After Rawdon goes to war, she comfortably estimates every valuable thing her husband has left her, revelling in the capital she gained in this marriage. Becky might have loved Rawdon, she once said with pride that she would bring fortune to him if they did not inherit Miss Crawley's money (p. 145). Nevertheless, in Becky's eyes, Rawdon, like a worthless commodity, is no longer a pushover for her and there's no need for Becky to maintain him. In the absence of material desire, the power of love is so fragile that it gradually dissipates between the two. After receiving a personal letter from Rawdon asking for help, Becky is unwilling to offer any money to ransom Rawdon (Thackeray, 2003, p. 475). This incident makes Rawdon disillusioned with Becky.

### Extramarital Relationship

After Rawdon fails to meet her wife's expectation by losing the right of inheritance, Becky, again employs her charm and sociability, successfully finds another replica — Lord Steyne, one of the "great dignitaries and illustrious defences of the throne of England" (p. 428). Since having an affair with him, Becky has reaped many stunning valuable commodities: "the brilliant diamond earrings or the superb brilliant ornament" (p. 428), which exceedingly satisfy her ravish for material desire to a large extent. Meanwhile, these commodities make her ever more greedy, wanting to obtain more from Lord Steyne. Whenever the Lord is coming to the house, there is always a well-dressed lady with "mouchoirs, aprons, scarfs, little morocco slippers and other female gimcracks" (p. 430), ready to receive him. In the presence of her nobleman, Becky is very particular about sitting and manners, as an authentic aristocrat. Becky's superior social skills, combined with the strength of her flirtatious charm, crushes the other female aristocrats, making this noble and wealthy lord deeply captivated by her. Nevertheless, if there are no shining commodities on Becky's body, she would not be paid attention to, no matter how charming and elegant she is. Her value is tremendously increased by every single commodity she wears, making her a "big guy" in others' vision. Ultimately, it is those extraordinary commodities which play an instrumental role in helping her attain such a high status. While Lord Steyne indulges in her charms, Becky, on the other hand, acts opportunistically, defrauding a large amount of money from him. Relying on Lord Steyne's financial resources, status and connections, Becky not only succeeds in blending into the aristocratic circle, but also becomes a popular one, wearing "the prettiest new dresses and ornaments; to drive to fine dinner parties (p. 649). Likewise, she enjoys the Lord's wine cellar and the rarest delicacies brought to her. Lord Steyne is like a valuable piece of merchandise, following Becky everywhere she goes and drawing attention and compliments for her without making any utterance (Thackeray, 2003, p. 461). In addition to this, it is also apparent from the conversation when Becky and Lord Steyne parts ways that Lord also treats Becky as an available commodity, rather than as an individual. "I have given you thousands of pounds, which this fellow has spent and for which he has sold you" (p. 478). In manipulating Lord Steyne, Becky is unaware of the fact that she has been commodified totally either.

## IV. IMPACTS OF COMMODIFIED INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

### Illusions and Alienation

Backed by the theories of Marx's commodity fetishism and Lukács' objectification, in a capitalist society, mankind manufactures all kinds of commodities for exchange while in the meantime creating an alien force that gives commodities a universal power over people, distorting their own grasp of commodities and thus making them blindly pursue material wealth. With such irresistible greed for commodities, people are gradually led into a state of illusion, unconsciously prioritizing inanimate objects, commodities and money over people themselves. In order to dominate more material wealth for the enjoyment of a higher social status, people rely more on these objective material products, ignoring the importance of the people around them, and falling deeper and deeper into their own illusions. Individuals who are obsessed with desire adopt exquisite goods to make colourful new clothes for themselves, not knowing that they have long been stuck in the quagmire and cannot extricate themselves.

In *Vanity Fair*, Becky, on more than one occasion, has wandered fastidiously through her extremely flamboyant fantasies. In Chapter 3, after she is informed of the fact that Jos Sedley is single and well-to-do, she forms a lifelike imagination as a mistress with a prosperous husband: "She had arrayed herself in an infinity of shawls, turbans, and diamond necklaces, and had mounted upon an elephant to the sound of the march in Bluebeard, in order to pay a visit of ceremony to the Grand Mogul" (p. 19).

From this excerpt, it is evident that Becky Sharp has become an obedient slave to the commodity, feeling satisfied solely by the power of imagination. "An infinity of shawls, turbans, diamond necklaces", by which she not only transfigured herself into a dignified fair lady, but also captured herself a husband. In Becky's fantasy, dominated by material wealth, it is only a matter of time before she steps into the upper echelons of society. Just as she had put it, "I can take my place above her in the world, as why,



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indeed, should I not?" (p. 77). It is commodity fetish that leads Becky deeper and deeper in the fantasy she has woven, measuring all interpersonal relationships in terms of money and profit. Gradually, she fully considered material gains as a priority, and became increasingly detached from her friends, husband and son, and finally lost every authentic relationship.

### Reification and Marginalization

Firstly, it is establishing commodified interpersonal relationships that temporarily entitles Becky to enjoy a high level of sophistication and money, nonetheless, it backfires her as well, making her objectified by what she has obtained. Luxurious clothes and pricy jewellery have always been the aspirations of Victorian fair ladies. In the person of Mrs Rawdon, Becky has expended much energy and talent in her dressing in order to show off her wealth and social status, despite the fact that she is no aristocrat: "She was in a pink dress that looked as fresh as a rose; her dazzling white arms and shoulders were half-covered with a thin hazy scarf through which they sparkled; her hair hung in curls round her neck; one of her little feet peeped out from the fresh crisp of the silk: the prettiest little foot in the prettiest little sandal in the finest silk stocking in the world" (p. 338).

Pink dress, hazy scarf, silk stocking, these commodities or adornments add to Becky's already charming appearance, helping her fascinate Lorde Styene. Becky is like a commodity that continues to increase in value as the decorations on her body increase, while her own value is overwhelmed by the various items on her body. One can only see what is on her and not her true self. In addition, in the patriarchal social background of the Victorian era, women are dominated by men. The objectification of herself puts Becky, who is already in a subsidiary position, at an even greater disadvantage, despite looking bright on the surface.

Secondly, in the company of Miss Crawley at Queen's Crawley, Becky often pleases the old lady by mimicking others for sarcasm, as if she belongs to a higher class. Yet she was born into the lower class. It seems that she had fit in, but in fact, she does not. The more she mimics, the more she shows her distance from the class she is born of. Furthermore, as a woman of humble origins, not only does she not fit into the ideal aristocracy class, but she is gradually marginalised by the class to which she originally belongs. It is impossible for her to fit into the mainstream, only to linger on the margins of the commodified world, satisfying her desire by consuming appealing commodities.

### CONCLUSIONS

Since the appearance of currency, diverse commodities are presented to satisfy people's demands and make people feel gratifying and pleasurable. Nevertheless, with the continuous development of society and living standards, there exists a common phenomenon that an increasing number of people become greedy and vain under the influence of various kinds of commodities which could demonstrate their wealth and status. Gradually, there appears a conversion that the power of commodities overrides that of human beings, making them the slaves of commodity controlled by their inmost desire. The capitalist concept of utilitarianism has basically become a universal value, and the relationship between people is more reflected in those between rights and money. Some will not hesitate to resort to despicable means at the expense of others so as to gain more possessions and higher social rank for themselves. As a cautionary tale, *Vanity Fair* is not so much a novel as it is a microcosm of society. Focusing on some of Becky Sharp's representative commodified interpersonal relationships before and after marriage and her related karma, this paper serves as a warning of the negative impacts of commodities as well as the material desires behind them.

Admittedly, using Marxist critical theory as the entry point is quite challenging in that the theories involved in Marxist commodification are extensive and profound. In addition, the interpersonal relations of commodification covered in this paper are only a small part of Becky's many interpersonal relations. At the same time, there are not many references available on interpersonal relations of commodification, so there are certain limitations in this field. Nonetheless, the purpose of writing this paper has been achieved and I hope it could be meaningful for the contemporary world.

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