

# Two “Immoral” Ladies in the Kaleidoscope of Victorian Age— Comparison of Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre* and Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*

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*Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair* are both masterpieces in the late 1840s in English literature. The two “immoral” female images, Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre* and Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, are “rebellious” women against Victorian ideals, but there still exist differences between them.

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## Introduction

*Jane Eyre* fell like a meteor in 1847 and literary London buzzed with speculation. Its second edition was dedicated to William Makepeace Thackeray, who has published his own masterpiece *Vanity Fair* in monthly instalments in 1847-1848. London witnessed the great success of two novels just within several months. Both Charlotte Bronte and William Makepeace Thackeray were severe exposers of contemporary society in the late forties when English critical realism of the 19th century flourished and it was a curious coincidence that they both had women as their protagonists.

### Similarities: Two “Rebellious” Women Against Victorian Ideals

Both Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp are orphan girls, penniless and friendless. Jane loses her parents shortly after birth and later is sent to a charity school for poor girls in Lowood by her aunt. Becky’s dying father, after mother is dead, sends her to Miss Pinkerton’s academy for young ladies and there she is bound over as an articulated pupil. Their trunks and clothes illustrate their awkward financial conditions clearly. When leaving Chiswick Mall, “a very small and weather-beaten old cow’s skin trunk with Miss Sharp’s card neatly upon it ... was delivered by Sambo with a grin, and packed by the coachman with a corresponding sneer” (*Vanity Fair*, p. 15). Jane is no better when she is leaving Lowood for Thornfield, “I had not a very large wardrobe, though it was adequate to my wants; and the last sufficed to pack my trunk,—the same I had brought with me eight years ago from Gateshead” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 84) and when she is to see Mr. Rochester for the first time, “I ... replaced my black stuff dress by one of black silk; the best and the only additional one I had” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 115). In addition, Rebecca once also outcries that “My poor papa could give me nothing, and I had but two frocks in all the world” (*Vanity Fair*, p. 24).

Jane and Becky were also both socially deprived in their girlhood. At Lowood, Jane had spoken to no one, nor did anybody seem to take notice of her. She usually wandered among the forms and tables and laughing groups without a companion. Moreover, when Becky is leaving Chiswick Mall, "Nobody cried for leaving her" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 16).

Jane and Becky are well-educated after having taken courses of study considered necessary for ladies in those days. Nevertheless, their behaviors are at odds with traditional notions of femininity. On leaving school, what energetic, intelligent, daring, and rebellious Becky did with the "Dixonary", the parting gift: "... Miss Sharp put her pale face out of the window, and actually flung the book back into the garden", "almost caused Jemima to faint with terror" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 16). This act of defiance and insubordination is a heroic act in the eyes of the performer because "the young lady's countenance ... assumed a smile" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 16). Becky fights for herself the first battle by resisting oppression and challenging authority when Miss Pinkerton wants her to instruct the juniors in music so that she can spare herself the expense of a master. "... Give me money, and I will teach them. ... You took me because I was useful. There is no question of gratitude between us. I hate this place, and want to leave it" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 23). When Miss Pinkerton attempts once to scold her in public, clever Rebecca hits upon the plan of answering her in French, which quite routs the old woman, because she does not know a word of French, and is too proud to confess it. This similar defiant, insubordinate, and rebellious spirit can be found in Jane as well. When she is left in guardianship of her aunt, Mrs. Reed, who is rude and unjust to the poor orphan, Mrs. Reed's own children also find pleasure in teasing and mocking Jane. Having been trodden on severely and unable to bear the ill-treatment, one day, Jane gathers her energies and launches them in the blunt sentence that

... I declare I do not love you; I dislike you the worst of anybody in this world ... I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; ... I will say the very thought of you make me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty. (*Jane Eyre*, p. 30)

### **Differences: A Self-Made Woman and a Schemer Worming Herself Into Upper Society**

In spite that Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp share the same origin as orphan and later the same identity as governess in rich families, Jane finds her own personal identity and lives with her beloved in the end, while Becky, after many vicissitudes and wanderings, worms her way into "good" society and lives like a lady, though her son refuses to see her. Wherever they go and whomever they meet, the denouement has been determined from the very beginning and will forever be the same because of their differences in birth, experiences in school, and attitudes toward love affairs.

Jane is the daughter of a poor clergyman and her "mother had married him against the wishes of her friends, who considered the match beneath her" (*Jane Eyre*, p. 20) and her "Grandfather Reed was so irritated at her disobedience, he cut her off without a shilling" (*Jane Eyre*, p. 20). It is uncertain whether she has inherited from her father the pious faith in God and from her mother the rebellious spirit and the belief of marriage based on true love, but Jane is truly a principled, self-controlled, and self-denial woman and she declares equality and love without regard to gender and class differences, judged from her statement after she has fallen in love with the master, but is told that he is going to marry another rich miss of the upper-class,

Do you think I am an automation?—a machine without feelings?—Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart! ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, or even of mortal flesh: —It is my spirit that addresses

your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are! (Jane Eyre, p. 252)

By contrast, Becky's father is an artist "with a great propensity for running into debt, and a partiality for the tavern" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 20). In consequence, he "thought to better his circumstances by marrying a young woman of the French nation, who was by profession an opera-girl" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 20). With this family background, Becky "had the dismal precocity of poverty. Many a dun had she talked to ... many a tradesman had she coaxed and wheedled" (*Vanity Fair*, p. 21). As she advances in life, "Becky Sharp struggles with a society that discriminates against her on account of her birth" (Langland, 1984, p. 72). That is why her every contact with every man aims only at bettering her circumstances.

It is true that Jane meets merciless, unsympathetic, and harsh people, but there are still Bessie to show Jane affection; Mrs. Fairfax who aids her and St. John, Diana, and Mary who save her from death. Especially Miss Temple and Helen Burns, during the maltreated and half-starved existence in Lowood, the former "is maternal in a special sense: not simply sheltering and protective, but encouraging of intellectual growth" (Rich, 1979, p. 142). And the latter, Jane's dearest friend gives her greatest comfort and warmth. Without them never can Jane maintain her hope for future and grow up to be a "docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous; very gentle, and very heroic" lady. As for Becky's school life, we are only informed that "for two years I have only had insults and outrages from her (Miss Pinkerton). I have been treated worse than any servant in the kitchen. I have never had a friend or a kind word ..." (*Vanity Fair*, p. 19). Thus, Becky forms her philosophy that revenge may be wicked, but it is natural, and she is no angel. Certainly, she is not. Along her adventurous way into the "good" society, Becky recognizes gradually the vanity, selfishness, and injustice in the world "Where money grubbing is the main motive for all members of the ruling classes, and they had no scruples whatever in employing all possible means to attain that end" (Liu, 1993, p. 306). In *Vanity Fair*, only crafty, clever, shrewd, sophisticated, resourceful, unprincipled, unscrupulous, and ruthless duper and schemer can survive. So is Becky Sharp, pragmatic, self-interested, and calculating, all in all "sharp".

With young ladies as the protagonists, relationship and love are an important part inevitably in the stories. Jane and Becky hold totally different attitudes toward the men attracting them or attracted by them. Jane flees from Mr. Rochester on the wedding day, learning that he has a wife. The decision to leave Rochester is repeated and reversed by the decision to leave St. John.

Both leave-takings exhibit the same pattern: each time the man recounts his past and tells Jane that he has observed her voyeuristically and that she possesses the qualities that could complement himself. Both times Jane interrupts and seizes power over her lover, angering him with her intractability, asserting he right to determine her own life. (Berg, 1987, p. 113)

What Jane rejects in both Rochester and St. John is their inability to see her as she really is, they can only see her as a necessary complement, an accessory, to themselves. We have seen that adherence to the moral law, to reason, to the "iron shroud" of patriarchal tradition, is so repressive as to be for Jane equivalent to "suicide". She refuses to submit to the wills of God or the men in her life, but follows her own principle to be independent from anyone. Becky Sharp may be regarded the same as Jane Eyre who is, and perhaps always has been, willing to transgress moral "law" in order to fulfill her own needs, but her story constitutes an elaborate narration of sexual deception, brutality, violation of sacred familial bond, and violent reprisal. "She flirts and carries on illicit relations with all rich and powerful men, young and old, within her rich, for the sole purpose of living a comfortable life" (Liu 1993, p. 307). Her best friend's brother, the master, the son of the master and some rich, wicked old aristocrats, and so on are all targets and preys along her way of a number of adventures. By attracting

Joseph, her friend's brother again, the unprincipled adventuress at last, gains her eventual reward, a booth of her own in *Vanity Fair*. No doubt she would still go on to hunt for another "Joseph" if she had not attained that end. For her, relationship and love are only a piece of merchandise sold at *Vanity Fair*.

### Conclusion

The English society with various strata is unfolded before readers after reading *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair* and we are brought home to the lives of women of every stratum in the first half of the 19th century. We can see women were oppressed by forces from everywhere, like tradition, customs, and women's expected roles as embodiment of many social ideals and were trained to be graceful, gentle sentimental, and weak. Yet, there came out "rebellious" women like Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp. Becky is a typical woman in a bourgeois society. Life moulds her up to be pragmatic, ambitious, resourceful, and brave. Living by the unspoken codes of her day, she has her aspiration to gain wealth and position by any means, fair or foul. In contrast to the traditional virtuous stands another defiant woman, Jane Eyre, "a keen ... daring" and "independent" woman, who asserts right to determine women's own life an equality to stand by men. Different characters' lives and actions are shaped by the moral norms and ethical beliefs of their times. But the authors' own origins, background, life experiences, and world outlook all leave imprints on their protagonists without exception, so writers in the same age present different characters before the readers. This is another persuasive proof that any creation of art comes from the real life.

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