

Battles for Property and the Awkward Rank: A Historical and Ideological Interpretation of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

Shirui Feng^{1, a}

¹East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, 200237, China

^aEmail: 2778037301@qq.com

Abstract

The research delves into the property battle between the two families, the Crawleys and the Osbornes, in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Undertaking a comprehensive analysis from both historical and ideological perspectives, this study aims to provide a Marxist interpretation of Thackeray's portrayal of the middle class and illuminate their uneasy state of existence. Drawing on Marxist criticism theories, it explores the interplay of these ideologies against the backdrop of the conservative early 19th century. It also investigates the influence of Cultural Hegemony on the middle class. This study offers insights into the nuanced dynamics of class conflict during a pivotal period in history, emphasizing the enduring value of *Vanity Fair* in dissecting the socio-economic intricacies of the middle class.

Keywords

Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero; Marxist criticism; middle class; aristocracy; ideology.

1. Introduction

Karl Marx once commented, Dickens and Thackeray, Miss Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell, their "graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together, and have described every section of the middle class from the 'highly genteel' annuitant and fundholder who looks upon all sorts of business as vulgar, to the little shopkeeper and lawyer's clerk" [1, p. 181]. As a realist writer, William Makepeace Thackeray boasts insightful observations. With a humorous and satirical touch, he vividly depicts a cross-section of society. As Anthony Trollope wrote in his biography, "Thackeray's mind was at all times peculiarly exercised with a sense of snobbishness" [2, p. 6]. "The snob" in his works is also a generalization of the image of the nineteenth-century British middle class, a social rank who admires people in the higher class and has no respect for people in the lower class. This essay will deal with these snobs and their ideologies. Through the analysis of the property battle of the two major families in *Vanity Fair*, the Crawleys and the Osbornes, from a historical and ideological context, it aims to offer a Marxist perspective on Thackeray's characterization of the middle class and reveal their awkward state of being.

2. Of Marxist Theories

Marx and Engels' theories assist critics in recognizing literature as a social phenomenon. And the saying "the base determines the superstructure," foundational to Marxist criticism, simply originates from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production

constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness [3, par.6].

Building on that, Marxist criticism theories are further developed by scholar such as Williams, Eagleton, Althusser, Goldman, becoming a prominent approach in literary criticism.

Under this context, to conduct a historical analysis of literature, it is firstly essential to comprehend the intricate and complex relationship between these works and the ideological world in which they exist, "since an ideology is always a complex phenomenon, which may incorporate conflicting, even contradictory, views of the world" [4, p. 6]. Beyond ideology, there is another concept that also needs attention, namely, Hegemony. As said in *The German Ideology*, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" [5, p. 61]. According to Williams, Hegemony is not merely the ruling ideology, nor its controlling power; it is a totality constituted by both practice and expectations. It is ultimately a "culture", but "a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes" [6, p.110].

Moreover, for better and more authentic analysis, simply grasping the positions of these classes concerning the mode of production or studying the "stages" are not enough. Within the historical process, there are factors interacting with each other: the "dominant", the "residual" and the "emergent". What has won the ruling status and "Hegemony" is the "dominant". The "residual" means any culture includes available elements of the past, but their place in the contemporary cultural process is profoundly variable, which can be incorporated into the dominant culture. The "emergent" is related to the rise of new classes, the awakening of new class consciousness, and the subsequent new cultural. When identifying, it is important to distinguish the "emergent" from those "opposing" or trying to "replacing" the dominant culture [6].

Based on these theories, this essay will explore the interaction between these cultural and ideological factors within the plot and its historical background as well as the impact of Hegemony on the middle-class.

3. The Battles for Property

The property battles discussed in this section refer to the intrigues and scrambles for inheritance respectively in the Crawley family and the Osborne family. It is evident that, in depicting this aspect, Thackeray uses war metaphors to reveal the truth:

She [Mrs. Bute Crawley] knew Rebecca to be too clever and spirited and desperate a woman to submit without a struggle; and felt that she must prepare for that combat, and be incessantly watchful against assault; or mine, or surprise [7, p. 267].

It was unlucky, to be sure, that the lad should have secured a stock of provisions on the very day when the first encounter took place; but this relief was only temporary, old Osborne thought, and would but delay George's surrender [7, p. 310].

"Combat", "assault", "stock of provision", "surrender", these words form a strong rhetorical meaning that in the situation of inheriting property, people's former relationship of close blood ties no longer exists, but a state of mutual hostility emerges; every confrontation can be regarded as a battle. Coincidentally, as the story proceeds to this point, the background events happen to be Napoleon's return to Paris, and a new war is about to begin. Under the effect of double tension, it can be sensed that the outcome of the property battle will in fact bring about a major change in the fate of the main characters just as the outcome of the war.

3.1. The Crawley family

The main contention in the Crawley family revolves around the seventy thousand pounds inheritance of Miss Crawley. The dispute consists of two rounds in total.

The opposing sides in the first round of the conflict are the ambitious Mrs. Bute Crawley and the couple, Rebecca Sharp and Captain Rawdon.

Before Becky conceived the idea of pursuing the inheritance, Mrs. Bute had already set up an ambush. According to Miss Crawley's will, fifty thousand pounds was to be allocated to her beloved nephew Rawdon, with the remaining money designated for the clergyman's family. Out of a desire for larger share of the inheritance and a strong disapproval of Becky's efficient management of the baronet's household, Mrs. Bute deliberately played matchmaker between her two enemies, Becky and Rawdon. This plan aimed to drive Becky away from Queen's Crawley and make Rawdon lose his aunt's favor. The key to the inheritance dispute lies in Miss Crawley's attitude. So, what kind of person is Miss Crawley? The narrative describes her as follows:

She was a bel esprit, and a dreadful Radical for those days. She had been in France (where St. Just, they say, inspired her with an unfortunate passion), and loved, ever after, French novels, French cookery, and French wines. She read Voltaire, and had Rousseau by heart; talked very lightly about divorce, and most energetically of the rights of women [7, p. 135].

In brief, Thackeray generalizes this old lady's character as "silly and romantic" [7]. The language in *Vanity Fair* is always distorted by a satirical tone, so the narrative descriptions cannot present the complete truth. Although Miss Crawley is referred to as a so-called radical who openly appreciates elopements regardless of social status, she is by no means an impulsive person. Instead, she exhibits shrewd calculations for her own benefit. She was well aware of Rawdon's financial situation and hoped that he married or even ran away with a wealthy wife.

I adore all impudent matches. What I like best, is for a nobleman to marry a miller's daughter [...] And what I like next best, is for a poor fellow to run away with a rich girl. I have set my heart on Rawdon running away with someone. [...] Rawdon has not a shilling but what I give him. He is crible de dettes—he must repair his fortunes, and succeed in the world [7, p. 154-155].

Although Becky sensed Mrs. Bute's malice, Rawdon was still the best ladder for her to climb up. As anticipated by Mrs. Bute, Becky and Rawdon secretly married. An alliance of shared interests was formed. Before Miss Crawley learned of the marriage, Becky had successfully ingratiated herself with her, surpassing even her longtime female companions. However, Sir Pitt Crawley's sudden proposal disrupted the plan, forcing them to reveal the marriage earlier than expected. Becky's tactics at this point were somewhat naive, lacking sufficient vigilance against hidden adversaries. Moreover, her understanding of human frailties were not subtle. She failed to detect that Miss Crawley's true nature was not as liberal and benevolent as she claimed. Actually, Miss Crawley is a woman whose thoughts are full of partiality and prejudice. Once she heard the news of the secret marriage, all the pretense went away suddenly.

"Rawdon married Rebecca—governess—nobod— Get out of my house, you fool, you idiot—you stupid old Briggs—how dare you? You're in the plot—you made him marry, thinking that I'd leave my money from him— you did, Martha," the poor old lady screamed in hysteric sentences. "I, Ma'am, ask a member of this family to marry a drawing-master's daughter?" "Her mother was a Montmorency," cried out the old lady, pulling at the bell with all her might. "Her mother was an opera girl, and she has been on the stage or worse herself," said Mrs. Bute [7, p. 232].

Mrs. Bute Crawley took advantage of Miss Crawley's sickly state, gaining control over her. She seized the fortress when the enemy departed. However, Mrs. Bute acted too hastily, imposing severe arrangements on Miss Crawley's life, making it unbearable. Becky seized the opportunity, attempting to encourage Rawdon to launch another attack by apologizing in a letter. However,

the old lady's previous romantic feelings vanished after Rawdon betrayed her, and she harbored extreme anger towards him because of Rebecca. Rawdon failed to grasp the crucial opportunity created by his wife, and lost the first round. Meanwhile, the clergyman broke his collarbone, forcing Mrs. Bute to abandon the hard-won fortress. She reluctantly concluded the first round and went back to attend to the injured.

The main contenders in the second round were Mr. Pitt Crawley and the clergyman's family, and meanwhile Rebecca and Rawdon were in France. Responding to Napoleon's return to France, Britain organized troops to the continent. During the war, Rawdon earned great merit. But Miss Crawley's heroic dreams had already been shattered. Regardless of the new Colonel and his wife's attempts to please her, she determined that she would rather let her beloved Rawdon remain poor for life than leave the couple her money. At this time, with the defense of the fortress weakened, Pitt Crawley and his fiancée joined the battle. Pitt Crawley is a hypocrite who once despised Miss Crawley's dissolute life. However, as soon as there was an opportunity to inherit the property, he immediately decided to save his aunt's soul. Mr. Crawley discovered Miss Crawley's fear of death. He made a plan to intervene gently, bringing his fiancée and her mother, Lady Southdown, to visit the aunt. Although he was mediocre in ability, he proved adept at handling critical moments, talking religion to please his future mother-in-law Lady Southdown and politics to please his aunt.

This orthodox horror of Romish superstition saved Pitt Crawley in Lady Southdown's opinion, whilst his admiration for Fox and Napoleon raised him immeasurably in Miss Crawley's eyes. Her friendship with that defunct British statesman was mentioned when we first introduced her in this history. A true Whig, Miss Crawley had been in opposition all through the war, and though, to be sure, the downfall of the Emperor did not very much agitate the old lady, or his ill-treatment tend to shorten her life or natural rest, yet Pitt spoke to her heart when he lauded both her idols; and by that single speech made immense progress in her favor [7, p. 518].

His fiancée, Lady Jane, comes from a noble background and has a personality completely opposite to Becky's, which happened to be greatly favored by Miss Crawley. However, Miss Crawley didn't immediately throw herself into the seemingly righteous arms of her big nephew. At this opportune moment, Mrs. Bute Crawley hatched another trick. Knowing that Miss Crawley was fond of young men like Don Juan, she asked her son James to visit the old lady. Initially, Miss Crawley was generous towards James. To maintain a competitive edge, Pitt Crawley managed to expose James's rude and vulgar behavior, which made Miss Crawley disgusted. As a consequence, James was quickly sent away. Thus, the clergyman's family completely lost the second round of the struggle. In France, due to the distance, Becky is unaware of Miss Crawley's specific attitude, assuming she might have a change of heart. However, the old lady thought that Becky had tarnished her reputation. The newborn baby further intensified her resentment. Finally, Miss Crawley revised her will and Mr. Crawley was the winner. Shortly after Mr. Crawley's wedding, Miss Crawley, under the control of Lady Southdown, gradually weakened and eventually passed away.

Looking back at the entire process of contention, it is easy to identify four main characters: Miss Crawley, Rebecca, Mrs. Bute Crawley, and Mr. Pitt Crawley. The situations of Mr. Crawley and Mrs. Bute Crawley are similar, both belonging to the rural landowning class, but Mr. Crawley, through inheritance, has the potential to become a Member of Parliament, making him more representative. Therefore, this section primarily analyzes the interaction between Mr. Crawley, Rebecca, and Miss Crawley, aiming to explore how various ideological factors in Regency-era England influenced people's behaviors and choices.

At the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution broke out. Edmund Burke published his work *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, fiercely criticizing the French Revolution while providing a comprehensive exposition of conservatism. He argued that custom and tradition were the fundamental norms of human society and that abandoning tradition would lead to the

overall collapse of society. Burke's book is the founding work of British conservatism, and Burke himself is the father of British conservatism. Burke's writings signaled that the upper class had shifted towards conservatism [8]. And the Tories regained power during the reign of George III, solidifying their rule by opposing the French Revolution, and keeping the Whigs in opposition until 1830 [9]. This Tory rule was the most conservative period in modern British history, with restricted people's rights and many facing political persecution.

In contrast to conservatism is radicalism, which has a richer connotation. For example, in politics, while most people condemned the French Revolution, the Whig party leader Fox actively supported it. The overall stance of the Whig party also leaned towards freedom and reform:

Owing their position to successful revolution against a King, they never adopted the unquestioning loyalty of the Tories. [...] some of the most prominent Whigs continued freely to express opinions which would have landed humbler folk in gaol, such as belief in liberty and advocacy of drastic parliamentary reform [9, p. 68].

Radicalism includes philosophical radicals who develop liberal doctrines and workers' radicals who are gradually moving towards socialism. Adam Smith, the founder of British economics, became influential after the publication *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. He was important because of the doctrine of *laissez-faire* which he took over from the French, and because he first set forth the argument in favor of free trade [9]. Then, in the nineteenth century, Bentham took up the banner of liberalism and developed a result-oriented utilitarianism. On the other side, Paine's *Rights of Men* was a rallying cry for radicalism, advocating the restoration of people's power and their liberation from poverty. His ideas later became the theoretical basis for workers' activism [8].

The struggle between Mr. Pitt Crawley, Rebecca, and Miss Crawley is a true reflection of the social conflicts in the 1810s. It is evident that the dominant ideology of the time was conservatism. The character of Mr. Crawley, as described by Thackeray, exhibits typical traits of the conservative upper class. He is highly proper, values morality and etiquette, and strives to uphold the dignity of upper-class life:

When he grew to man's estate, and came back from Christchurch, he began to reform the slackened discipline of the hall, in spite of his father, who stood in awe of him. He was a man of such rigid refinement, that he would have starved rather than have dined without a white neckcloth [7, p. 126-127].

He was religiously zealous and an evangelical:

He [...] took a strong part in the Negro Emancipation question. Then he became a friend of Mr. Wilberforce's, whose politics he admired. [...] He was in London, if not for the Parliament session, at least in May, for the religious meetings. In the country he was a magistrate, and an active visitor and speaker among those destitute of religious instruction [7, p. 128-129].

The character of Rebecca Sharp is almost the opposite of Mr. Crawley, a landed gentleman. She is an undistinguished woman, without a noble background, property, or societal respect, working as a governess. On the one hand, she is shrewd, rational, courageous, and exceptionally capable. On the other hand, she is opportunistic, almost unrestrained by moral constraints. She is a typical "economic woman" within the perspective of liberalism, embodying the spirit of unbridled capitalism. In a free-market economic system, individuals are expected to compete freely with each other, allowing them to exert their best abilities. Everyone should advance along the path of maximum personal interest, ultimately accomplishing tasks that bring the greatest benefit to society. Becky is a "heroine insofar as she understands the power of money and credit in contemporary society, and she actively uses this knowledge and money's transformative power for her own advancement" [10, p. 13]. She is adept at managing her husband's debts and, while fitting in social circles, amasses a considerable amount of secret

funds for herself. In times when conservative individuals fear change, she calmly faces the uncertainties of life. After losing the opportunity to become a baronet's wife, Becky has this inner monologue:

But Rebecca was a young lady of too much resolution and energy of character to permit herself much useless and unseemly sorrow for the irrevocable past; so, having devoted only the proper portion of regret to it, she wisely turned her whole attention towards the future, which was now vastly more important to her. And she surveyed her position, and its hopes, doubts, and chances [7, p. 227].

This monologue illustrates that Becky didn't dwell on past gains or losses but focused on what she could change in the future. This reflects an opportunist's optimism, showcasing her confidence in her ability to navigate her own affairs.

Becky Sharp enjoys what Adam Smith calls the "toil and bustle" of commercial society. Becky has a keen sense of hierarchy and believes her rightful place is at the top of the power pyramid. What sets her apart from other ambitious people is the pleasure she takes in working the machinery of society on her way to the top [11, p. 81].

Just as there is an "invisible hand" in the market, there are also "invisible rules" in social relations. Becky has a control of these rules. She knows how to manipulate the vain people around her and happily uses them as a means to her end. She enjoys the fitness of her skills to the goals she wants to achieve.

Rebecca's characterization is much more developed than Mr. Pitt Crawley's, and readers may think that she deserves the money. However, the question is, why did she lose? This essay argues that Rebecca losing to Mr. Crawley does not represent the emergent factors in society losing to dominant factors. The liberal ideology represented by Rebecca is not an emergent factor in itself; rather, it is in opposition to the dominant factors, ready to replace their existence at any moment. In 19th century Britain, the middle class had already become the backbone of the nation and actively supported parliamentary reforms to seek political status. The middle class already had its own dominant ideology, not one with a newly emerging class consciousness like the working class, so it did not belong to the new factors in society. History has also proven that the 19th century was a time of great success for liberalism. The ideology represented by Rebecca would contend with the ideology represented by Mr. Crawley and eventually replace it to some extent, becoming the dominant force in society. This is also reflected in the ending of the novel, where the *Reform Act of 1832* is passed, and the Whigs achieve a sweeping victory. Pitt Crawley has lost both of his parliamentary seats, and conservatism is gradually on the decline.

The real reason lies above Miss Crawley. As mentioned earlier, Miss Crawley justifies her dissolute life with radicalism. She seems to be a typical Whig, enthusiastic about the French Revolution and even advocating for the absence of a king in England. However, she is also an absolute egoist. She treats her companions like slaves, and her affection for Becky is based on a fabricated French aristocratic background. Once she learned that Becky's mother was a dance girl, she immediately scorned her as lowly. When the French emperor provoked war, she opposed the government's policy. After Napoleon's downfall, she would not mourn too much for her idol. Ironically, in Miss Crawley's life, the person most resembling her idol Napoleon turns out to be the lowly Becky:

If [Becky] is a mock Napoleon, he is an overblown Becky Sharp. Her life comments on the hollow vanity of his. Like him, she subverts privilege, exploits the weakness and idiocy of a hereditary aristocracy, manipulates social institutions, and campaigns daringly for victory and success. But, like him, she remains finally a ridiculous prisoner of "this world," a barren St. Helena of self [12, p. 131].

However, having such a person around her only invites her disdain and Becky is seen as ungrateful. Ultimately, Miss Crawley's radicalism is essentially a form of romanticism. The ideological content of British romanticists represents the consciousness of the traditional aristocracy and belongs to the conservative camp. "Their ideology is filled with nostalgia for traditional society, criticism of social progress, and disgust for the vulgar morals of the middle class. They stand on the moral high ground, launching fierce attacks on the moral character, governing abilities, and even the aesthetic taste of the middle class" [13, p. 78-79]. Miss Crawley's romantic inclinations are evident in her attitude towards Rawdon. Rawdon is a rascal and a playboy, but Miss Crawley stubbornly believes he is much superior to Mr. Pitt Crawley because Rawdon is the projection of her romantic hero image. Once Rawdon deviates from her expectations, the fervor brought by romanticism quickly cools, and she reverts to her conservative and vulgar nature.

One reason for Mr. Pitt Crawley's victory is his alignment with his aunt in the conservative camp, ensuring Miss Crawley's late-life and inheritance are properly taken care of. Another reason is his utilization of a societal residual factor—religion. After Napoleon's complete downfall, the romantic hero epic also came to an end. Mr. Crawley introduced Lady Jane, a perfect woman of upper-class society with religious morality, to his aunt as a form of redemption and new spiritual solace for her fallen soul. Ironically, after the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty, the old lady seemed to lose vitality quickly, and not long after, she gradually succumbed to the harsh religious rule represented by Lady Southdown, heading towards the death she had long feared.

3.2. The Osborne family

The Osborne family's property battle, unlike that of the Crawley family, is essentially a domestic sovereignty conflict, which ends up with the death of George Osborne. Old Mr. Osborne, having great expectations for his son George, wished him to marry a wealthy woman and thus enter higher society.

Old Osborne thought she would be a great match, too, for his son. He should leave the army; he should go into Parliament; he should cut a figure in the fashion and in the state. His blood boiled with honest British exultation, as he saw the name of Osborne ennobled in the person of his son, and thought that he might be the progenitor of a glorious line of baronets [7, p. 298].

Although George had many flaws, he was unwilling to be entirely controlled by his father. Driven by his own sense of goodness and encouraged by his friend Dobbin, he decided not to abandon Amelia. This decision infuriated his father, leading to the deprivation of George's inheritance. During George's fight with his father, his sisters and his future brother-in-law, in fact, contributed to the turmoil. It was because when George lost the right to inherit the property, the actual dowry for his sisters would increase.

The Osborne family appeared to have weathered the economic crisis brought about by Napoleon. They couldn't wait to gloat over Sedley's misfortune. However, Old Osborne actually also suffered significant losses—his investments failed because he lost his most important capital: his son, his hope.

In *Vanity Fair*, the personality of Old Osborne, Becky, and the baronet are remarkably similar, driven solely by self-interest. Similar traits manifest differently in each character—cunning in Becky, vulgarity in the baronet, and extreme snobbery in Old Osborne. Old Osborne is a devout believer in "pay-in-cash", habitually jingling all the guineas and shillings in his great pockets during conversations. He controls his children with money: his son is his hope for social advancement, his eldest daughter serves as the household manager, forced into spinsterhood, and his youngest daughter is part of a business deal valued at twenty thousand pounds between him and one "City Aristocrats." Old Osborne is a tyrant in the family, yet simultaneously, he is a slave to the cultural hegemony of the aristocracy. Both he and his son are psychologically corrupted by this hegemony.

“Thackeray mischievously suggests that the Victorian bourgeoisie was driven not by utilitarian calculation or domestic ideology, but by the desire for aristocratic status” [14, p. 138]. Under the cultural hegemony of the aristocracy, there is a prevailing trend in British society to look upward, with the lower class emulating the middle class, and the middle class following the upper class. The values of the aristocracy serve as a model. George, in this context, is a casualty of this prevailing trend. Cole calls him “the mirror-gazing man—an image fraught with implicit gender reversal” [14, p. 139]. He has limited abilities and lacks a sense of responsibility. However, he places great importance on personal appearance, crafting himself into a fashionable playboy to please the aesthetic hegemony of the aristocracy and thus befriend the prodigal sons of the upper class. In this process, he himself was continuously objectified, and the money in his hands was easily swindled by individuals like Rawdon. Although Rawdon took advantage of George in many ways, he and his wife secretly mocked him. It can be said that even if George did not die on the battlefield, he would eventually go bankrupt due to his own vanity. The dilemma of the Osborne family is also a result of the mismatch between social existence and social consciousness. Old Osborne is a businessman and quite wealthy, but he and his son are staunch Tories, much more conservative in their thinking than characters like Becky Sharp. They fail to see new avenues of ascent. Old Osborne memorizes *the Peerage*, forges aristocratic emblems, attempting to quietly achieve a class transition. Although the upper class do recruit new members of middle-class origin, the attempt to blend lifestyle and values of upper class with those of the middle class could be disastrous. Stearns reveals the reality, “capitalists increasingly captured the power base, but the middle class did not, even when it approved of the new direction of the upper class. Elements of the middle class might still rise to upper-class status, but this kind of mobility does not prove class merger” [15, p. 393].

All in all, in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray portrays the awkward position of the middle class through the Osborne family and Becky Sharp. Whether it is the upper-middle-class Old Osborne or the lower-middle-class Becky, both must attempt to align themselves with the aristocracy to fulfill their ambitions, yet acceptance proves elusive. They are aware of their social status but fail to unite with others in the same class to collectively strive for political and social influence. Instead, they engage in divisive behavior, elevating some while denigrating others, fostering mutual discrimination. This aspect evokes a poignant reflection.

4. Conclusion

In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray suggests that middle-class Britons not only desire to become aristocratic, but they also live in the fixed illusion that they are already aristocratic. A careful reading also reveals that among the middle class in the book, there are no individuals engaged in industrial manufacturing or other tangible industries. Instead, they are securities brokers, merchants, bankers, teachers, clergymen, and military officers, creating a sense of vanity. As a liberal, Thackeray tries to use these counterexamples to portray his ideal middle-class lifestyle beliefs. His “conduct book aims to produce an urbane, elegant, but unpretentious and unsnobbish bourgeois style of living, one that will not be dependent on imitation of aristocratic habits” [15, p. 152].

In conclusion, from a historical perspective, the story of *Vanity Fair* unfolds in the early 19th century during a conservative period. The aftermath of the French Revolution posed a threat to the monarchy, leading to an increased assertiveness of the aristocracy in propagating their ideologies. Liberalism, unwilling to be subdued, vigorously vied for dominance in mainstream ideologies, while remnants of religious influences continued to permeate various aspects of life. The middle class emerged as the backbone of the nation against revolutionary and radical excesses, serving as an antidote to a corrupt and parasitic aristocracy as well as a victim of their Cultural Hegemony. However, with changes in the international situation and the development

of free trade, social classes continued to evolve. The era of liberal prominence began to shine brightly after 1832.

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