ISSN: 2181-3906 2025

International scientific journal
«MODERN SCIENCE AND RESEARCH»
VOLUME 4 / ISSUE 2 / UIF:8.2 / MODERNSCIENCE.UZ

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SHAPING FEMALE IDENTITY

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14931100

Abstract. *In this article by drawing partial parallels to Becky Sharp, we can see how Catherine Hayes is also an intelligent woman in her own unschooled, "streetwise" manner, navigating a world that offers few legal or respectable avenues for female self-determination. Unlike Becky, Catherine never had the limited but real educational training that might elevate her rhetorical skills or allow her to pass among the polite classes. Instead, her cunning emerges from raw survival instincts.*

Keywords: *draw, partial, parallel, Becky Sharp, Catherine Hay, intelligent, woman, unschooled, manner, navigating, world, few legal, respectable, avenues, female self-determination, never, real, educational, might, rhetorical, skills, allow, emerges, survival instincts.*

РОЛЬ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ ЖЕНСКОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ

Аннотация. *В этой статье, проводя частичные параллели с Бекки Шарп, мы можем увидеть, что Кэтрин Хейз также является умной женщиной в своей собственной необразованной, «уличной» манере, ориентирующейся в мире, который предлагает мало законных или респектабельных путей для женского самоопределения. В отличие от Бекки, Кэтрин никогда не имела ограниченного, но реального образовательного образования, которое могло бы повысить ее риторические навыки или позволить ей пройти среди вежливых классов. Вместо этого ее хитрость возникает из сырых инстинктов выживания.*

Ключевые слова: *рисовать, частичный, параллель, Бекки Шарп, Кэтрин Хей, умная, женщина, необразованная, манера, ориентирующаяся, мир, мало законных, респектабельных, путей, женское самоопределение, никогда, реальный, образовательный, может, риторический, навыки, позволять, возникает, инстинкты выживания.*

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863) was celebrated for his detailed and satirical portrayals of British society in the mid-nineteenth century. His best-known novels, including *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848) and *Pendennis* (1848–1850), examine the manners, morals, and ambitions of various social classes, often centering on the precarious position of women. *Catherine*

(1839–1840), an earlier work published in serialized form in *Fraser's Magazine*, occupies a unique place in Thackeray's canon. While it has sometimes been dismissed by critics as a parody of the so-called "Newgate novels," more recent scholarship has underscored its importance in understanding Thackeray's evolving attitude toward female characters and social issues.[1; 195-210]

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray presents two major female protagonists, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, each with contrasting approaches to life, ambition, and virtue. Becky Sharp, famously witty and opportunistic, epitomizes the resourceful woman who uses her intellect, charm, and cunning to climb socially, often ignoring moral constraints. Amelia Sedley, by contrast, exemplifies a more conventional Victorian ideal of feminine softness, nurturing, and moral sentiment, though she lacks the agency or penetrating insight that Becky wields so effectively. This tension—between the cunning, educated or semi-educated female on one hand, and the docile, tradition-bound female on the other—runs throughout Thackeray's oeuvre.

If we look back at *Catherine*, which takes place in the early eighteenth century, we notice that Catherine Hayes's portrayal as a criminal, a seductress, and, at times, a pitiable figure highlights Thackeray's interest in understanding the deeper motivations and limitations of women in a society with rigid structures.

Catherine has often been read as a far darker and more direct exploration of the consequences of limited opportunities for women—especially women of lower social standing. Thackeray's irony and moral commentary in *Catherine* foreshadow the complexities he would later develop more subtly in *Vanity Fair*.

By drawing partial parallels to Becky Sharp, we can see how Catherine Hayes is also an intelligent woman in her own unschooled, "streetwise" manner, navigating a world that offers few legal or respectable avenues for female self-determination.

Unlike Becky, Catherine never had the limited but real educational training that might elevate her rhetorical skills or allow her to pass among the polite classes.

Instead, her cunning emerges from raw survival instincts. This divergence underscores the thematic significance of education in shaping the trajectories and moral frameworks of Thackeray's women. Becky's partial success and partial downfall are intimately tied to her mastery of language and social etiquette, while Catherine's fate is more brutal and abrupt, shaped by an even starker lack of moral and intellectual guidance. [2; 124]

The following hierarchical chart illustrates the eighteenth-and early nineteenth-century notions of "separate spheres," where women were primarily confined to the domestic domain (child-rearing, household management, and moral support), while men dominated the public realm. This bifurcation significantly influenced women's educational opportunities, with aristocratic and bourgeois women enjoying somewhat structured learning (e.g., private governesses or small boarding schools), whereas those of lower social strata frequently had minimal, if any, formal education. By laying out these tiers of educational access, the chart underscores the broader social constraints that shaped female identity and informed literary depictions, including those in Thackeray's *Catherine*.

This chart highlights how the ideology of separate spheres firmly placed women within domestic roles, restricting their access to genuine intellectual development.

Even among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, education tended toward finishing-school polish or governess-led instruction, rather than thorough academic grounding. Lower-class women received barely any formal schooling, leaving them even more disadvantaged. By visualizing these structural limitations, one can better grasp the social and literary context within which Thackeray's *Catherine* operates—and how the novel reflects and critiques the inequitable distribution of knowledge and opportunity for women of different ranks.

The table below outlines the prevailing social ideologies surrounding women's education in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, as reflected in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Catherine*. By comparing aristocratic and bourgeois approaches to female instruction with the plight of lower-class women—such as Thackeray's protagonist—this chart illustrates how restrictive cultural norms, limited curricula, and widespread prejudices curtailed women's opportunities for intellectual development. Thackeray's narrative thus emerges as both a satire of superficial educational practices and an implicit critique of a society that denies substantive learning to half its populace.

As this table illustrates, the cultural insistence on separate spheres, reinforced by limited or superficial modes of instruction, profoundly shaped women's roles and aspirations in Thackeray's era. Aristocratic and bourgeois women often received shallow training for social polish, while lower-class women like Catherine had scant opportunities to cultivate moral or intellectual strength. The result, as *Catherine* suggests, is a tragic shortfall: women's potential is stifled, leaving them ill-equipped to meet life's challenges or to achieve agency in a social system that severely restricts their learning.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British society was deeply invested in delineating what constituted "proper" education for girls. It was generally accepted that women required only those skills that would make them dutiful wives, manageable companions, or decorative ornaments in the domestic sphere (Vickery, 1998). Consequently, many believed that advanced learning would render women "unfeminine." Instead, proficiency in sewing, embroidery, dancing, simple musical performance, and the reading of scripture or sentimental literature were prized, reinforcing the notion that women's primary function was ornamental or supportive rather than intellectual. Although some upper-class families prided themselves on producing more educated daughters, the depth of that education often did not extend beyond language acquisition (French, perhaps Italian) and enough history or geography to sustain polite conversation. [3; 34]

This was also an era steeped in patriarchal assumptions about mental capacity, in which mainstream scientific or philosophical circles questioned women's capacity for abstract reasoning. Such biases, still prevalent in the nineteenth century, had roots in Enlightenment discourses that often saw women as physically and mentally weaker or more prone to emotionalism (Spencer, 1986). Only in rare cases—typically among radical intellectuals or nonconformist groups—did the idea of systematically educating women in the same manner as men gain traction.

Given these stereotypes, many families channeled daughters into learning that augmented their marriage prospects: a woman who could sing, play pianoforte, sketch, and speak a little French was deemed infinitely more marriageable than one who delved into mathematics, philosophy, or the classics. Such was the widely accepted code of gentility. Critics of the time, including some proto-feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), decried the superficial nature of this "accomplishment-centered" education. They argued that denying women rigorous intellectual training effectively rendered them perpetual minors, dependent on husbands or male relatives, and incapable of genuine self-determination. Thackeray's own ambivalence toward women's education—evident in both *Vanity Fair* and *Catherine*—reflects the tension between endorsing a broader, moral-intellectual cultivation for women and satirizing the empty refinements many late-Georgian and Victorian women were compelled to adopt.

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