

### VANITY FAIR.

It is almost a century and a half since the English novel took its rise. It would be an interesting study to note the objects and motives of the workers in this department of our literature since that date, whether as the outcome of the times or as manifestations of the characteristics of the writers themselves.

From the time when Richardson and his co-workers pleaded the cause of virtue in language which brought discredit upon their aim, until Dickens in our later time made an exposure of the defects in the educational and poor law systems, the misery of chancery wards and prisoners for debt, novel writing has outdone the drama itself in the range of subject matter.

Among the many uses to which it has been applied is that of social reform, if criticising human frailties can effect much in this direction. Be this last as it may, Thackery has certainly employed satirical fiction with the greatest success.

No one of his works rears more plainly on its title page its object than does "*Vanity Fair*." Its introduction, too,—“Before the Curtain,” as it is called, suggests the tenor of the whole. “As the manager of the performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place.” Then, concluding a summary of the follies being enacted there, he adds, “Yes, this is *Vanity Fair*; not a moral place certainly, not a merry one though very noisy.”

Although avowedly “A novel without a hero,” one character—that of Rebecca Sharp, maintains a prominent position throughout. A place of honour in the social world is her ambition. A mistress of strategy, she does not scruple to employ any means to further her designs. All those finer sensibilities which are the grace of true womanhood were wanting in her nature. But although loveless and false, she was withal witty, clever

and cheerful, and could command at pleasure the *appearance* of those feelings of which she was entirely destitute. Her intellect and practical talent were the chief factors in her society conquests. How best to make my Lord Steyne or General Tufto her admirers; or “how to live on nothing a year” and yet maintain the semblance of spending the income of a retired member of the East India Company were to her problems easily solved and applied.

In no position does she appear to worse advantage than in the treatment of her little son. “During two years she had scarcely spoken to the child. She disliked him . . . . The mother’s dislike increased to a hatred: the consciousness that the child was in the house was a reproach and a pain to her.” And this “to a fine open-faced boy, with blue eyes and waving flaxen hair, sturdy in limb, but generous and soft in heart, fondly attaching himself to all who were good to him.” Even the rough Colonel, his father, who had played his part in more than one fatal duel would caress him for hours together, and fondly declare that he was “the finest boy in England.” These, the tenderest and strongest of ties, when they came between the mother and her aims are thus seen to have been nonentities.

Perhaps the character of Mrs. Crawley, *nee* Rebecca Sharp, is the extreme one of “*Vanity Fair*.” This much, however, can be affirmed,—all the other impersonations with two exceptions are modified forms of principles akin to hers.

Thackery’s object seems to have been twofold. To display in its true colours the hollowness of higher London society during the first quarter of the present century was the primary purpose; affording in its execution opportunities to comment upon the inborn foibles of humanity. That, in an age which pronounced George the Fourth, after his notorious treatment of his wife, “the first gentleman in Europe,” there was much to condemn cannot be doubted. That there is much in the same circles at present open to