

The Shackles of “Things” and the Prison of Class: A Material Semiotic Interpretation of Marriage Transactions in *Vanity Fair*

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Abstract

William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is set in the Victorian era and vividly portrays a society obsessed with material desires. This article takes the perspective of material semiotics, selecting key material objects such as dowries and jewelry in the novel's marriage transaction scenes for analysis, aiming to explore the class implications these material symbols carry and the hidden power struggles behind them. The study shows that these material symbols are not only indispensable bargaining chips in marriage transactions but also become class barriers and invisible shackles. The female characters in the novel make markedly different choices in this marriage game mediated by material wealth, yet their fates ultimately converge, as none manage to break free from these shackles, becoming victims of the class prison. So, this article attempts to uncover the hypocritical veil of the Victorian marriage system by interpreting the symbolic meanings of these material objects, thereby revealing the real survival difficulties and struggles of women at that time under the dual pressures of materialism and class.

Keywords

Vanity Fair; material semiotics; marital transactions; class barriers; women's fate.

1. Introduction

In Victorian England, the rapid progress brought about by the Industrial Revolution not only affected the socio-economy, but also fundamentally changed the traditional class divisions and social values. In this environment, money and property gradually became the main criteria for judging a person's social position, and marriage became a key channel for individuals to climb to a higher social class and consolidate family economic resources. William Makepeace Thackeray, as an important realist writer of the Victorian era, wrote the famous work *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray, 2019:45), which revolves around the life experiences of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley. The novel presents the different decisions they made in the realm of marriage during the Victorian period and the completely different life outcomes that resulted from these decisions. Thackeray created many characters in the novel, most of whom are selfish and hypocritical. He mercilessly points out the flaws of his characters, which is a notable and prominent feature of Thackeray's novels—the absence of heroes allows readers to understand and realize that the society of that time was corrupt and morally depraved. For a long time, the academic discussion of 'Vanity Fair' has mostly focused on character analysis, social hierarchy criticism and feminist interpretation. In character analysis, researchers often regard Becky and Amelia as two typical Victorian women, and analyze the deep influence of their personality characteristics on their respective life trends. When it comes to social class criticism, most of the existing studies focus on the novel's deep portrayal of the hypocrisy of the aristocracy and the selfishness of the bourgeoisie. The feminist perspective focuses more on the analysis of the real living conditions of women in the patriarchal society, and excavates the resistance

potential and spiritual needs hidden in women. However, in the current research, few scholars use the theoretical perspective of material semiotics to systematically sort out the symbolic significance of various items in the marriage transaction of the novel, and rarely discuss the actual impact of these items on the social hierarchy and women's personal fate. The main point of material semiotics is that objects not only have practical functions (Eagleton, 2018 : 37), but also have rich cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. They are the specific carriers of social relations and power structures. In the marriage transactions described by "Vanity Fair," material wealth such as dowry, jewelry and property has long exceeded its original practical value and has become the main channel for transmitting and maintaining social power relations. Based on the theory of material semiotics, this paper selects representative material symbols in 'Vanity Fair' to analyze, deeply studies the symbolic role of these symbols in marriage transactions, and examines how they participate in shaping the social hierarchical structure of the Victorian era and how they become the actual shackles that restrict women's development. This paper points out the survival dilemma and development obstacles faced by women at that time, and also provides a new direction for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural outlook of the Victorian era and the social situation of women.

2. "Objects" from the Perspective of Material Semiotics and Marriage Transactions in the Victorian Era

2.1. The core theory of material semiotics

Material semiotics is an interdisciplinary research theory that comes from general semiotics. It adds "objects" into semiotics research, and puts focus on the symbolic features and social meaning that objects have. Traditional semiotics mostly works on linguistic signs, and material semiotics is different from that — it pushes the boundaries of sign study much further. Its main idea is that all kinds of material things in the world can work as signs, they have both signifier and signified. An object's signifier matches its physical shape, and the signified is the cultural ideas, social values and power connections it carries (Barthes, 2013: 43). Within the theoretical framework of material semiotics, what an object means is not set from the start. People build and explain that meaning only in specific social and cultural situations. The same object can get totally different symbolic meanings, when it's in different time periods of history or different cultural settings. On top of that, the symbolic meaning of an object isn't just one single layer — it has multiple meanings and can be really complicated. Material semiotics also shows very clearly how objects and ordinary people interact with each other. It says objects are not just things people make, they are also important things that shape how people think and what they do. When people use, consume and talk about what objects mean, they take part in building social meanings for those objects; also, objects use their symbolic meaning to change people's sense of self, what they value and the choices they make in their behavior.

2.2. The Materialized Characteristics of Marriage Transactions in the Victorian Era

In Victorian England, you could find clear signs of money and material exchange being built right into the institution of marriage. This old system had already given up on real emotional connections between men and women, turning marriage into just a social game where the main goal was getting practical benefits. Different social classes had totally different things they wanted from marriage: old hereditary aristocrats saw these family alliances as a main way to make their family's name stronger, and to collect more wealth and power for themselves. The new middle class that had started growing, which held lots of capital, thought of marriage as a quick way to get into high society, and also an important path to move up the social ladder. For women living at the very bottom of society, marriage was often the only option they had to get

away from being poor, and to make sure they had a steady life to live. In Victorian English society, the formation of marriage was always inseparable from the essence of material exchange, long having detached from the emotional core between men and women, turning into a social struggle centered on interests. Hereditary aristocrats maintained family status and accumulated wealth and power through marriages; the emerging bourgeoisie used marriage to gain access to high society and achieve social mobility; and women from lower classes could only see marriage as their last hope to escape poverty and attain a stable life. In this utilitarian marriage transaction, “materiality” ran through its core. A dowry could be considered a woman’s “entry ticket” into the marriage market, and its richness directly affected her voice within the family and her life trajectory. Women from wealthy families with substantial dowries often had the opportunity to marry into prestigious families or affluent merchant households; conversely, women with small dowries or no dowry at all were always in a passive position in matrimonial choices and might even face lifelong unmarried status. In addition to dowries, precious items such as sparkling jewelry, meticulously sewn fine clothes, and impressive estates were also indispensable components of marital transactions (Miller, 2010:58). Against this backdrop, women themselves became a special “commodity” in the marriage market: their appearance, gentle temperament, family background, and other traits were converted into negotiable chips. Men acquired women’s dowries and labor through marriage, while women exchanged these for long-term economic support and corresponding social status. This marriage model, dominated by material interests, completely stripped love of its purity, turning the union of the sexes into a cold exchange of benefits.

3. The Core Material Symbols of Marital Transactions in *Vanity Fair*

3.1. Women’s “Entry Ticket” and “Price Tag”

In the narrative of *Vanity Fair*, the dowry is the core material marker that runs through the entire process of the marriage market. It serves not only as the ticket for women to enter the marriage market but also as a direct label indicating a woman’s marital value. For Victorian women, the size of a dowry directly affected their starting position in the marriage game and even the trajectory of their entire lives (Thackeray, 2019: 45). Amelia Sedley, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, possessed a substantial dowry of twenty thousand pounds, making her instantly a sought-after target in the marriage market. At that time, twenty thousand pounds was a significant sum, and this dowry not only brought considerable economic vitality to the husband’s family but also substantially elevated their social status. Because of this, Amelia attracted numerous suitors, including George Osborne, a member of the aristocracy. However, George’s affection for Amelia was never connected to genuine feelings; he only cared about the dowry that could alleviate his family’s urgent financial needs. In his view, Amelia’s worth was entirely determined by this dowry, and she herself was merely a body containing the wealth. In stark contrast to Amelia was Becky Sharp, who came from a poor background. As the daughter of a destitute artist, Becky had neither money nor any dowry, making her encounters in the marriage market extremely difficult. Entering high society through conventional means was entirely impossible for her; to achieve her wish of entering a higher class, she had to rely on her beauty and intelligence, actively participating in the competition of this marriage market. She ultimately decided to marry Rawdon Crawley, the second son who held only a noble title without inheritance rights, attracted to his aristocratic identity and hoping to use his connections and resources to open the doors to high society. Through this marriage, she finally obtained nobility and achieved an initial rise in class, yet the mark of her lowly origin always followed her, never fully removable. The dowry, as a highly representative material marker, not only determined a woman’s status in the marriage market but also subtly influenced their self-perception. Under the constraints of Victorian patriarchy, women were frequently instilled

with the idea that a dowry equaled their entire value. They were educated from a young age to labor for the accumulation of a dowry, with the sole lifelong aspiration being to marry into a good family. This distorted value system gradually caused women to lose independent self-awareness, ultimately turning them into mere material appendages. Amelia was a victim of this mindset; she placed all happiness in George and treated the dowry as the only bond sustaining their marriage. When news of George's death at the Battle of Waterloo reached her, Amelia's mental world collapsed instantly, and she subsequently fell into despair, unable to ever recover.

3.2. Jewelry and Clothing: Symbols of Class Identity and Performance Props

In the writing of *Vanity Fair*, jewelry and clothing are never simply decorative items, but rather material symbols laden with class significance (Barthes, 2013:43). They serve both as direct markers for dividing social circles according to status and as performance tools for characters navigating and surviving in the flashy world of vanity. In Victorian upper-class society, the texture, style, and opulence of jewelry and clothing had long become an invisible class boundary. The attire choices of women from different social strata were strictly confined within the framework of existing social rules. Take Miss Crawley, for example. This elder member of the Crawley family possessed various types of jewelry and exquisitely made clothing (Thackeray, 2018:89). Her daily attire was extremely luxurious, and every gesture she made relied on her clothing and jewelry to maintain the dignity and prestige of her aristocratic household. For them, these sparkling adornments and carefully stitched elegant garments had long surpassed the basic function of beautifying appearance; they became a concrete expression of aristocratic privilege and glory. From the perspective of women in the emerging bourgeoisie, jewelry and elegant clothing are important stepping stones to gaining entry into high society (Miller, 2010:58). They were willing to spend large sums on precious decorations and luxurious apparel, intentionally mimicking the dress style of aristocratic women, hoping to gain recognition and acceptance in upper-class circles. Amelia is a typical example. After marrying George Osborne and entering aristocratic circles, she began wearing rare jewelry and luxurious clothing, striving to move closer to the image of an aristocratic lady. Yet, this imitation ultimately remained superficial; no matter how lavish her outfit, it could never erase the marks of her class origin, and women of the emerging bourgeoisie ultimately found it difficult to truly integrate into the core of the aristocracy. As for Becky Sharp, her use of jewelry and clothing carried an even more utilitarian flair; these items were merely tools for playing the game in *Vanity Fair*. Becky was well aware of the class-signifying value of jewelry and attire, using a dazzling and sumptuous appearance to craft an image in line with upper-class expectations, thereby gaining recognition and trust within the circles. After entering high society, she further capitalized on expensive jewelry and lavish clothing to boost her status, attempting to mask her lowly origin with a glamorous exterior. However, this performance, using clothing and jewelry as props, ultimately ended in failure; no matter how luxurious her attire, it could not change her innate class identity, nor did it allow her to truly secure her position in upper society. For women in high society, elegant attire and exquisite jewelry are viewed as crucial tools for maintaining their social standing and class identity. Hence, many are willing to invest considerable time and money in grooming their personal image to earn respect in elite circles. Over time, this obsession with outward appearances traps women in an endless pursuit of external beauty, gradually weakening their self-perception and eroding their sense of independence in the process.

3.3. Mansion: The Spatial Carrier of Class Power

In Victorian England, the significance of a residence went beyond merely providing a place to live; it had become a key symbol for distinguishing people's social status. In the vivid stories of *Vanity Fair*, estates were even more weighty material symbols, concretely embodying class power through their spatial form. The Crawley family's estate is a typical example: its grand

and elegant architecture directly reflects the family's noble status and social influence. For the aristocracy, magnificent estates and residences were tangible manifestations of power, silently demonstrating their control over land and people. In contrast, the homes of the emerging middle class were mostly located in newly developed urban areas. Although they fell far short of aristocratic houses in size and luxurious decoration, they still displayed the owner's substantial economic strength and career success. For this emerging class, owning a respectable and impressive home was not only a way to showcase personal achievement but also an important means to gain access to high society and elevate social status. Mr. Sedley, Amelia's father, as a representative of the newly affluent bourgeoisie, had a spacious and comfortable residence, which directly reflected his accumulated wealth and social position. The situation for the lower class was entirely different. For them, having a decent home was an almost unattainable luxury, with many crowded into dilapidated dwellings in urban slums with poor living conditions and hygiene. This was precisely the case for Becky Sharp before her marriage: a small, humble room that clearly marked her lowly origins and her position at the bottom of society. As a material embodiment of class differentiation, residences were not only external markers of identity and power but also deeply shaped people's lifestyles and social activities. People of different classes were separated into their own living spaces, with little interaction, making the already strict class boundaries even harder to cross. In this way, residences became spatial representations of class power, using physical separation to maintain and reinforce the existing social order and class structure of Victorian England.

4. The Shackles of "Things": The Fetters of Material Symbols on Women's Fate

4.1. The Dissolution of Women's Self-Consciousness by Material Symbols

In the story world of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, lots of material symbols slowly turn into chains that tie down women's fates. They keep eating away at the independent selfhood that women should have, and in the end turn them into nothing more than attachments to material wealth. The deeply rooted patriarchal system of Victorian England directly linked a woman's social worth to what material things she owned. Because of this link, the self-awareness that women might have awakened to was hidden behind all the bright, complicated forms of material things. It slowly got fuzzier and then faded away completely (Thackeray, 2019: 45). Amelia Sedley's life is a really clear example of the problems women faced back then. Because she had a large dowry, she became a very popular choice in the marriage market. But she put all her hope for happiness in George Osborne's hands, and she even used her dowry as the main thing to keep her marriage going. She never tried to find her own meaning in life or what she cared about spiritually. She was always stuck in the "good wife and loving mother" role that society forced on her, followed what George wanted without question, and at the end lost the ability to think for herself and make her own choices. When George died in the Battle of Waterloo, Amelia's whole inner world fell apart right away, and she fell into a hole of despair she couldn't get out of. At the root of it all, her tragedy came from tying her own personal value completely to material wealth and protection from a man, so that she lost her independent thinking in the end. Even though Becky Sharp tried to stand up against the chains of her fate on her own, she still couldn't get away from the limits that material symbols put on her in the end. Born into humble origins and penniless, she was naturally at a disadvantage in the marriage market. To achieve upward mobility, she had to leverage her beauty and intelligence, actively entering the game of marital transactions, using her appearance and wit as capital to open the doors of high society. Yet Becky's rebellion ultimately ended in failure: although she attained noble status, she could never fully shed the marks of her lower-class birth, nor did she find her true self-value. Her tragedy stems precisely from treating material wealth and social class as the ultimate life goals,

eventually losing herself in her desire for material gain and abandoning recognition and insistence on her own value. Driven by the strong pull of material symbols, women's self-awareness is continuously weakened, ultimately reducing them to mere dependents of material possessions. They cannot independently examine their own life value or spiritual direction, passively subjecting themselves to the whims of fate. Under the structural constraints of Victorian patriarchal society, women's subjectivity is continually suppressed and eroded, ultimately rendering them victims of a dual mechanism of class differentiation and gender oppression (Armstrong, 2012: 76).

4.2. The Manipulation of Women's Marital Choices by Material Symbols

In the context of the story of *Vanity Fair*, the influence of material symbols not only erodes women's self-awareness but also manipulates the course of their marriages with an invisible force. The marriage circles of the Victorian era had long turned into an arena of competing interests, where the amount of material wealth replaced emotional compatibility as the core standard for evaluating the value of marriage, and women's choices in marriage were thus firmly restricted by the scale of material possessions. Amelia Sedley's marriage is a typical example under the control of material symbols (Armstrong, 2012:76). With a substantial dowry of twenty thousand pounds, she became an object of pursuit by many men as soon as she entered high society, yet the partner she ultimately chose was George Osborne, a wealthy idler from an aristocratic family. George's affection for Amelia was never about sincere love; it was merely about her substantial fortune, which could alleviate the financial difficulties of his declining family. From beginning to end, Amelia's marriage could not escape the transactional nature; she became a tool for George to amass wealth, yet she never saw the utilitarian essence behind the relationship. Becky Sharp's marriage choices were also tightly bound by the shackles of materialism and class. The hypocritical and materialistic *Vanity Fair* where Becky lived is a society of the survival of the fittest, profit-seeking, lacking in sentiment and morality, sycophantic, controlled by money in every aspect—a market of fame and fortune. In this market, for fame, profit, money, and status, everything can be sold: conscience, friendship, love, parental love, filial affection, sibling relationships, and personal dignity; everything can be exploited: baseness, theft, deceit, fraud, extortion, even murder. Becky was born into poverty, had nothing at all, with neither a dowry to rely on nor a prominent family background to support her, and could not enter high society through conventional means. Driven by her ambition to rise in social class, she set her sights on Rawdon Crawley—the family's second son who, although without inheritance rights, held an aristocratic title. For Becky, this marriage was likewise a carefully calculated transaction: she used marriage as a stepping stone to gain aristocratic status, taking the first step in crossing class boundaries. The strong control of material symbols over marriage choices completely stripped marriage of its emotional core, transforming it into a purely transactional arrangement. Under the layered constraints of Victorian patriarchy, women were unable to control their own marital fate or break free from the shackles of materialism, ultimately destined to become double victims of class society and gender oppression.

5. Class Prison: Social Barriers Constructed by Material Symbols

5.1. Material Symbols and the Shaping of Class Identity

In *Vanity Fair*, material symbols serve both as the core capital in the marriage game and as the key vehicle for defining class identity. Class divisions in the Victorian era were distinct, with different social strata marking their status through exclusive material symbols, which thus became intuitive indicators of class distinction. The aristocracy often relied on rare jewelry, luxurious clothing and accessories, and grand residences to demonstrate their noble status and power. These material carriers were not only external manifestations of aristocratic privileges

but also clear annotations of their class affiliation (Poovey, 2014: 95). The emerging bourgeoisie, meanwhile, were keen on acquiring valuable ornaments and building comfortable homes, deliberately imitating aristocratic lifestyles in hopes of entering high society and gaining recognition. However, even if their material possessions resembled those of the aristocracy, they inevitably bore the inherent imprint of the bourgeois class and could not truly count as aristocrats. The lower classes were unable to possess such status-signifying material symbols; coarse clothing and cramped, humble homes were their daily reality, these simple objects reflecting their predetermined lowly origins. The shaping of class identity through material symbols further solidified class barriers; interactions between different classes were rare, and individuals were mostly confined within the class circle to which they belonged.

5.2. The Shackles of Material Symbols on Class Mobility

In 'Vanity Fair', material symbols not only delineate the identities of different classes, but also become a huge obstacle to class mobility. The class solidification in the Victorian era is very serious (Hobsbawm, 2017 : 82), and class mobility is very difficult in itself. Becky Sharp is a very typical example. She was born in poverty and had no dowry. She was at a disadvantage in the marriage market from birth. In order to climb up, she could only rely on her own beauty and wisdom to take the initiative to enter this game with marriage as a tool. In the end, she chooses to marry Roden Crowley - the younger son who has no right to inherit property, and Becky hopes to enter the upper class with his connections and resources. However, her attempt to cross the class eventually failed. Even if she gained the status of aristocracy, the traces of poverty never disappeared from her. The most fundamental reason is that she could not break the class barrier built by material symbols and was always pressed at the bottom. Struggling, for women, they can only rely on marriage to achieve class crossing, and the existence of material symbols makes it more difficult for them to truly break through class barriers. The restriction of material symbols on class mobility further strengthens the existing structure of class society (Wu Jingming, 2019 : 93). In the social background of patriarchy in the Victorian era, class mobility was subject to many restrictions. Most people could only passively accept their class origin, and it was difficult to rewrite the established destiny by personal efforts.

5.3. Material Symbols and the Maintenance of Social Order

In 'Vanity Fair', material symbols not only hinder people from changing their social status, but also secretly maintain the existing social order. In the class society of the Victorian era, material symbols have long been a part of the social order. They maintain a stable class structure by dividing different classes and constraining people's behavior (Williams, 2015 : 112). The aristocrats used material symbols to show off their privileges and status, and lived a rich and prestigious life relying on their inherited identity ; the emerging bourgeoisie imitates the material life style of the aristocracy, trying to improve their social status and gain the recognition of the upper class ; the lower class can only passively accept their own class, unable to obtain the material symbols of the elite class, and can only survive in the class of their own birth. The role of material symbols in maintaining social order further consolidates the stable structure of class society. In the context of the patriarchal society in the Victorian period, the social order effectively disciplined people through material symbols. Most people could only settle down in their own situation and could not change anything.

6. Conclusion

Based on the theory of material semiotics, this paper focuses on various material objects in marriage transactions in 'Vanity Fair'. It is found that the dowry, jewelry, clothing and housing involved in the novel have long exceeded their practical value and become the core carrier of multiple symbolic meanings. These items are not only an important bargaining chip in the

marriage transaction, but also more like invisible shackles, which not only strengthen the class barriers, but also bind the fate of women. The novel profoundly reveals the real face of capitalists after the end of the industrial revolution and the irreplaceable position of money in society. Although Thackeray did not directly expose the economic exploitation of the bourgeoisie, he pointed out that the cold money relationship has penetrated into all aspects of society and private life. This relationship not only destroys the normal relationship between people, but also makes people gradually lose their basic human nature. . In Victorian Britain, the dowry brought by women 's marriage is not only property, but also the core capital to enter the marriage market and the direct standard to measure women 's social value. Jewelry and Chinese clothing as a symbol of the upper social life, not only reflect the status, but also an important way for women to show themselves. While shaping the external image of women, these items also quietly affect their thinking, judgment and life choices. Houses and manors are the concrete manifestation of class power : they clearly mark the owner 's social status, regulate the way of daily life, form a closed social circle, gradually weaken women 's self-consciousness, affect their marriage choices, block the possibility of class mobility, and ultimately make many women fall victim to the rigid hierarchy. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray reveals the hypocritical nature of the Victorian marriage system by focusing on the various material symbols in the marriage relationship. He truly depicts the difficult situation of women under the dual pressure of materialism and social hierarchy. In a sharp and critical way, he condemned this society full of hypocrisy and calculation, and expressed his deep sympathy for women 's suffering and his strong desire for a fairer society. This study provides a new analytical perspective for the existing ' *Vanity Fair* ' research, which helps readers to have a deeper understanding of the social and cultural background of the Victorian era and the real situation of women. More importantly, it also warns modern society that we should be alert to the negative impact of materialism, attach importance to the cultivation of women 's independent consciousness, support their growth, and actively devote ourselves to the cause of social equity and justice.

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