EDUCATION AND SOCIAL STATUS IN THE NOVEL "CATHERINE"

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Abstract. *To understand how Thackeray addresses education in Catherine, it is essential to situate the novel within its historical and cultural context. Although Catherine is set in an earlier period, Thackeray himself was writing in the early reign of Queen Victoria. In many respects, the eighteenth-century setting is filtered through Thackeray's own vantage point and comedic-satirical style typical of the 1830s. He used historically distant settings partly to parody then-popular "Newgate novels"—sensational stories that glorified criminals—and to highlight broader truths about English social life.*

Keywords: *education, novel, Thackeray, Catherine, historical, cultural, context, period, Queen Victoria, Fraser's Magazine, comedic-satirical, popular, "Newgate Novels", parody, criminal, sensational, story, social life, truth, historical.*

ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ И СОЦИАЛЬНЫЙ СТАТУС В РОМАНЕ «ЕКАТЕРИНА»

Аннотация. *Чтобы понять, как Теккерей рассматривает образование в «Екатерине», важно поместить роман в его исторический и культурный контекст. Хотя действие «Екатерины» происходит в более ранний период, сам Теккерей писал в раннее правление королевы Виктории. Во многих отношениях обстановка восемнадцатого века фильтруется через собственную точку зрения Теккерея и комедийно-сатирический стиль, типичный для 1830-х годов. Он использовал исторически далекие места действия отчасти для пародии на популярные в то время «новеллы Ньюгейта» — сенсационные истории, прославляющие преступников, — и для того, чтобы подчеркнуть более широкие истины об английской общественной жизни.*

Ключевые слова: *образование, роман, Теккерей, Екатерина, исторический, культурный, контекст, период, королева Виктория, журнал Fraser's Magazine, комедийно-сатирический, популярный, «новеллы Ньюгейта», пародия, криминальный, сенсационный, история, общественная жизнь, правда, исторический.*

In approaching William Makepeace Thackeray's early novel Catherine (1839–1840), one is immediately struck by the author's satirical lens and his unflinching depiction of social and moral failings. Although Catherine is often overshadowed by Thackeray's later works such as Vanity Fair or Pendennis, it nonetheless provides fascinating insights into the social fabric of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Central to these insights is the question of education—how it was understood, who received it, and how it shaped one's place in the rigidly stratified society of Thackeray's era. This essay explores the significance of education in Thackeray's novel Catherine by first examining the author's social and cultural context, then describing the state of education in England around the time period depicted, and finally analyzing the ways in which various characters' literacy and learning relate to their social standing, moral behavior, and personal aspirations. Throughout, we shall see that Thackeray employs satire, irony, and occasionally poignant realism to underscore how educational disparities both reflect and reinforce social stratification. [1;300]

To understand how Thackeray addresses education in *Catherine*, it is essential to situate the novel within its historical and cultural context. Although *Catherine* is set in an earlier period, Thackeray himself was writing in the early reign of Queen Victoria (the novel appeared serially in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1839–1840). In many respects, the eighteenth-century setting is filtered through Thackeray's own vantage point and comedic-satirical style typical of the 1830s. He used historically distant settings partly to parody then-popular "Newgate novels"—sensational stories that glorified criminals—and to highlight broader truths about English social life.

From the late eighteenth century through the early decades of the nineteenth century, the educational landscape of Britain was undergoing gradual but significant changes. While the privileged classes often sent their sons to grammar schools, private academies, or exclusive institutions such as Eton or Harrow, the broad mass of the population had much more limited opportunities. Charitable or religious societies established "charity schools" or "ragged schools" aimed at the very poor. Sunday schools operated by the Church of England (and, in some places, by nonconformist congregations) began teaching rudimentary literacy to lower-class children—sometimes only scripture reading. For young women of higher social standing, "accomplishments" (music, drawing, needlework, perhaps some French) often mattered more than deep intellectual pursuits. For girls of lower status, the idea of formal schooling was even more precarious, reliant upon local philanthropic efforts or intermittent public (and paternalistic) support.

By the early nineteenth century, the push to expand literacy was growing, spurred by various humanitarian reformers. Yet this expansion was uneven: significant class-based inequalities, as well as gender-based restrictions, permeated the system. The so-called "monitorial" methods of Joseph Lancaster or Andrew Bell—where older or more adept students taught the younger—were sometimes employed to provide basic reading and writing instruction to large groups at minimal cost. Nonetheless, at the time Thackeray was writing, the division between the small educated elite and the uneducated masses remained stark.[2; 288]

Although Thackeray himself enjoyed a privileged education (at Charterhouse School, followed by studies at Cambridge, which he eventually left without taking a degree), he was acutely aware of the failings and absurdities within the British education system. He recognized how the ability to read, write, and acquire social polish could become an engine not only for moral development (at least nominally) but also for snobbery, social climbing, and hypocrisy.

Thus, in *Catherine*, Thackeray's satirical lens takes into account how schooling, or its absence, shapes the moral and social realities of characters who range from aristocrats to servants.

In the period bridging the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were broadly three types of educational institutions: elite public schools (and a few grammar schools), charity or church-run institutions for the poor, and private academies or seminaries (sometimes even informal "dame schools") which filled the gap for the middling classes. Elite schools, such as Eton, Harrow, Westminster, and a handful of others, catered to the sons of aristocratic and genteel families who could afford fees, lodging, tutors, and the intangible social capital these institutions provided. While nominally focusing on Latin, Greek, and sometimes mathematics, such schools also transmitted the "polish" required for leadership roles in government, the military, and the church. Social networking was arguably as important as intellectual development.

For children of more modest means—especially those hovering around small trades, agriculture, or artisanal employments—educational opportunities were narrower. The Church of England or nonconformist groups might sponsor local schools that taught only reading (primarily to enable individuals to read the Bible) and possibly some basic arithmetic. In the period after 1780–1790, these religiously oriented schools grew in number but struggled with funding. Some philanthropic individuals, outraged at the poor's ignorance, launched charity schools. The curriculum often emphasized moral instruction, conformity to social hierarchy, and the performance of menial tasks suited to the pupil's presumed station. Meanwhile, private "dame schools," where an older woman (often barely literate herself) took in local children, were known for providing minimal instruction. They served more as childcare than a rigorous schooling environment. [3; 545-568]

Education, in short, mirrored the strict class divisions of the time. The wealthy sent their offspring to expensive institutions that taught classical languages, courtesy, and the social mores of the ruling class. The "middling sort," including many Dissenters, found themselves at private academies offering a slightly more modern curriculum. The poor, if they gained schooling at all, encountered religious or philanthropic instruction, typically limited to the absolute basics of literacy, numeracy, and moral or religious formation.

Girls across the social spectrum faced additional obstacles. Those from well-off families might receive a "finishing" type of education focusing on accomplishments (music, drawing, needlework, conversation in French, etc.), whereas those from lower strata often remained illiterate, or only half-literate.

Given this stark hierarchy of schooling, it is little surprise that literacy levels varied dramatically. Some historians estimate that in 1750, less than half of adult Englishmen could sign their own name; by 1800, the figure was modestly higher, though still well under 65%. For women, literacy rates were even lower. These statistics do not capture the deeper aspects of "education," such as exposure to advanced subjects or critical thinking, but they give a sense of the fundamental limitation of reading and writing skills. It is precisely this disparity—between the well-educated and the wholly or partially illiterate—that Thackeray dramatizes in his works, *Catherine* included.

During Thackeray's formative era, reading and writing were not purely intellectual endeavors; they also signified one's position in society. A well-educated individual, generally from a more affluent background, was granted greater respect, job prospects, or marriage opportunities. Conversely, the inability to read marked one as socially inferior, at times morally or intellectually suspect. Thackeray, inheriting the eighteenth-century tradition of Hogarthian satire, recognized how the veneer of "gentlemanly education" could mask moral failings, while a lack of formal schooling did not necessarily correlate with vice. Still, the social mechanisms at play often favored those who could manipulate the codes of literacy—such as letter-writing, reading newspapers, or referencing classical knowledge.

From a gender perspective, women, especially in lower-income groups, had very little access to formal education. Middle- or upper-class women might learn reading, writing, and certain feminine "accomplishments," but rarely were they encouraged to master academic or professional subjects. A woman of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, even if proficient in reading, could suffer social censure if she displayed too much erudition—accusations of being a "bluestocking" overshadowed genuine intellectual curiosity. Thackeray's own attitude toward women's education, as gleaned from some of his writings, was somewhat ambivalent: he endorsed the idea that women should be taught moral and practical skills but seemed cautious about the idea of their overt intellectual equality. In *Catherine*, the female protagonist's ignorance or innocence merges with cunning and coquetry; Thackeray thus highlights how female characters navigate a world in which they lack formal learning but still exhibit forms of practical intelligence or manipulation.

For the rare character who has some measure of schooling, the difference can be dramatic.

An example can be found in the local parson, Dr. Dobbs, who represents the parish clergy, presumably a university-trained clergyman. In the comedic sketches where Dr. Dobbs interacts with other villagers, his learning places him at a certain remove, allowing him rhetorical power and community respect. He is tasked with moral oversight and, at times, with administrative duties like officiating at baptisms or performing the occasional small-claims arbitration. Such was the historical reality: a parish clergyman, typically literate in Latin and possibly Greek, occupied a position of local authority that far exceeded his wages. Thackeray uses minor scenes like the parson's "exhortations" or musings to highlight the somewhat condescending or paternalistic tone of a man who has read more books than the rest of the village combined. [4; 459]

Beyond the parson, the other educated figure is the Count (or Captain), who—despite his ambiguous claims—projects a certain martial knowledge, presumably some capacity in multiple languages, and the social polish of a traveling soldier-of-fortune. Though the reader soon suspects him to be morally corrupt, the advantage conferred by his "higher" background is undeniable. He can seduce Catherine, manipulate the local innkeepers, and move about without being questioned, in part because he carries the aura of an educated gentleman.

Thackeray thus points to a society in which superficial tokens of schooling or aristocratic bearing grant disproportionate power.

One of the ways Thackeray distinguishes the educated from the uneducated is through their speech patterns. Characters like Corporal Brock or Catherine's neighbors speak in dialect, use malapropisms, or exhibit confusion over polysyllabic words. Meanwhile, the Captain or certain cameo roles slip into more elaborate sentences. This difference is not about intelligence per se—rather, Thackeray's comedic style uses the clash of registers to highlight social difference. We see how the community's ill-educated individuals may rely on local superstition, secondhand gossip, or just plain ignorance in making judgments. Such limitations open them to exploitation, especially at the hands of more verbally adept individuals.

Through Catherine's and John Hayes's arcs, the novel suggests that education might offer an escape from the drudgery of lower-class life, but in practice, neither fully capitalizes on it.

John Hayes, for instance, is described as having meager literacy but big ambitions. He is stingy, small-minded, and daydreams about rising above his station, yet lacks the moral or intellectual substance to do so nobly. Thackeray hints that had he benefited from a sturdier formal education, he might have channeled his ambition more productively—or at least recognized the pitfalls of associating with criminals like Corporal Brock. Catherine, similarly, might have used better schooling to avoid exploitative relationships, but her cunning is purely survivalist, shaped by a childhood lacking strong moral or intellectual grounding.

Thus, Thackeray's portrayal, while comedic, underscores a serious social critique: the lower classes remain vulnerable in an educational desert, leading them to rely on questionable "street smarts" or to place faith in illusions of quick social mobility. Meanwhile, the aristocratic or officer class uses education as a social weapon—learning how to speak "properly" or adopt fashionable airs means one can charm or dupe the unlettered.

Thackeray's trademark style blends satire, irony, and comedic hyperbole. In *Catherine*, these literary devices serve to highlight the chasm between educational ideals and social reality.

Rather than deliver a didactic sermon on the need for public schooling, Thackeray uses comedic episodes and ironic contrasts. He invites the reader to laugh at ignorance while also empathizing with characters trapped by it.

A consistent pattern in *Catherine* is that the morally upright character is not necessarily the one with more schooling. In fact, Thackeray frequently inverts the expectation that a formal education aligns with goodness. The Captain, presumably refined, is the worst offender in cynicism, while Catherine's small circle—though ignorant—sometimes appear more genuine in their emotions. Thackeray thereby jabs at the hypocrisy of society's assumption that better-educated equals morally superior. The novel's comedic effect arises from seeing how the "gentlemanly" or self-proclaimed noble manipulates simple villagers, exposing the pretenses of education when divorced from empathy or honor.

Catherine was originally conceived as a parody of the "Newgate Calendar" style of criminal biography and the contemporary novels that glamorized thieves or murderers.

Thackeray wanted to puncture romantic illusions about outlaws by showing them in all their squalor. In so doing, he also acknowledges that the failures of the education system—society's neglect of the poor—produce fertile ground for crime. When a character can barely read, or lacks moral education, the lure of quick ill-gotten gains becomes stronger. Thackeray's satire implicates the entire social structure, including the elite who hypocritically deny real educational reforms while lamenting rising crime rates.[5;101]

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