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Abstract

Within the context of Victorian literature, the name of William Makepeace Thackeray stands out as one of the most important English-language writers of the 19th century. Thackeray is known worldwide for his satirical novels, in which he depicts, with amazing precision, the vices and weaknesses of the Victorian upper-class. This essay presents a succinct study of one of Thackeray's less popular satirical novels, *The luck of Barry Lyndon*, published in 1844, with the purpose of understanding this author's conception of the social figure of the Victorian gentleman.

Satirising the ignorance of ethics: The figure of the antigentleman in Thackeray's "The luck of Barry Lyndon"

Key words

William Makepeace Thackeray, *The luck of Barry Lyndon*, Victorian gentleman, satire, Victorian social novel

Palabras clave

William Makepeace Thackeray, *The luck of Barry Lyndon*, caballero victoriano, sátira, novela social victoriana

Resumen

Dentro del contexto de la literatura victoriana, el nombre de William Makepeace Thackeray resalta como uno de los escritores en lengua inglesa más importantes de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. Thackeray es mundialmente conocido por sus novelas satíricas, en las cuales ilustra con asombrosa precisión

los vicios y las debilidades de la burguesía victoriana. En el presente ensayo se lleva a cabo un análisis breve de una de las novelas satíricas menos populares de Thackeray, *The luck of Barry Lyndon*, publicada en 1844, con el propósito de comprender la concepción del citado autor acerca de la figura social del caballero victoriano.

1. Social and historical context of *The luck of Barry Lyndon*

Very few periods have been as significant in the history of Great Britain as the Victorian Era. The second half of the 19th century witnessed the rise and very rapid expansion of the British Empire all over the world. This considerable growth affected almost every aspect of life in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, including the arts and, consequently, literature.

As many literary scholars point out (Klingopulos, 1973a; Pantuckova, 1974), the production of literature in Great Britain was particularly prolific during the Victorian Era. During this era, the scope of literary styles, techniques and themes, experienced a significant change, in relation to the trends previously established by the Romantic Movement (Klingopulos, 1973b). The reading public also increased, due to technological advances that promoted the access to literature by more people from the lower classes of society (Webb, 1973). All in all, the Victorian period has historically been considered to be one of the greatest in Britain's literary history.

It is in this historical context that *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, a satirical novel written by William Thackeray (1811-1863), was published in 1844. In spite of being one of Thackeray's less studied works, this novel has been reviewed positively by literary critics over the years. Scholars have pointed out that *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* reflects Thackeray's virtuosity both as a social portrayer and as a novelist (Allingham, 2002; Colby, 1966).

The purpose of this paper is to make a succinct analysis of some key excerpts from

The luck of Barry Lyndon, in order to find instances of Thackeray's satirical depiction of the Victorian gentleman's social and cultural traits. This will allow the reader to grasp Thackeray's conceptions of the 19th century gentleman, within the theoretical framework of satire as a literary resource.

2. The figure of the gentleman in 19th century Britain

Within the Victorian society, and especially within the upper classes, the concept of the **gentleman** was of great importance. Even though its origins were not Victorian, the figure of the nobleman or *chevalier* has often been associated with 19th century Britain. According to several scholars and historians (Carter, 2002; Cody, 2004; Landow, 2004; Tosh, 2002;) certain social, intellectual and ethical values were attached to the figure of the Victorian nobleman, which thus became a sort of social icon. Among these traits we find profound intellectual and ethical education (which constituted the moral code of the Victorian gentleman), the refinement of manners in the public and the private life (and especially in the treatment of women), a genuine interest in social life, a positive regard for work, and an active political career. The Victorian gentleman was thus a balanced individual, who combined intellectual, physical, social, and political skills in the appropriate proportions.

3. Satire as a literary resource

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the term **satire** is used to refer to "literary works holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn". In other words, the main purpose of satire is to expose

human foolishness and/or evil in an amusing way, by means of elements such as sarcasm, irony, and parody. According to Hodgart (1969), humour *per se* is not the main focus of satire; it is merely the means by which it achieves its end, namely the exposure of human weaknesses and imperfections in order to correct the behaviour of the target and to warn others not to behave in such a way. The satirist may achieve his purposes through the use of several techniques, amongst which we find **burlesque**, which is the ridiculing of the target's speech; and *reductio ad absurdum*, where the author seems to "agree" with those features or values he is actually trying to criticise (Johnston, 1998). Thackeray uses both these techniques in the depiction of the main character of *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*.

4. The satirical depiction of the Victorian gentleman in *The luck of Barry Lyndon*

From its beginning to its end, *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* is full of references to the most important social and individual traits associated to the figure of the Victorian gentleman, which is incarnated in the main character and narrator of the novel, Redmond Barry (also known as Barry Lyndon). These characteristics are presented to the reader in the form of anecdotes in which Barry (who also acts as the narrator of the story) describes the most important events and situations in his life, as well as his interaction with other people and his (supposedly heroic) social and political behaviour.

It is interesting to notice that most of the psychological and social traits of the character of Barry Lyndon represent a contradiction to what historians and literary critics have

described as the typical Victorian gentlemanly behaviour (Colby, 1966). Thus Lyndon stands in opposition to what was considered to be the appropriate philosophy of life for a nobleman during the Victorian period, even though he persistently tries to present himself to the reader as a true gentleman throughout the novel.

An example of Lyndon's views about his own gentlemanly characteristics can be found in the first chapter of the novel, in which Barry provides an account of his family's (supposedly) noble origins, as well as a description of the practical and intellectual skills he possesses:

In poetry, and in what I call natural philosophy, or the science of life, and in riding, music, leaping, the small-sword, the knowledge of a horse, or a main of cocks, and the manners of an accomplished gentleman and a man of fashion, I may say for myself that Redmond Barry has seldom found his equal. (p. 10)

An element that should be taken into account when analysing *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* is the narrator's questionable reliability. Even though Barry seems to possess some of the practical and intellectual skills of a typical Victorian gentleman, the reader eventually realises that the main character of the novel actually lacks the abilities he so readily attributes himself. This contradiction is the basis upon which Thackeray constructs his satirical portrayal of the Victorian gentleman.

In addition to his contradictory views of practical and intellectual education, Barry Lyndon shows a noticeable disregard for women. This aspect of Lyndon's personality

also opposes the social traits commonly associated with the figure of the Victorian gentleman (Carter, 2002; Tosh, 2002). He regards women as mere objects, which can (and must) be used by men to obtain what they want. Barry's relationships to women were based on convenience, rather than on true empathy as can be interpreted from the following fragment:

(Sir Charles Lyndon) was dying: his widow would be the richest prize in the three kingdoms. Why should I not win her, and, with her, the means of making in the world that figure which my genius and inclination desired? I felt I was equal in blood and breeding to any Lyndon in Christendom, and determined to bend this haughty lady. (p. 95)

Work ethics is another element through which the reader can establish an opposition between the character of the gentleman depicted in *The luck of Barry Lyndon* and the Victorian conceptions of this social figure. Contrary to 19th century ideas, which defined work as a very significant element in the life of a gentleman (Tosh, 2002), Barry Lyndon continuously disregards labour and the gentlemanly values it helped develop. Except for his military service, Barry's only jobs were gambling, cheating, and blackmailing. He prefers to employ easy - often despicable, methods to obtain economic and social pre-eminence. In addition, Barry's passion for gambling and cheating is proportional to his contempt for work, as he readily points out in several parts of the novel. Thus Barry Lyndon does not associate the concept of work with that of individual, social, and economic development, as Victorian gentlemen did (Tosh, 2002).

In spite of this clear opposition between the social, ethical, and individual virtues attached to the Victorian gentleman, and the ones depicted by Thackeray through the character of Barry Lyndon, it is worth noticing that there are, indeed, some similarities between both figures. For instance, Barry shares the Victorian gentleman's positive regard for social life, as well as his active involvement in the world of politics. Only in these aspects can Barry be considered to be a true Victorian gentleman.

5. Barry Lyndon, a walking Victorian anti-gentleman

The analysis of the plot of *The luck of Barry Lyndon* enables the reader to reconstruct William Thackeray's views about the figure of the gentleman within the context of the Victorian society. As we have pointed out, the most important psychological and social traits of this social icon can be found in some fragments of the novel, specifically in the character of Barry Lyndon. It is worth remarking, however, that the characteristics attributed by Thackeray to his hero do not constitute a merely objective reflection of the traits of Victorian gentlemen. On the contrary, most aspects of Barry's behaviour and personality utterly oppose the Victorian social conventions about the figure of the nobleman. The character of Barry Lyndon represents, then, a satirical portrayal of the Victorian gentleman.

The satirical tone of *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* can be grasped by the reader from the very first chapters. It resides in the autobiographical narrative style of the novel, since Barry continuously contradicts his ideas, statements and beliefs with his

own actions. Thus, it is evident that Barry's description of his own traits and personality are not to be considered as a reflection of Victorian gentlemanly ideals, but as their exact opposite. Thackeray's purpose was to expose the negative traits of Victorian gentlemen. This is, in my humble opinion, one of the main virtues of *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*. Even though the idealistic stereotype of the heroic Victorian gentleman has been historically presented as an iconic element of British culture (even to the present), reality was often different from that pattern. Through Barry Lyndon, Thackeray was able to show how fictive that half-divine conception of the Victorian gentleman really was, and offered a much more faithful representation of this social stereotype, rendering it more credible, more human. This sustains Thackeray's reputation both as an accurate social portrayer and as an outstanding satirist, whose literary contributions helped define the subgenre of the Victorian social novel, and make him stand out as one of the main writers of that era. ■

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