CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Certain points were made and some interim conclusions were arrived at in the course of this study of Thackeray's characterisation in his novels. It is time to gather them together and to attempt an evaluation of his performance as a creator of characters, and an estimate of his contribution to this aspect of the novelist's art. Many critics have praised him for his remarkable character-painting. In almost all of his novels he provides a host of personages, and all are worked out effectively.
In order to evaluate his skill in characterisation, we must, first of all, ascertain Thackeray's purpose behind creating all these personages. His novels as a whole can be described as social satire. Social manners and morals interested him most; and he could not overlook any fault or foible. We might say that he wanted to present a picture of society through a variety of characters. And among these characters some turn out to be more fascinating and acquire an individual importance. The author often forgets his purpose of social delineation, and enjoys the detailing of characters. But this should not lead us to believe that his characters can be extracted from their social set up without damaging the novel. The social life has been incorporated in the individual life, that is; the individual has been shown as a part of society. His characters are largely shown to have been influenced by the virtues and weaknesses of the society of which they were members. Some of his characters adjust themselves nicely to their social environment, while the others are confused or oppressed by the criss-cross of social forces and values. They are unable to
cope up with the demands made upon them by society.
The most striking example is that of Colonel Newcome.
Only a few are shown to remain uninfluenced by the
environment in which they lived.

It is fairly clear from his works that rogues
and cheats interested him most. It is also a general
feature seen in the world of fiction that baser
characters tend to attract more attention. This
undoubtedly stems from the generally passive nature
of the virtuous, and the rather active and energetic
temperament of the wicked. Thackeray has a sort of
liking for these more energetic and attractive
characters. Throughout his works he has shown a
cautiously sympathetic attitude towards the morally
less desirable personages. The good characters are
not presented with that interest and energy which
Thackeray employs in the characterisation of bad
characters. The virtuous Amelia is insipid, Dobbin is
wooden, Laura and Helen are 'bottles of tears', Rachel
and Theo are dull; George does not have much of life
in him, Thackeray's creative genius finds a more
congenial outlet in presenting vices than virtues. He
feels more at ease and is really at his best with his
bad characters.

After a perusal of his novels, the reader is left with the impression that Thackeray was in general concerned with the society and its influence on various characters. His keen eyes and sharp sensibility made him aware of all the evils and vices rampant in society. He was disgusted with the way things were going, but he does not seem to suggest any improvement as a reformer usually does. The satirist's temperament and the satirist's skill are there but, quite often and with excellent consequences, the moralist in Thackeray is overwhelmed by the creative writer. His characters often become people, and his own enjoyment in the presentation of a character leads to our rejoicing in the spectacle.

In his portrayal of society, manners and morals drew his attention, and that too of cheats and rogues. His eye lighted more readily on weaknesses and he gets a kind of pleasure and satisfaction in dissecting and delineating them. But he could and did recognize goodness and virtue wherever it existed. He does impart good qualities to his characters and has
shown some as the very incarnation of virtues; but, the effect is again that of highlighting the vices of the other characters by the method of contrast. His excessive fondness for showing vanity, greed, snobbishness in his characters has led many critics to an unjust view as a cynic. This is far too sweeping and superficial. Behind his keen shafts of satire, a generous and sympathetic heart is clearly visible and a cynic never sympathises.

Apart from society and characters, Thackeray does not take interest in describing scenes and scenery like Hardy. He ignores almost completely the world of nature. His characters are set in drawing-rooms, dinner halls or in clubs. When we recall the novel we hardly remember any locale in which the action took place. Thackeray is more deeply interested in character than in environment. The only environment that figures in his novels is the social. Nature was not his forte, and the political arena did not attract him. In *Resnoad* and *The Virginians* he does set his characters against historical scenes, but history remains completely in the background and hardly influences his characters. All the personages lead
lives which had nothing to do with history. It seems that Thackeray keeps his characters away from political and historical influences, and confines them to the limits of their personal and social life. They do live on this earth, and are more life-like than those of his contemporary novelists, but they act and interact among themselves and are confined to their own world ruled by social morals and manners.

Thackeray chooses his character's mainly from the upper middle class. He was born and brought up among them, and knew that life intimately. Except for Becky, all his major characters are generally from this class. Unlike Dickens, he could not take any lively interest in poor people. He seems to know nothing about the poor except that they serve his rich protagonists. We do not have any well-elaborated character-sketch of a person from the poorer classes. The poor are introduced in the capacity of servants or servants. The same happens in the case of the aristocracy. There is not a single sympathetic portrait of a lord or a lady. Most of them are drawn with the hand of a caricaturist. They are introduced for no purpose other than to exhibit the vices and
follies of their class.

Thackeray presents his men engaged in social climbing or aiming at worldly prosperity. Very few find solace in the seclusion of the quiet fireside. All his novels are concerned with young men and women except *The Newcomes*. He generally deals with the problems which come in the way of their marriage. His heroes and heroines seek happiness through the marriage; and, this happiness may be totally material or emotional. Some seek to improve their chances in life through a rich match while others are shown to have considered the nobility of mind and heart as essential ingredients for marriage. Whatever mistaken attitudes his young heroes and heroines may have in the beginning, they realise their error quite in time to benefit by the realisation. They all come round, and are shown to value goodness of heart more than mere beauty or wealth in their mates. Such conclusions to his stories confirm Thackeray's view that marriage should always be based on love; and money - calculations and physical charms lead the marriage to failure. Pen is happy with Laura though he was at first attracted by Blanche's money and beauty. Clive could not find satisfaction in his love - less
marriage with Rose, and attains happiness in the end by marrying Ethel, the girl of his choice.

Another remarkable point about his practice is that he does not conclude his novels by marrying off the hero and heroine. The only exception is *Pendennis* in which that state of bliss and happiness which is the conventional outcome of marriage is reached. Like Stevenson, he too recognizes that marriage is not the end and the solution of all the problems of life. Marriage brings in as many difficulties as it solves. The life of real struggle starts after marriage, and these problems are graver than those which men usually face during courtships. According to Thackeray, the novelist should not ignore such vital facts of life by simply uniting the hero and heroine at the end, and dropping the curtain over the whole affair.

Love is also one of the major issues which Thackeray has discussed in his novels. The love between young men and women, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours. This love is sometimes shown to be very sentimental and emotional, full of feeling and understanding. It is almost devotion in some cases
of parents and their offspring; and quite often it results in foolish overfondness such as Amelia's for her son. Quite often, the "love" is shown to have been based on monetary calculation as in the case of Blanche and Beatrice. Of the young men and women in his world, Thackeray rewards only that love which is generous and selfless, and without the least consideration of money, rank or title.

These are the common problems which Thackeray has discussed in his novels. We do not find any spiritual or intellectual struggle in his characters and there is no soul-searching on the part of the character as well as of the author. In this sense, his field of characterization is limited. We seldom find any great depth, except in Esmond. In Esmond we have a feeling that characters have a life beyond that which is described in the novel. We can well cite the example of Lady Rachel Castlewood. She is an individual instead of a typical Victorian wife. She is shown confronting rather a delicate moral situation. Thackeray had a difficult task of reconciling the conventional wifely role of obedience and her own judgement of her husband as a rather crude person. But here again Thackeray simply solves the problem for her
through the death of Lord Castlewood. His world is very much physical which can be viewed through the five senses. None of his novels deals with the problems of soul or with its various windings. We can fairly say that his is a surface presentation of life and character. what his personages think and feel beside social aspirations, or what the hungry soul aspires for is none of Thackeray's business. It may be that the prevailing social complexities so engrossed him that he could not find time to think of other kinds of complexities. Scarcely any of his characters have mental conflicts worth the name, and so we do not have in his novels any of the serious complications which arise from one's being human or from living in the world of conflicting values and forces. Quite simply, his characters, when they are not passive, struggle against others and almost never against themselves.

The most noticeable aspect of his portrayal is the author's outlook towards his characters. He does not find it necessary to explore the unconscious or semi-conscious. All his characters are presented on the conscious level. Thackeray caught only those moments from a character's life when he or she comes into contact
with other characters. None of his personages sits quietly alone to brood over even a course of action, to say nothing of graver intellectual problems of life. Most of his characters are actively busy with some job or the other on hand.

For Thackeray novel-writing was certainly a profession, and he never thought of it as a fashionable pastime. He took it very seriously, and considered it as grave as a person's job of preaching from a pulpit. As a priest is morally bound to tell the truth to his congregation, Thackeray also assumed it to be his duty to offer the truth — the truth which he knew or rather which he could provide the reader with. But due to social taboos he was unable to write all that he knew and felt; but what he wrote was at least true if not the truth. He wanted to present the truth — the one he perceived through his senses, but was inhibited by some prudery and some nervousness in regard to the reactions of contemporary readers. Realism invited him to delineate life in the manners of Fielding and the French novelists but, at the same time, moral hesitation holds him back and forces some reservations. These two opposing forces made him an indecisive m
moralist. At times he is at a loss as to what he should convey to his readers — the plain truth which he knew or an expurgated version of it. This confusion is very evident even to a casual reader. The unnatural and hopeless outcome of the Pen — Fanny — affair is the result of this confusion. It should not be presumed that prudery was always in the ascendance. Luckily, realism has often the upper hand and morality slips into the background; but, this does not continue for long. As soon as he grows conscious of the drift of the story, he retracts a little and passes a scathing and sweeping remark to erase all that he has said under the spell of realism. The alternation between these rival concerns affects Thackeray's characterisation.

Many critics have compared him with Fielding for his desire to present MAN and the style he adopts for character portrayal. Often he ventures towards a kind of open morality and a more sporting spirit in the manner of Fielding but he keeps in the main to the more limited moral approach of Richardson.

It has been said very often that Thackeray's characters are close to life. On this point almost all
the critics unanimously praise Thackeray's art of characterisation. He relates even the minutest details of his character's physiognomy, habits and manners to give them the semblance of life. He also achieves it through picturesque and eloquent language. His sketches are so life-like that, later in life, he recognised Philip Finmin in a chance visitor. He had seen the 'drunken swagger' of Captain Costigan when he met him, years after his creating that character.

Once his characters acquire life, they get out of his hands and become somewhat autonomous. Thackeray confesses to being at the mercy of his own characters: "Once created, they lead me and I follow where they direct." This is evident as some of his characters grew more attractive and the reverse in spite of the author. But, after giving free rein to his creative enjoyment in a character, he seems to become suddenly nervous. As an example, we may cite the needless blackening of Becky's character when he presents her as a monstrous kind of mother who has no love for her own child, after giving quite a sympathetic portrait of her as a very self-reliant, though unscrupulous, person making her way up in life against
odds. This has no other conceivable purpose but to present her from becoming too attractive.

It seems that Thackeray gets so engrossed in the personality of his own characters that, for the time being at least, he forgets his purpose and the ultimate need of the story. He moves along with his characters as if in a trance. Suddenly he becomes conscious of himself and attempts to extricate himself from the character, realising to his dismay that he is on a wrong track. He at once pulls himself up and draws the characters back to the planned road. It causes a jolt in the progress of the story as well as in the uniformity of the characterisation. We have a feeling that Thackeray often creates characters by instinct rather than according to plan.

He has the true novelists' interest in characters as people. This prevents his novels from becoming dull exercises in moral preaching. This makes his task as a moralist more difficult. While there are occasional instances of awkwardness arising from the conflict between his role as a moralist and his more human response to his characters, we must say, by and
large, that he has successfully reconciled the public role and the personal reaction. Even his villains and their lives are therefore credible and they manage to be quite lively without appearing wooden or melodramatic.

Another point that can be made is that his realism never moves out into that kind of naturalism in which the French novelists commonly excel. Regarding sex, Thackeray is always mute, and the conscious, even self-conscious avoidance of the subject weakens his novels. If he had been more frank, his novels might have been saved from degenerating into somewhat hypocritical moral pronouncements regarding the natural urges of the flesh. This nervousness on Thackeray's part spoils the whole impression of frank writing, which Thackeray often claims. This may explain why he could not find many admirers in his own time as well as in ours. The Victorians were squeamish about his glaring hints about sex, and we are tired of the elaborate evasions. The Victorians were scared of what might reflect through the garb and the modern writers find the cloak of modesty irritating.
His moral concern is reflected even in his themes which are all didactic. Though a moralist, he could not believe in crude poetic justice. He was of the opinion that there is no direct relation between action and its consequence. This is a sort of realism which he offers to the reader. Still we have a feeling that the concern to preserve the moral equation is prevalent throughout his works. None of his bad characters are left to prosper unrestrictedly, nor do the good characters go on suffering without reparation. Becky is not punished in the true sense of the word but could not attain the dizzy heights which she was aiming at. His good characters generally achieve what they wish for. At the outset Colonel Newcome appears and exception. His material desires may not have been fulfilled in his life—time but he certainly attains the mental peace which had eluded him throughout his life. Besides, Thackeray never leaves any immoral section of his characters without at least his reproof. He does leave the general impression that the vice and folly do not always pay. While being generally conventional, he shows some occasional unconventional daring. The comparative prosperity in which Becky is
left at the end of *Vanity Fair*, and the curious change of relationship between Esmond and Lady Rachel which ends up in the marriage can be cited as examples of the unconventional and unusual. But in general he conforms to the established usage and does not venture into tricky and difficult places.

Thackeray does have a strong faith in God and religion but his God has nothing to do with his characters or their destinies. This sort of indifferent faith is perhaps not sufficient for a staunch moralist. Thackeray does not introduce any religious topic and none of his characters seek the help of God, and none is shown as a humble spirit in the presence of the Almighty. Not a single character looks for consolation and support in religion. Whatever his characters are and in whatever manner he presents them, he never fails to point out the moral and never misses an opportunity to preach. He has an inherent faith but is not ostentatious about it.

Though a man of practical talents who avoids the emotional aspect of life, he could not extricate
himself completely from the sentimental strain which runs through all his stories. This may be assigned to the dissatisfaction he felt with real life. He sought happiness which eluded him throughout his life. Thackeray's novels indicate very clearly his feelings of loneliness, of unfulfilled desires, of wasted sentiment. This is what we can call the cause of Thackeray's melancholy and of the elegiac strain in his novels.

While discussing characters we may also conclude about the type of characters Thackeray makes use of in his novels. In modern times, the general appreciation is for round characters but Thackeray makes use of 'flat' characters as well. For comic purposes, he does create 'flat' characters; otherwise his protagonists are commonly 'round'. In his round characters we feel a depth, a three-dimensionality but Thackeray is of the opinion that a certain constancy is essential in every character. The rigid part of our nature is character. Out of the chaos of our behaviour we find a pattern that constitutes character. It also becomes a means of arousing and satisfying the reader's
expectations. Even in his most rounded characters we have this constancy and rigidity. It is just because of this that we can call Becky a Becky or Beatriz a Beatriz. They change very little, if at all, through experience. Thus he never lets the character grow or develop; they are like machine-made things—complete from the very first entrance into the novel. Ethel is the only true exception. Thackeray knows their ins and outs from the very time of their conception and acquaints the reader as well.

Regarding this he does not trust even his own plot, story and at length the reader. Whatever he wants to disclose about his personages he does in plain words and, that too, often in the first person. He steps down from the pedestal of a detached observer and interrupts the progress of the story with his comments. These comments are often direct and sometimes indirect too. The direct comments from the author have generally been considered a grave fault in the art of characterisation. A writer should not judge his own characters; it is the reader’s privilege, but Thackeray is perhaps not prepared to concede it to the reader. He becomes so involved with the life of his characters that the
impartiality which is an asset of the author, vanishes. This involvement with his own characters is the reason that he remarks upon them like a brother or a friend. As a participant in their lives, which he often becomes, it is difficult for him to be a mute and silent onlooker.

Now about the devices of characterisation. Thackeray has used the various conventional devices excellently. Often he establishes a relationship between physiognomy and the traits of a character. Dobbin and J.J. Ridley, the painter, have been shown very plain looking and even, to an extent, ugly. Thackeray, like many others, apparently considers plausibility more dependable than the flashing handsomeness of characters like Osborne or Rawdon. His virtuous heroines are certainly beautiful but they lack the energy and spirit, and their beauty has not that seductive charm which his "bad" women generally have. Thackeray is particular about detailing the physiognomy of the characters. These descriptions often provide a picturesque image of the character; but, sometimes such descriptions become somewhat symbolic, and reveal something about the personages beside the mere details
of physical features.

Apart from physiognomy, he also gives a full account of the habits and manners of his characters. This also helps the reader to understand a character, and impart a "solidity of specification". These details make them more real and life-like, and the reader is prepared to suspend "disbelief" and accept these creatures of the imagination as real persons. Though he generally gives all the details just when he introduces a character, he never misses any opportunity to add more to the character concerned. This is true even in the case of minor characters.

Thackeray has managed to provide a variety by creating a large number of characters who seem to live according to a common philosophy of greed. These characters do not exist in the novel for their own sake but to give an impression of society. Critics have levelled the charge against Thackeray that he repeats his own characters. For a casual reader there is not much difference between Amelia, Laura, Helen, Rachel and Lady Ann. They appear somewhat the same and, if any difference is perceptible, it is because of the
difference in their assigned roles. A closer look, however, reveals some differences among his characters. All are not strictly alike, and have some inherent and fundamental differences. Rawdon is a little different from Osborne and Osborne is a shade better than Jos. Sedley. It is Thackeray's keen observation and deep understanding of human nature which enables him to differentiate among characters who have a certain similarity about them. He is also in the habit of establishing the relationship between the characters of different novels. If he takes up a character in a novel, he will certainly pick up the character in the next novel and will relate him with any of its characters.

Now we will assess Thackeray's power of depicting men and women separately. Though himself a male he presented women with full understanding of female psychology. He loved portraying females more than males. With men he adopts a somewhat indifferent attitude but with women, he seems emotionally involved. This may perhaps be ascribed to his sentimental attachment to his friend's wife, Jane. In his real life he knew what suffering she had borne, and was sympathetic to her. This
is also one of the reasons that he fully realised the magnitude of the sufferings of Amalia. He was writing Emond when his affair with Jane broke up; and this experience has naturally been reflected in the book. He made Rachel, the woman, suffer the pangs of hopeless love. Such personal involvement certainly affects the character—portrayal. Colonel Newcome takes shape from Thackeray's step—father, and does become a sentimental portrait. Regarding good and bad women separately Thackeray has presented vile women with more zest, interest and sympathy.

If we grant that the portrayal of society could be one of the intentions or governing principles of fiction—writing, we should expect to have novels which deal with characters only within certain limits. The complexities of human personality, the stress and strains of inner life of characters are not to be expected. What we can expect is only a valid compromise between the need to characterise society—for example, a fairly large number of characters exhibiting a general similarity of attitude and behaviour—and the complexities and confusions of
individual personality. Thackeray does achieve such an effective compromise. His characters do not fail to register in our mind more or less strongly as individuals without preventing us from seeing the features of the society in which they live and move. It is only such characters who can become interesting to us as persons, and contribute at the same time to a view of society or of life. This indeed an achievement and a triumph for Thackeray as a novelist.