# Birth

William Makepeace Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India, on July 18, 1811, into a wealthy English merchant family. His father, Richmond Thackeray, an officer in the East India Company, died in 1815, and the following year William was sent to England to live with his aunt at Chiswick. After his father’s death, William’s mother married an engineering officer named Major Carmichael Symth. She had been in love with him before she married Richmond Thackeray. Solace In Patterns William showed his talent for drawing at a very early age. He would draw caricatures of his relatives and send them to his mother through letters. Even at school, he used to draw pictures of his friends and teachers and his friends preserved those pictures all through their lives. Though his caricatures of his teachers got him into trouble sometime, he enjoyed his popularity in school due to his art. Otherwise, William was not much physically active as a boy due to his shortsightedness. Furthermore, he found solace in drawing, as he said later,' They are a great relief to my mind.'

Education

William was given the 'education of a gentleman', at private boarding schools. He was sent to the Charterhouse School, where he was enrolled as a day-scholar. He led a rather lonely and miserable existence as a child. He wrote regularly to his mother and stepfather. In one of his letters, he wrote: "There are 370 in the school; I wish there were 369". This subtle post-script showed how utterly out of place he felt at the institution. The caning and other abuses he suffered at school became the basis for recollection in his essays, such as The Roundabout Papers, as well as episodes in his novels Vanity Fair and The Newcomes.

In 1820, William’s mother and stepfather Major Carmichael Symth joined him at Chiswick. The reunion of mother and child was very emotional. He got along well with Major Symth as well, he also addressed him 'father' later on. They met many times after that as he used to spend holidays with them. Thackeray based the character of Colonel Newcome on this respectable, unworldly gentleman. William later recalled the dry lessons in the classical languages that he was forced to learn and the debilitating effect it had on what he felt about classical literature. He developed a life-long dislike for classical literature. He relied on literary escapades on popular fictions of the day like Scott’s Heart of Midlothian or Pierce Egan’s Life in London. William was never an outstanding student but while at school he developed two habits that were to stay with him lifelong: sketching and reading novels. He also started working as an amateur theatre artist.

When he graduated from the Charterhouse school, he needed additional tutoring to prepare for Cambridge. He got this tutoring from Major Symth. He made many good acquaintances at Cambridge including Edward FitzGerald. Cambridge was full of distraction for the young man. Rowing was an official sport which the students enjoyed a lot but drinking and occasional illicit visits to London was also added to their list of recreation. William started his adventure in journalism at Cambridge. He started to enjoy writing as much as drawing.

From 1828 to 1830 he studied at Trinity College, Cambridge. His tutor then was William Whewell (a philosopher of natural science), but Thackeray saw little of the don and spent his time at wine parties. Neither at Charterhouse nor at Cambridge did he distinguish himself as a scholar. In 1830, Thackeray left Cambridge without a degree. During 1831-33 he studied law at the Middle Temple, London. He attempted to develop his literary and artistic talents, first as the editor of a short–lived journal and subsequently as an art student in Paris. None of these worked out since he kept oscillating between various occupations that were temporary in nature. The trouble with Thackeray was that he could never settle for one

thing. One day he would translate Horace; the next day he would draw funny sketches; the day after that, he would write satirical verses.

After having left the university, he toured the continent, visited museums, theaters and libraries. He also wrote poems, which penned his profound observation upon the vanity and pity of life.

## Stepping Into World

He moved to Weimer, Germany, then the intellectual capital of Europe. He learned German and read Goethe. Personal life of Goethe was making waves in the German society at that time. He had the opportunity to meet the aged poet once. Though nothing significant occurred at the meeting, as Goethe was almost a national monument and Thackeray an upcoming journalist. Though he did not achieve anything great during his nine month stay in Germany, his sketchbook gained a lot many pages of excellent portraits, landscapes and caricatures. This stay gained for him a command of the language, a knowledge of German romantic literature and an increasing skepticism about religious doctrine. The time he spent at Weimar is reflected in the Pumpernickel chapters of Vanity Fair.

On his return from Germany, Thackeray lived the life of a young indulgent man, gambling, drinking in taverns, and enjoying the company of women. He considered painting as a profession and his artistic gifts can be seen in his letters and his early writings, which are energetically illustrated. On his return, he had to pursue his law study, however reluctantly. Pulling on his study, he took utmost advantage of London life, moving freely between high society balls and parties, and low class taverns and gambling houses. In fact, gambling and theatre became his full time occupation during that time.

On coming of age in 1832, Thackeray inherited Ј 20,000 from his father. However, he soon lost his fortune through gambling, unlucky speculations and reading investments. Most of it was lost due to the failure of an Indian bank where he had invested a lot of money.

In 1832, Thackeray met William Maginn. Maginn was an editor and heinfluenced Thackeray's professional life. Thackeray got the break into the world of London journalism through him. He also invested part of his patrimony in a weekly paper, The National Standard, which he took over as editor and proprietor in 1833. He used to write most of the articles himself. He was very hopeful of the success of his newspaper, but his wait for about a year never yielded any result. The paper was unsuccessful and went under quickly, but it gave Thackeray his first taste of the world of London journalism. It was an event that Thackeray once again found use for in his novel The Newcomes. He was seriously in trouble, as he had to earn his living. Thackeray resolved to study art when he found that he could earn a living by using his artistic talents. In 1834 he went to Paris for this purpose. Life in Paris was neither easy. He could barely support himself there with his limited income form occasional journalism. But Paris brought him a dream realized - to find someone to love. He had met many a girls and women in his life and had fallen in and out of their love quite many times by now. Even his sketchbook was filled with imaginary characters like Mr and Mrs Thack and their trail of many children.

Marriage

He met Isabella Shawe, a timid, simple and artless girl. He fell outrightly in love with Isabella. She was just 17 and was totally under control of her mother. He was immediately ready for marriage, but Mrs Shawe did not permit. Isabella herself could not make any decision. Similarly, his parents were also much reluctant for the union. His stepfather wanted him to establish himself first, for that Thackeray was made the Paris correspondent for a newspaper The Constitutional and Public Register at Ј400 per year. Backed by the income and through his steady persistence, the marriage did take place finally on August 20, 1836. After trying out briefly the bohemian life of an artist in Paris, and failure of his newspaper, he returned to London in 1837 and started his career as a journalist. He worked for periodicals like Fraser’s Magazine and The Morning Chronicle, but his most successful association was with Punch.

Thackeray worked as a freelance journalist for about 10 years, publishing literary criticism, art criticism, articles, and fiction, either anonymously or under a number of comic pseudonyms. Often he used absurd pen names such as George Savage Fitzboodle, Michael Angelo Tit Marsh, Theophile Wagstaff and C J Yellowplush, Esq. William and Isabella Thackeray’s first child, Anne Isabella, was born on June 9, 1837. Her birth was followed by the collapse of The Constitution of which William was the Paris correspondent. Thackeray began writing as many articles as humanly possible and sent them to any newspaper that would print them. This was a precarious sort of existence, which would continue for most of the rest of his life. He was fortunate enough to get two popular series going on in two different publications. During this time, Thackeray also produced his first books, Collections of Essays and Observations published as travel books. This combination of hack writing and frequent travel took Thackeray away from home and kept him from his wife’s growing depression.

Troubled Times

Thackeray and Isabella Shawe had a happy life during their first years of marriage. But as financial demands forced Thackeray into more and more work, Isabella became isolated and lonely. The happy years of marriage was eclipsed by the tragic death of their second daughter Jane, born in July 1838. She died of respiratory illness in March the following year. Harriet Marian, their third daughter was born in 1840. It was at this time that Isabella fell victim to mental illness . After a few months she started displaying suicidal tendencies and as it was difficult to control her, she was placed in a private institution. Doctors told Thackeray that all she needed was a change of air. She was taken to her mother in Ireland, where she attempted to drown herself in the ocean. Thackeray began a series of futile searches for her cure. He took Isabella to various spas and sanatoriums, at one point himself undergoing a 'water cure' with her, since she wouldn’t go at it alone. He continued to hope for some time that she would make a full recovery. He was forced to send his children to France to his mother. For the next several years he shuttled back and forth between London and Paris - from the journalism that supported himself and his debt-laden family, to his parents and children in Paris, and to his wife in French asylums. Thackeray entrusted Isabella to the care of a friendly family, and threw himself into the maelstrom of club-life for which he had but little taste. He said, "My social activity is but a lifelong effort at forgetting.

Responsibilities

## Thackeray’s children returned to England in 1846. He gradually began paying more and more attention to his daughters, for whom he established a home in London. Eventually, he resigned himself to Isabella’s condition and was seemingly indifferent to the circumstances around her and the children. He raised his daughters with the help of his mother, who was never satisfied with the governess’s Thackeray hired. The touching reminiscences of Anne Thackeray’s biographical introductions to his works portray him as a loving, if busy, father.

He started the serial publication of his novel Vanity Fair in 1847. It brought Thackeray both fame and prosperity. From then on he was an established author on the English literary scene. Dickens was then at the height of his fame, and, though the two men appreciated each other’s work, their admirers were fond of debating their comparative merits.

## The Brookfields

During these years of success, Thackeray lived the life of a bachelor in London. He spent much time with his friends, attending the social functions of a fashionable society. He became the constant attendant upon Jane Brookfield, the wife of an old friend from Cambridge.

Thackeray and the Brookfields were involved in an increasingly tense emotional triangle. His first trip to America in 1852 provided the time and distance for Thackeray to try and extricate himself from the tangle. Henry Brookfield’s coldness and desire to dominate his wife, her resistance and the need for someone to turn to, and Thackeray’s loneliness combined to create a complicated affair. Brookfield alternately ignored or forbade his wife’s warm communications with the successful novelist. Jane Brookfield returned Thackeray’s ardent expressions of friendship and lamented her husband’s inability to understand her. Thackeray, for his part, professed for Jane a devotion that was pure and he also remained a

companion of her husband. He nonetheless felt betrayed by Jane’s tendency to cool down the correspondence when Brookfield complained. Thackeray eventually caused a dramatic break in the triangle by berating Brookfield for his neglectful treatment of Jane. After Thackeray heard of Jane’s pregnancy, during his second trip to America, he decided never to return to her.

Trip To America

Thackeray tried to find consolation through travel and, lecturing in the United States. He thus followed in Dickens’ footsteps. These lectures were profitable for Thackeray and also provided influential insight on novelists like Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne.

Dickens had offended the Americans and did not write a profitable account of his journey. Thackeray, on the other hand, saw America through friendly eyes. In one of his letters to his mother, Thackeray wrote that he did not recognize blacks as equals (though he condemned slavery on moral grounds). He chose to believe that the whipping of slaves in America was rare and that families were not normally separated on the auction block. This was because he was apprehensive about criticism from his hosts that the living conditions for English workers were worse than those for slaves in America.

Thackeray made enduring friendships during his lecture trips to the United States. The most significant of these was the one with the Baxter family of New York. The eldest daughter, Sally Baxter, enchanted the novelist and she became the model for Ethel Newcome, the protagonist of his novel. She was vibrant, intelligent, beautiful and young. He visited her again on his second tour of the States by which time she was married to a South Carolina gentleman.

Through all this, he was continually ill with recurrent kidney infections caused by a bout of syphilis in his youth. In spite of his failing health, Thackeray still managed to have an impressive house built and settled generous dowries on his daughters. After the second profitable lecturing tour on The Four Georges (that is, the Hanoverian kings of the 18th and early 19th centuries), Thackeray stood for parliament elections as an independent candidate. His sense of humor perhaps prevented him from trying too hard for appealing his constituents. When Lord Monck, presiding at one of his rallies, said "May the better man win", Thackeray retorted with a smile, "I hope not !" He knew that the rival candidate, Edward Cardwell would make a much better statesman. Thackeray believed that his advocacy of entertainment on the Sabbath was crucial in his defeat.

Controversy With Charles Dickens

Of the several literary quarrels in which Thackeray got involved during his life, the ‘Garrick Club affair’ is best remembered. Charles Dickens had always been one of Thackeray’s earliest and best friends. But a quarrel had arisen and for several years the two men were not on talking terms. Thackeray had taken offense at some personal remarks in a column by Edmund Yates and demanded an apology, eventually taking the affair to the Garrick Club committee. Dickens was already upset with Thackeray for an indiscreet remark

about his affair with Ellen Ternan and so he championed Yates. Dickens helped Yates to draft letters both to Thackeray, and in his defense, to the club’s committee. Despite Dickens’ intervention, Yates eventually lost the vote of the club’s members, but the quarrel was stretched out through journal articles and pamphlets. Thackeray told Charles Kingsley, "What pains me most is that Dickens should have been his advisor; and next that I should have had to lay a heavy hand on a young man who, I take it, has been cruelly punished by the issue of the affair, and I believe is hardly aware of the nature of his own offence, and doesn’t even now understand that a gentleman should resent the monstrous insult which he volunteered."

This quarrel was resolved only in Thackeray’s last months when one evening the two met on the stairs of the Athenaeum, a London club. Thackeray impulsively held out his hand to Dickens. The latter returned the greeting, and the old quarrel was patched up.

## Later Years

It was as if Thackeray had an intuition that he must make haste to hail and farewell to his old friend. It was only a few nights later – December 23, 1863 – that he went to sleep for the last time. He was found dead on the morning of Christmas Eve. The master had called the roll; and Thackeray, like the beloved Colonel Newcome in one of his novels, responded gently, "Adsum – I am here." Towards the end of his life, Thackeray was proud that through his writings, he had regained the patrimony lost to bank failures and gambling. He passed on to his daughters an inheritance sufficient for their support and also a grand house in Kensington.

He was buried in the Kensal Green Cemetery on December 30. An estimated 2000 mourners came to pay tribute, among them was Charles Dickens. After his death, a commemorative bust was placed in Westminster Abbey.