

**The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater  
Theatre/Dance Department proudly presents**

# VANITY FAIR



**by Kate Hamill**

**based on the novel by William Makepeace Thackeray**

**directed by Sara J. Griffin**



University of Wisconsin  
**Whitewater**

College of Arts  
and Communication

**Study Guide Companion  
created by Leslie LaMuro**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page 2 . . . . .	Synopsis & About Kate Hamill
Page 3 . . . . .	About William Makepeace Thackeray
Page 4. . . . .	Discussion Questions
Page 5 & 6 . . . . .	About the Time Period
Page 7 . . . . .	Discussion Questions
Page 8 . . . . .	Whatever Shall I Wear?
Page 9 . . . . .	Mens Fashion in 1815
Page 10 . . . . .	Vanity Fair Quiz
Page 11 -13 . . . . .	Well Behaved Women...

# SYNOPSIS

*Vanity Fair* proves that there is nothing fair about vanity. This (im)morality play watches as one woman climbs the social ladder using her feminine wiles and wit, indulging her wicked impulses; while another, a model of goodness and virtue loses her fortune and all that she loves while clinging to her moral high ground. Bold, wickedly funny, and shockingly relevant, *Vanity Fair* demands that we face our own hypocrisy. After all...who are we to judge?

The play follows the lives of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley following their graduation in 1815 from Miss Pinkertons Academy for Young Ladies, where they learn the skills of calligraphy, elocution, and needlework. Miss Sedley comes from a well born family while Miss Sharp is an orphan who was a charity student. The play follows them through their lives as they find husbands, have children, and find that their virtues and fortunes take very different paths than they had planned.

"...scandalous, relentless and heartbreaking...bound to impress even the most loyal of Thackeray fans. ...one of the most intriguing adaptations of a novel I have ever seen... the plot is saturated with such vigor and life. ...[VANITY FAIR] brings the essence of the novel in all its glory to the stage." —BroadwayWorld.com



## ABOUT KATE HAMILL

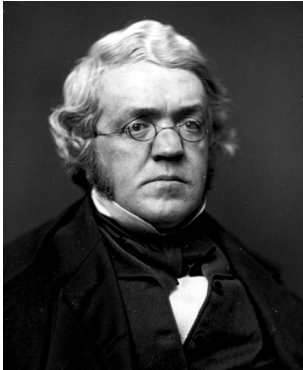
Kate Hamill is an award winning New York City based actress/ playwright, originally from a farm in upstate New York. Her passion is to create new feminist, female-centered classics focusing on complicated women. She is known for theatricality, and works that feature absurdity and examines social and gender issues and the timeless struggle to reconcile conscience and identity with social pressures. "As an actor, she tends to play truth-tellers, oddballs and misfits: complicated people who color outside the lines."

Hamill was named 2017 Playwright of the year by the Wall Street Journal. She has the honor of being one of the 10 most-produced playwrights in the country from 2017-2020. Plays include: *Emma*, *Dracula*, *Prostitute Play*, *Scarlet Letter*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Vanity Fair*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Little Women*, *Mansfield Park* and more.

She has won several awards for her acting and playwrighting including: Off -Broadway Alliance Award, Drama League Award, WSJ Critic's Pick, and Helen Hayes Award for Best Production with many other nominations. Hamill received her BFA in Acting from Ithaca College and has had training at Circle in the Square, and Magnet Theatre Improv Classes (levels 1-3).



# ABOUT WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY



William Makepeace Thackeray, was an only child born in Calcutta, India on July 18, 1811. His parents were of Anglo-Indian descent. His father was Secretary to the Board Revenue of the East India Company in a district near Calcutta but died of a fever in 1815. William, his son, was sent home to England at 5 years old to be educated. His mother did not return to England but stayed in Calcutta to marry a childhood sweetheart.

Thackeray was educated as a “gentleman” at private boarding schools, including six years at Charterhouse where he was frequently abused. He didn’t like the boring teachings in the classical languages and his subsequent feelings for classical literature, he did however enjoy the popular fictions of the day. He was not a scholar but went on to Cambridge, where he entered Trinity College in 1819. He was not much interested in learning but instead enjoyed wine, gambling and trips to the Continent and left the university without a degree after two years.

Thackeray then spent some time traveling, visiting Paris and Weimar, where he met Goethe. He returned to study law at the middle Temple but didn’t pursue that either. At the age of 21 he received his inheritance from his father, but spent much of it on gambling and funding two unsuccessful newspapers, The National Standard and the Constitutional in which he would write.

In 1836 he married Isabella Gethin Shawe the daughter of a Matthew Shawe who served as a distinguished colonel primarily in India. The Thackeray’s had three girls, Anne Isabella, Jane who died at eight months old, and Harriet. Thackeray now began writing for his profession as a journalist to support his family. He primarily worked for Fraser’s Magazine, a sharp-witted and sharp tongued conservative publication, writing art criticism, short fiction, and longer fiction works Catherine and The Luck of Barry Lyndon. He also reviewed books for The Times from 1837-1840 and was a regular contributor to The Morning Chronicle and The Foreign Quarterly Review. He began writing for a newly created magazine called Punch and became a regular contributor from 1843- 1854 and published The Snob Papers which later became The Book of Snobs – this work popularized the modern meaning of the word “snob”.

*Vanity Fair* established his fame and was first published in serial installments in Punch. He was hailed by lords and ladies he satirized as the equal of Charles Dickens. He wrote several novels and ran unsuccessfully for Parliament as a Liberal for the city of Oxford. In 1860 he became editor of Cornhill Magazine but didn’t enjoy being an editor so he wrote the column called *Roundabout Papers* for the magazine.

He died on December 23, 1863 from a stroke. His funeral at Kensington Gardens was attended by an estimated 7,000 people and he is buried at Kensal Green Cemetery and has a memorial sculpted bust by Marochetti in Westminster Abbey.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



**DISCUSS HOW THACKERAY'S  
SATIRE OF UPPER CLASS SOCIETY  
MADE HIM A DARLING OF UPPER  
CLASS SOCIETY.**

**CAN YOU THINK OF A SIMILAR  
SITUATION IN TODAY'S SOCIETY,  
OF SOMEONE THAT MAKES FUN  
OF SOCIETY AND BECOMES A  
CELEBRITY FOR DOING THAT?**



**WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES  
A PLAYWRIGHT ADAPT  
A NOVEL INTO A PLAY?**

**WHAT NOVEL WOULD YOU  
LIKE TO SEE  
MADE INTO A PLAY?**

**WHY DO THEATRES CONTINUE TO PRODUCE PLAYS  
IN THE CATEGORY OF CLASSICS?**

# ABOUT THE TIME PERIOD

## EDUCATION IN 1815

Often children of wealthier families sent their children to boarding schools, there were separate schools for boys and girls. The schools for boys had studies focused on politics, sciences, math, and physical things. Girls were taught reading and writing and home economics, charismatic skills, etiquette, table manners, embroidery, and skills that would make them look like a good marriage prospect.

"Women did, though, require a new kind of education to prepare them for this role of 'Angel in the House'. Rather than attracting a husband through their domestic abilities, middle-class girls were coached in what were known as 'accomplishments'. These would be learned either at boarding school or from a resident governess. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished:

"A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern

languages ... ; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions" ... (ch. 8 *Pride & Prejudice*)



&

As Miss Bingley emphasizes, it was important for a well-educated girl to soften her erudition with a graceful and feminine manner. No-one wanted to be called a 'blue-stocking', the name given to women who had devoted themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits. Blue-stockings were considered unfeminine and off-putting in the way that they attempted to usurp men's 'natural' intellectual superiority. Some doctors reported that too much study actually had a damaging effect on the ovaries, turning attractive young women into dried-up prunes. Later in the century, when Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women, many families refused to let their clever daughters attend for fear that they would make themselves unmarriageable."- source Kathryn Hughes, *Gender and sexuality* published May, 15, 2014

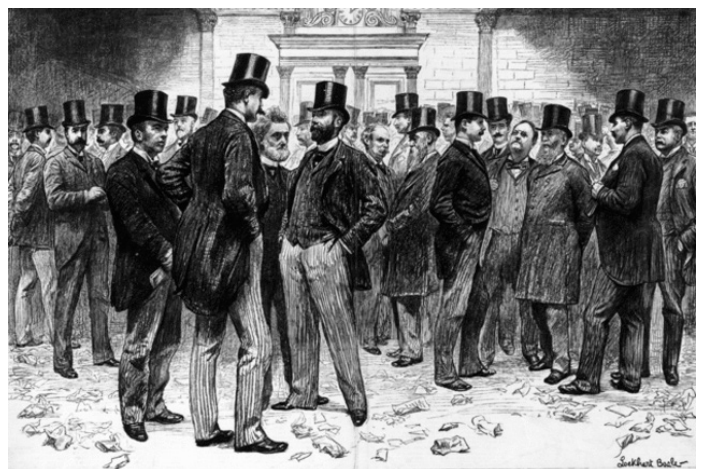


## GENDER ROLES

During the Victorian period Men and women's roles in society were very sharply defined perhaps more so than any other time in history. In earlier centuries women worked alongside husbands and brothers in the family business. Many people lived over their businesses (like a haberdashery) and the women would help with the customers or accounting while also attending to regular domestic duties. As the industrial revolution progressed, men more frequently commuted to their place of business at a factory, shop or office. Wives, daughters and sisters were at home all day to oversee domestic duties that were commonly carried out by Servants.

This created a separation of the sexes who often only gathered together at breakfast and again at dinner. This phenomena was called "Separate spheres". The ideology of Separate Spheres rested on a definition of the 'natural' characteristics of women and men. Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands labored all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote.

Women were to remain demure and chaste with no interest in sexuality other than to bear children. They were not even allowed to speak to men unless there was a married woman present as a chaperone. Several women of the day including: Elizabeth Barrett, Charlotte Bronte, Florence Nightingale longed to do something useful in the world so they became poets, writers and nurses to rebel against the constraints of society. Their works were often criticized as shocking, Lady (Elizabeth) Eastlake a conservative commentator wrote scathing reviews of Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair's Becky Sharp, disliking their sexual ambition by marrying into the households that employed them.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**HOW DID BECKY SHARP'S  
UPBRINGING INFORM HER  
CHOICES AS AN ADULT  
WOMAN?**

**HOW DID AMELIA  
SEDLEY'S UPBRINGING  
INFORM HER CHOICES AS  
AN ADULT WOMAN?**

**HOW WERE THE  
EXPECTATIONS OF MEN'S  
BEHAVIOR VERSUS  
WOMEN'S BEHAVIOR IN  
PUBLIC DIFFERENT?**

**HOW HAVE EXPECTATIONS  
OF GENDER ROLES  
CHANGED SINCE 1815?**

**DO YOU THINK THAT IN TODAY'S SOCIETY THAT WOMEN ARE  
STILL EXPECTED TO UNDERPLAY THEIR INTELLECT TO BE  
ATTRACTIVE TO MEN?**



# WHATEVER SHALL I WEAR?

## FASHION IN LONDON OF 1815

Fashion for women was very feminine, empire style dresses out of very sheer and light fabrics. Often made in white, and keeping it white was a sign of higher class women who didn't get dirty. Working class women did not usually wear white because they worked hard and did get dirty.



## THE PELISSE 1800-1850

The Pelisse can be a confusing term because there were several forms over a 50-year period. After 1810 it was worn full length and was a warmer longer sleeved coat than the Spencer, but often made of the same materials.

It was usually fur trimmed, straight in cut, belted at a high waist like the gown and sported a broad cape like collar an influence of military styles. The colors for pelisses were golden brown, dark green and blue. The Pelisse was normally worn over pale gowns which were visible as it was worn open at the front.



Regency Dress Era 1800-1825 Fashion History article  
by Pauline Weston Thomas at [www.fashion-era.com](http://www.fashion-era.com)  
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# 1815: MEN'S FASHION

## UPPER-CLASS MEN AND LIBERAL PROFESSIONALS

The style in London for men was becoming more and more refined and this was due to the influence of two things: the dandy and the romantic movement. The dandy (a man who placed high importance on personal aesthetics and hobbies, but wanted to seem totally nonchalant about it) arguably emerged as early as the 1790s. The definition is a bit weird. On the one hand, there have always been fashionable men who deeply cared about their appearances and that exists to this very day. What was special about the early 19th century dandy was that they had a certain look. Dark colors were all but mandatory. (Dark doesn't necessarily mean dreary though, many items, particularly vests and coats were cut from rich, vivid fabrics.) Blue tailcoats with gold buttons, like the one right, were everywhere. White muslin shirts (sometimes with ruffles on the neck/sleeves) were extremely popular. Breeches were officially on their way out, with pants/trousers taking their place. Fabrics in general were becoming more practical silk and more wool, cotton, and buckskin. Also, dandies garments were also quite tight-fitted as well.

This example of a dandy, right. Beau Brummell, the prototype for Regency men's fashion (Brummell was a British fashion icon during the early 1800s, but fled the country to escape debt in 1816), considered himself an expert on fashion and elegance. Outlandish, flamboyant fashion was a major no-no for him. His overall opinion on both subjects can be summed up as follows:

"TO BE TRULY ELEGANT  
ONE SHOULD NOT BE NOTICED."

Source: <https://cdnhistorybits.wordpress.com/2017/12/06/mens-fashion-during-the-regency-era-1810s-to-1830s/>

Additional fashion sources:

<https://world4.eu/regency-empire/>

<https://cdnhistorybits.wordpress.com/2018/01/02/womens-fashion-during-the-regency-era-1810s-to-1830s/>



# QUIZ

1. Miss Becky Sharp's final act when leaving Miss Pinkerton's Academy is \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. leaving a Thank you note for Miss Pinkerton
  - b. stealing a crystal candle holder
  - c. tossing Miss Jemma's gift back into the school
  - d. tearfully saying goodbye
2. Meeting Amelia Sedley's older brother Joseph for the first time, Rebecca \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. is overly disgusted by his appearance
  - b. faints
  - c. ignores his romantic overtures
  - d. feigns attraction to gain his attention
3. William and George Osborne become friends \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. when they were chums in school
  - b. only after fighting each other
  - c. while stationed in the same Army company in India
  - d. while growing up in Manchester
4. At Rebecca's first meeting with Sir Pitt Crawley \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. she is impressed by his stately manner
  - b. they discussed her duties at lunch
  - c. the coachman introduces her
  - d. none of the above
5. Soon after entering the Crawley household, Rebecca \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. becomes a favorite of Sir Pitt Crawley
  - b. is pursued romantically by Lesser Pitt Crawley
  - c. began her duties as governess to the young Crawley boys
  - d. none of the above
6. Lesser Pitt Crawley can be best described as \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. the spiritual advisor to Rebecca
  - b. a miserly man obsessed with maintaining his estate
  - c. the drinking, gambling, fun-loving, debt-ridden son of Sir Pitt
  - d. a pious man of the cloth
7. All of the following can be said of Rawdon Crawley, except that \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. he dances with Rebecca
  - b. he fought three duels
  - c. he graduated from Cambridge
  - d. he is his rich Aunt's favorite nephew
8. George's father is opposed to the marriage of his son and Amelia \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. because he hopes to marry him off to his friend's daughter
  - b. unless she has a large dowry
  - c. after finding out her mother was in the Theatre
  - d. after finding out about George's gambling
9. Rebecca refuses Sir Pitt's proposal of marriage \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. because she is the daughter of paupers
  - b. and confesses her marriage to another man
  - c. because she thinks he is a disgusting old man
  - d. none of the above
10. Miss Crawley disinherits Rawdon due in large part \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. to the efforts of Lesser Pitt
  - b. to her mental illness
  - c. to the efforts of Miss Briggs
  - d. none of the above



# WELL-BEHAVED WOMEN SELDOM MAKE HISTORY CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL IDEAS OF FEMININITY

BY JOY MEADS

Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) begins with Becky Sharp chucking a dictionary—a farewell gift representing her years of study at Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies—out of the window of the coach carrying her away from the school. With that gesture of defiance, Becky rejects the rules of feminine behavior taught by that institution, searing herself in the memories of generations of readers as one of the most fascinatingly unconventional female protagonists in dramatic literature. The codes of etiquette Becky spurns functioned to crush the independence, ambition, and success of women then and still exert a hidden influence on the perception of women today.

Becky's best friend, Amelia Sedley, is everything she is not: a model student of Miss Pinkerton's Academy and an outstanding representative of the passive, deferential conduct expected of young women at the time. Historian Barbara Welter described the system of values taught in 19th-century Britain and America as a "cult of domesticity" governed by rigidly gendered norms of behavior. While the lived experiences of innumerable individuals and the research of a phalanx of scholars such as Anne Fausto-Sterling have proved that the physiological and psychological reality of sex exists along a spectrum, the gender codes under the "cult of domesticity" were strictly binary: you were either a man or a woman, and that label dictated everything. According to Walter, "men were the movers, the doers, the actors. Women were the passive, submissive responders."

These expectations of the behavior of young men and women shaped the representation of their counterparts in the literature of the time as well. A linguistic analysis of 19th-century novels at the University of Nevada found a stark difference between the types of verbs commonly associated with male and female characters. The researchers discovered that verbs associated with emotion (such as to cry, to love, to weep) were generally related to female characters. Verbs referring to action (to advance, to approach, to ride), however, were typically related to male characters. "This result would seem to support the work of literary and cultural critics," researchers Matthew Jockers and Gabi Kirillof concluded, "who have observed the 19th century tendency to valorize [value] passive women and active men."

Unlike Amelia, Becky was born without the privilege to sit gracefully as opportunity floats toward her. Her survival depends on her sweat, toil, calculation, and manipulation of circumstance, regardless of how unbecoming such efforts may seem. As William Makepeace Thackeray himself said in a private letter, "If Becky had had 5,000 [pounds] a year, I have no doubt in my mind that she would have been respectable." And yet, as understandable as Becky's actions may be, many readers have still found something about the character disquieting. Thackeray's editor chided him for "enjoying Becky" too much, and urged him to redirect his sympathies towards Amelia. Even

Thackeray himself seems at times uncertain about how to regard Becky. As literary critic Dolores Duke notes, "The writer's attitude towards his main character shifts back and forth between frank moralism and proud admiration, a shifting which is not surprising given the . . . almost inescapable model of female propriety in Victorian England."

This ambivalence is still present today. While everyone seems to admit that Becky Sharp is interesting, there remains an active debate about whether or not she is "likable." In her essay "Not Here to Make Friends: On the Importance of Unlikable Female Protagonists," author Roxane Gay challenges the utility of the label. "Unlikable is a fluid designation that can be applied to any character who doesn't behave in a way the reader finds palatable," she says. Gay also quotes a line from writer Lionel Shriver's essay for the *Financial Times*—"this 'liking' business has two components: moral approval and affection." Characters should be lovable, says Gay, "while they do right."

The question over whether powerful, independent women like Becky are likable is much more than a literary debate. There is a vast body of research demonstrating that women in the real world are stigmatized when they prioritize their own ambitions instead of deferring to others' needs and priorities. This is called the "incongruity theory of bias": when women stray from the traditional gender norms of behavior, they experience backlash. In one often-cited study at Columbia University, researchers gave MBA students the same profile of an ambitious executive, naming the person Howard for one test group and Heidi for another. Although both Heidi and Howard were viewed as competent, Howard was judged to be far more likable than Heidi.

In a similar study at Yale University, researchers created a profile of a fictional "ambitious" state senator who showed "a strong will to power." Study participants who believed the senator to be male preferred him to a less ambitious, neutral candidate. However, those who were told that the senator was female not only viewed her less favorably than the neutral candidate, but reacted with what the researchers described as "moral outrage." In their "Field Guide" to implicit bias, activist group the Kilroys<sup>1</sup> note, "When people defy stereotypical expectations, research shows, we are wired to react negatively. When researchers monitored the brain activity of people hearing words incongruent with gender stereotypes ("Mary" and "strong"), they saw brain activity similar to if the participants had just heard violations of basic linguistic rules, like poor sentence structure."

Women who follow Amelia's example of deferring to others' comfort hardly fare better, according to research. Though they are better liked, they are also perceived to be less competent than their ambitious counterparts. Feminist scholars call this behavioral trap "the double bind." But this isn't the only risk of abiding by the code of Miss Pinkerton's Academy. Amelia's passivity leaves her dependent upon external circumstances and the actions of others to provide for her own comfort, while Becky's agency makes her more resilient against changes of fortune and better equipped to change the conditions that have removed her power. This fact, perhaps, is the hidden root of our societal stigma against women's ambition. As Katha Pollitt states in her article "The End of Likability Politics," "what is likability if not a deference to men—with a self-deprecating smile? A likable woman doesn't talk too loud or too much. She doesn't take up too much space, isn't too sexy or too dowdy, and gracefully eludes confrontation. In short, she doesn't demand anything that

men would rather keep for themselves, be it political power or sexual autonomy or the right to be safe after having a couple of drinks."

As I write this article, we are in the first few months of a presidential campaign season featuring no fewer than six declared female candidates to date. Even at this early stage, the enduring force of these old dynamics is hard to deny. Immediately after Elizabeth Warren declared her candidacy, an article in the online magazine Politico questioned how the candidate could "avoid a Clinton redux—written off as too unlikable before her campaign gets off the ground." A widely-shared satirical article in online magazine McSweeney's Internet Tendency, titled "I Don't Hate Women Candidates—I Just Hated Hillary Clinton and Coincidentally I'm Starting to Hate Elizabeth Warren," poked fun at this dynamic. "I always tell my daughters they can be anything they want, so long as they don't make other people feel uncomfortable," it says. "They can be as ambitious as they want, so long as they do it in an acceptable manner."

Much has changed since Thackeray's time. Most people now believe in the concept of gender equity. Our society has worked hard to break down the structural impediments to women's advancement, resulting in real—if incomplete—progress. The current field of female presidential candidates represents a fruition of that effort, even as their reception demonstrates the work still left to be done. Centuries of distrust and skepticism of ambitious women have left their marks on our unconscious judgments and impressions in ways that are now often subtle and hard to see, but no less real or powerful. The traces of these old beliefs can be felt in the impulse to label a young girl "bossy" for the same behavior we might label as "assertive" in her brother.

Each example of an ambitious woman we encounter, in real life and in fiction, is another opportunity to break the grip of these old habits on our minds. The next time you find yourself wanting to call a woman character (or a real-life woman, for that matter) "unlikable," you might stop for a moment and consider if that character is defying gender role expectations. Kate Hamill, the author of this adaptation of *Vanity Fair*, asks that we see beyond old gender binaries in our response to these characters, and perceive them afresh, in all of their complicated humanity.

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**SOURCES** Devorah Blachor, "I Don't Hate Women Candidates—I Just Hated Hillary Clinton and Coincidentally I'm Starting to Hate Elizabeth Warren," McSweeney's Internet Tendency, January 2, 2019 (accessed March 19, 2019) [goo.gl/MdaxHF](http://goo.gl/MdaxHF); Roxane Gay, "Not Here to Make Friends: On the Importance of Unlikable Female Protagonists," BuzzFeed, January 3, 2014 (accessed March 19, 2019) [goo.gl/tqg47e](http://goo.gl/tqg47e); Matthew Jockers and Gabi Kirillof, Understanding Gender and Character Agency in the 19th Century Novel, *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, December 1, 2016 (accessed March 19, 2019) [goo.gl/EZQ3x5](http://goo.gl/EZQ3x5); Geoffrey McNab, "Becky Sharp Is Like Me—a Survivor," *The Guardian*, December 29, 2004 (accessed March 18, 2019) [goo.gl/KsTLL5](http://goo.gl/KsTLL5); Katha Pollitt, "The End of Likability Politics," *The Nation*, January 19, 2019 (accessed March 19, 2019) [goo.gl/v68ND9](http://goo.gl/v68ND9); Barbara Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860*, *American Quarterly* 18, No. 2, Part 1 (accessed March 19, 2019) [goo.gl/kGSD8e](http://goo.gl/kGSD8e)

**QUIZ ANSWERS:** 1) C    2) D    3) A    4) D    5) A    6) D    7) C    8) B    9) B    10) C