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## Romancing with the Pet: Animal Identity and Alterity in

### Virginia Woolf's *Flush*

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**Abstract:** Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography* (1933), a reconstruction of the life of Elizabeth Barrett's pet spaniel, is a radical experiment with the genre of biography. By taking a dog as biographical subject Woolf attempts to deconstruct the traditional anthropocentric notion of biography. While traditional literature has de-valued animal studies, Woolf's text tries to construct a distinct animal identity within a Victorian family. The presence of the pet within the family has been treated as an alterity which threatens the bourgeois domestic value of 'reproductive futurism'. She has also shown how man and animal share spaces with multifaceted ramification and the possibility of an affective relation with the pet beyond the traditional parameters of sexuality. The intimate relation between Elizabeth and Flush can be read as a parallel narrative of romance co-existing with the love affair between Elizabeth and Robert Browning.

**Key Words:** Pet-narrative, Romance, Biography, Alterity, Reproductive futurism.

"Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal; instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other?"

(*Flush*, Virginia Woolf)



Like its literary predecessor *Orlando* (1928), *Flush* (1933) is another attempt by Woolf to reach a new definition of biography. This time Woolf takes a dog as the biographical subject, a cocker spaniel owned by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. By displacing the human subject Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933) attempts to deconstruct the human/animal binary and eventually explodes all other binaries like man/woman, home/outside, national/foreign, public/private, high/low, fiction/non-fiction, canon/popular, centre/margin, history/literature, privileged/marginalized, mainstream/alternative etc. to name only a few. In fact, *Flush* questions the basic premises of the human binary system and opens up a modern interdisciplinary approach of interpretation. While doing so it also enunciates the text's dialogue with wider socio-cultural issues of the time and beyond.

*Flush* marks a crucial point in Virginia Woolf's literary journey as she gave up the traditional human subject of biography for an animal. For reconstructing the life of Flush Woolf largely depended upon the love letters exchanged between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett and Rudolf Besier's play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930). Laura Marcus observes in her book *Virginia Woolf* (2004) that *Flush* cannot be slighted for being an animal-narrative:

Yet *Flush* 'should not be seen as an aberration or 'freak' (as she termed it) in her *oeuvre*. There are strong connections between *Flush* and her other works: the vivid depictions of the London scene; representations of the Victorian home and its constraints on women's freedom (chiming strongly with *The Years*, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*); the self-conscious and self-reflexive evocation of the biographical 'pursuit' so central to *Jacob's Room* and *Orlando*. (144)

Woolf intended *Flush* to be a biography as is evident from its subtitle. But she completely jeopardises the anthropocentric biographical tradition by taking a canine subject and contributes in reconstructing the literary canon. Jane Goldman in *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* comments: "*Flush*'s very transgression and destabilisation of the categories of 'high' and 'low' art make it a satirical allegory of canon formation" (74). Woolf's text is a radical attempt to deconstruct the traditional anthropocentric attitude which has always focalized the human subject. By switching



over from human perspective to canine perspective Woolf has expressed distrust towards human consciousness. Laura Marcus writes: 'In keeping Flush's experiences to the fore, Woolf retains, a somewhat ironic distance from Elizabeth Barrett, who was always to play a central role in Woolf's lexicon, often as the focus for her ambivalence towards the Victorians and the Victorian woman writer in particular (147). Laura Marcus notes:

Flush, repeats the biographical gesture of focusing on Barrett Browning's life rather than her work, but does so by deploying a biographical filter a subject unable to read the poet's text. The effective word-blindness of biographers, their disregard for the writing of a writer, is thus taken to a parodic extreme in Woolf's representation of the Barrett-Browning romance through a consciousness – that of a dog radically other to the written word. (148).

Being an animal-narrative *Flush* can be linked to a tradition of animal-writings like Edward Augustus Kendall's *Keeper's Travels in search of His Master* (1799), *The Noble Life of Moretto: An 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian Dog* by Pittoni (1713), *Black Beauty* (1877) by Anna Sewell which portrays the life of a horse, *The Autobiography of a Flea* (1887), Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) and *Just So Stories* (1902), Kenneth Grahame's *The wind in the Willows* (1908), or the American writer Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) and *White Fang* (1906) etc. The origin of the genre of beast narrative can be traced back to the sixth century B.C. fables of Aesop in which animals are anthropomorphized i.e. imposed human attributes in order to teach them a moral. Though the purpose of these fables was completely didactic, yet the genre exercised much influence in the development of more recent animal narratives. Woolf's *Flush* also alludes to the genre of beast fables in making satiric comments on the human way of living.

The nineteenth century was an age of proliferation in animal writings. The period witnessed the emergence of pet-writings and women writers' active participation in this special kind of genre. Fabienne Moine in *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (2015) talks about Victorian women's engagement with animal-writings: 'In their attempt to defend the idea that animals are individuals with rights, pet fiction and poems often reproduce non-verbal





means of inter-species communication by exploring unconventional literary forms' (156). Moine also says that by choosing pets as subjects of poems and fiction Victorian women writers challenged gender and power relations and resisted suffering and domination. In the Victorian domestic space women and pets shared togetherness and feelings of affect. Such experiences of affect expressed in narratives often charged the writings with a new life and a creative force. In this context it is noteworthy to mention that most women writers including Elizabeth Barrett, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and others had dogs as their pets.

In the Victorian period dogs played an important role in the family culture. Cultural geographer Philip Howell in *At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain* (2015) has traced the process of inclusion of the dog into the Victorian family. He argues that although dogs have been companions to human beings from ancient times, yet the concept of family dog was a creation of the Victorians by giving it a place at the heart of the family. Owing to industrialization during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the nineteenth century London's population bloomed. Growing urbanization demanded other animals like cows, horses, pigs, sheep, fowls, geese etc to be shifted to the outskirts of the city. Dogs became properly 'private' and they were upgraded to join the warmth of the family hearth from the cold of the backyard or kennel: "In the bosom of the family, the dog gained a name, a personal narrative and, at the end of its life, a burial place". Upbringing dogs became a part of the Victorian domestic ideology. In fact, cats and dogs were a Victorian woman's best friends. In cases of spousal abuse many a times the cats and dogs played important roles in saving the women from the hands of their abusing husbands. Being demoralized by various oppressive structures of the Victorian society the women found solace in their companion pets. Pets became their true companions.

*Flush* beautifully presents the sharing of space by human and animals in Victorian times. The human-animal relationship proves to be a disruptive force which lays bare the false sense of superiority of the Victorian people and dismantles some of the age-old myths about family, home, love etc. The book is also an important period-piece on Victorian era since through *Flush's* point of view Woolf gives an accurate picture of London life and culture. The vivid description of London



slums, description of upper class Victorian home and family—all capture the socio-cultural life of that period. Gender finds a prominent place in the narrative where the dog's point of view has been deliberately used by Virginia Woolf to throw special light on various systems of gender within the Victorian family. The presence of a pet within the household even adds a very different shade to the gender orientation of the Victorian family members and affects their inter-personal relationship. The intimate relationship of the pet i.e. Flush with Elizabeth in the Barrett household calls for queer reading. It makes apparent that in a patriarchal family the pet and the women are equal in status where both of them have no voice of their own. That is also one of the reasons for their intimate bonding. The animal-human relationship strongly influences the human-human relationship and lays bare the different facets of patriarchy which try to strangle woman's liberty. It also shows the tyranny of the father who is the head of the house along with other male members and the evolutionary steps taken by women to get out of the shackles. The instability of gender orientations, of inter-personal relations, and of the apparently stable Victorian family has been exposed. Such readings open up an altogether new and trans-disciplinary approach to Virginia Woolf's *Flush*.

According to Monica Flegel, a scholar on Victorian Studies, *Flush* is an attempt to undermine Victorian domestic ideology which emphasises upon heterosexuality, reproduction and family. Queer sensibilities existing within a highly structured patriarchal family are exposed as well in the process. Monica Flegel in her book *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture: Animality, Queer Relations and the Victorian Family* (2015), explains the intricate nexus of Victorian domestic ideology, pet culture and queer relations within the Victorian family. The Victorians tried to uphold family as some spiritually and psychically restorative ideal. Following this trend the Victorian domestic fiction became a culturally dominant and prestigious literary mode of conveying the beneficial nature of the family. This domestic ideology was closely linked with heteronormativity which tried to perpetuate heterosexual relationship in the society through marriage. That is the reason why Victorian fiction abounds in courtships, love affairs, marriages and children. Monica Flegel also coins the term 'reproductive futurism' to indicate the nature of the ideology preached by Victorian fiction. The role played by the pet in the Victorian family is linked



with the ideology of 'reproductive futurism'. The girl who cared for pet was considered to be the most marriageable. In fact, the pet was not for its own sake but for the sake of maintaining patriarchy in the family. Anything not conforming to such 'reproductive futurism' was dubbed as unnatural, deviant and perverse. Monica cites that any kind of border-crossing be it class-crossing, race-crossing, gender-disrupting or species-crossing could provide a threat to the stable equilibrium of the family. Monica Flegel observes:

If pets are meant, within stories of courtship and heteronormative coupling, as stand-ins for prospective partners and eventual progeny, then their stubborn refusal to shift themselves and make way for their human replacements suggests the "natural family" that is meant to come into being is threatened, whether through a failure to achieve the purposed goal of marriage and parenthood or because the animal has succeeded in being a rival for human affections. (42)

The text is strewn with evidences of intimate relation between Flush and Elizabeth Barrett. It clearly testifies to the fact that Flush was more than just a pet. To Miss Barrett Flush's value was no less than any human being. For the sake of his life she could stand against everybody. She was not a mere colluding figure to the 'reproductive futurism' of the Victorian society which taught woman to care for a pet in order to become a loving caretaker of a family. Rather her love for the pet makes her a rebel against the family by threatening the standard image of femininity and Victorian domestic ideology. Flush thinks of their relationship in terms of lover-beloved:

Was it Flush, or was it Pan? Was she no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek nymph in some dim grove in Arcady? And did the bearded god himself press his lips to hers? For a moment she was transformed; she was a nymph and Flush was Pan. The sun burnt and love blazed. (Flush 39).

The momentary transformation of Flush and Elizabeth into Greek god and goddess is expressive of eroticism. The idea of getting deprived from the love of Miss Barrett was unbearable to Flush. The quotation below shows Flush's deep feeling of sorrow Miss Barrett:



But then she said in her sober, certain tones that she would never love him again. That shaft went to his heart. All these years they had lived together, shared everything together, and now for one moment's failure, she would never love him again. . . . It was an act, Flush thought, of calculated and deliberate malice; an act designed to make him feel his own insignificance completely. (61)

The intimate relation between Flush and Elizabeth may also invite queer reading. Donna Haraway in her *Companion Species* observes: 'Queering has the job of undoing 'normal' categories, and none is more critical than the human/non-human sorting operation' (Introduction 10). Alice A. Kuzinar persists in defining pet love as everything except bestiality i.e. sex with the beast. According to her it is a model for alternative intimacy that takes pleasure in border-crossing:

"Flushie", wrote Miss Barrett, "is my friend—my companion—and loves me better than he loves the sunshine without". [. . .] And Flush to whom the world was free, chose to forfeit all the smells of Wimpole Street in order to lie by her side. (Woolf 36)

The linguistic barrier between Flush and Miss Barrett could not hinder their intimacy. In fact, it is the lack of language that connected them into an intimate bond: 'The fact was that they could not communicate with words, and it was a fact that led undoubtedly to much misunderstanding. Yet did it not lead also to a peculiar intimacy?' (Flush 38). Miss Barrett was also doubtful about the deeper significance of language: 'do words say everything? Can words say anything? Do not words destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words?' (38). Language seems to spoil the symbolism which acts as the uniting force. At times Flush and Miss Barrett would strive to overcome the difference between them. Miss Barrett could not understand certain behaviour and emotions of Flush. On the other hand, Flush also could not comprehend Miss Barrett's emotion's from his canine point of view:

There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: but how different! . . . Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. (Woolf 26-27)





Yet there is clear indication that the desire to unite was too strong to ignore ‘And yet, had he been able to write as she did? The question is superfluous happily, for truth compels us to say that in the year 1842-43 Miss Barrett was not a nymph but an invalid; Flush was not a poet but a red cocker spaniel; and Wimpole Street was not Arcady but Wimpole Street’ (39). The possibility of a romantic union is obvious in this suggestion. If the special and linguistic barrier between Flush and Miss Barrett got erased, it would have been possible for them to enter into a communion. Equating Flush with Pan, Miss Barrett with a nymph and Wimpole Street to Arcady is a clear suggestion of erotic connection. The Greek god Pan, also known as Faun in Rome, is believed to be a satyr (half-goat and half-human) residing in Arcadia in Greece in the companionship of nymphs. He is often associated with sexuality. This association is supported by Elizabeth Barrett herself in her poem “Flush or Faunus”:

I started first, as some Arcadian  
Amazed by goatly god in twilight grove:  
But as my bearded vision closelier ran  
My tears off, I knew Flush, and rose above  
Surprise and sadness; thanking the true Pan,  
Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love.

This also suggests an escape from harsh reality into the realm of imagination and fantasy. The human-animal pairing in *Flush* talks of a deeper companionship beneath the superficial showmanship of pet-love. This is certainly a different kind of companionship which defines gender-roles in a new way. The pairing between Miss Barrett and Flush in Woolf’s story suggests a parallel narrative of companionship which often gets overshadowed by Elizabeth Barrett-Robert Browning love-affair.

The narrative of *Flush* also brings forth the different faces of patriarchy predominant in the Victorian society. Miss Elizabeth was not free in her own home. Her life was that of a caged bird. Her every movement and behaviour—eating, sleeping, talking, going outside, mixing with



people—was under the scrutiny of her father, Mr. Barrett. This marginal position of both Miss Barrett and Flush in the family was one of the major reasons for their strong bonding. The stealing of Flush in the “Whitechapel” episode marks a crucial point in exposing gendered relations within the Barrett household. This one incident jeopardises the apparently stable equilibrium of the Barrett family. The forces of patriarchy failed to exert dominance concerning this incident. The entire family got divided into two groups—Miss Barrett on one side and the male-force consisting of Miss Barrett’s father and brothers on the other. Even her lover Mr. Browning also colluded with them. This resulted in a curious tension of relations cast by the pet among the members of the family. Mr. Taylor of Whitechapel demanded a ransom for the release of Flush. Miss Barrett told her brother Henry to meet Taylor and pay the ransom. When Flush was not returned in the next few days Miss Barrett became tensed. On enquiring Henry she came to know that her father intervened into the matter, ordered him not to pay the ransom and conceal the visit from her. The entire thing had been deliberately hidden from her. Her brother did not want to disobey his father and the matter was dropped. As a result ‘It was almost as difficult for her to go to Flush as for Flush to come to her. All Wimpole Street was against her. [. . .] Her father and her brother were in league against her and were capable of any treachery in the interests of their class’ (85).

Philip Howell in the chapter “Flush and Banditti: Dog stealing in Victorian London” in his book *At Home and Astray* (2015) quotes S. M. Squier:

The Whitechapel episode is a temptation scene; forced to choose between winning the approval of her male counterparts and saving Flush, Barrett is also being asked, symbolically, to choose between two systems of morality – one masculine and impersonal, the other feminine and personal. (Howell 49)

The stealing of Flush by the robber gang of Whitechapel did not remain just a personal issue but became a social cause. The demand for justice and law became much more important than the life of Flush: ‘Wimpole Street was determined to make a stand against Whitechapel’ (85). The people of the Wimpole Street made a stand against the imaginary weak moral of Miss Barrett: ‘In truth, the forces of Wimpole Street were still, even at this last moment, battling to keep Flush and



Miss Barrett apart (93). They called it sheer madness: ‘Her brothers, her sisters all came round her threatening her, dissuading her, “crying out against me for being ‘quite mad’ and obstinate and wilful—I was called many a names as Mr. Taylor” (94). The romance between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning which has all along served to be the basis of idealized love is found to be vulnerable in the face of this incident. Laura Marcus observes:

[. . .] Robert Browning is revealed to be collusive with patriarchal law, which is upheld at the expense of both women and dogs. When Flush is stolen by the dog-thieves of Whitechapel, Elizabeth Barrett’s father, brother, and lover are united in their refusal to rescue him by paying a ransom, even though Robert Browning pitches his protest against ‘the execrable policy of the world’s husbands, fathers, brothers and domineers in general’ (146).

Robert Browning wrote to Miss Barrett: ‘If she encouraged Taylor who stole dogs, she encouraged Mr. Barnard Gregory who stole characters. Indirectly, she was responsible for all the wretches who cut their throats or fly the country because some blackmailer like Barnard Gregory took down a directory and blasted their characters’ (87). Miss Barrett could have easily condescended to Mr. Browning’s proposal but she did not. Due to Miss Barrett’s persistence ultimately Flush was rescued from the hands of the gangsters by paying a ransom. But that was a great lesson for Flush. After this incident he shrank away from Mr. Kenyon and Mr. Browning. He trusted them no longer. He could feel the treachery and cruelty beneath those apparently sophisticated faces. He kept closer to Miss Barrett. Finally, the escape to Italy for both Flush and Elizabeth Barrett was an escape long desired —away from tyrants and dog-stealers.

Thus, by reviving the life of Elizabeth Barrett’s pet dog Flush, Woolf attempts to arrive at a new form of animal narrative that can be a parallel of serious biography. Flush talks about inter-species affect, togetherness, sharing and bonding from a perspective which is not anthropocentric. The canine perspective has been deliberately used to satirise human behaviour. From Flush’s point of view human activities are shown as meaningless and at times nonsensical thereby destabilising any assumed centrality of the human consciousness. Lastly we can conclude with the remark of



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Philip Howell: 'Like all good fables, beasts and humans have swapped places, turning the world upside down. This kind of inversion is no idle or ironic anthropomorphism, but a serious strategy for reimagining the shared history of people and bests in the Victorian age' (*At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain*).

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