

From A Dog's Eye-view: A Review of *Flush* by Virginia Woolf

Reviewed by ProfShreesh Chaudhary

Woolf, Virginia (1933/2019) *Flush*, Alma Classics, Richmond (UK): Alma Books Ltd, ISBN 978-1-84749-810-6, Pb, Pp. 111 with notes & references

Officially, *Flush* is the biography of Elizabeth Barret-Browning's cocker spaniel. The book begins with a description of the origin of Spaniels and the early days of Flush in the countryside, his adoption by Elizabeth, the poet, his subsequent life in London and Italy.

Why should this book about a dog from another country in another era interest us?

There are two answers. One, a dog of some unusual "talents" tells its tale here in human language. And, two, the beauty of this language, its flow and sweep is worth at least a visit by lovers of good prose.

I am not fond of dogs and pets. By chance I found this book one afternoon on the bookshelf of a young man of taste. I have always liked Virginia Woolf, her short stories in particular. Her prose is so sensitive and yet so simple. This book does not describe just the life of Flush, it also describes Victorian Europe with all its pretensions. See, for instance:

...one has only to go to Wimpole Street – to pace that avenue, to survey those houses, to consider their uniformity, to marvel at their curtains and their consistency, to admire the brass knockers and their singularity, to observe butchers tendering joints and cooks receiving them, to reckon the income of the inhabitants and to infer their consequent submission to the laws of God and man – one has only to go to Wimpole Street and drink deep of the

peace breathed by authority in order to heave a sigh of thankfulness that ... while crowns have blown down the wind and old empires have gone up in flames, Wimpole Street has remained unmoved... (P. 10)

Here was another masterpiece from an author in the line of Jane Austen and Emily Bronte, I told myself.

Flush was born poor, but raised rich. His owner, Miss Mitford, a citizen of modest means - "... I have not bought a bonnet, a cloak, a gown, hardly a pair of gloves... for four years" (P. 8) - "gifts" him away to ailing and lonely Elizabeth Barrett, of No. 50, Wimpole Street, London, after #10, Downing Street, perhaps the best address in London. "...Flush was worthy of Miss Barrett; Miss Barrett was worthy of Flush" (P. 9). Flush looks at the Victorian world stratified in classes, in not just what they eat, or wear, but also how they do so. Flush recognizes "Class".

Until this moment he had set foot in no house but working man's cottage at Three Mile Cross. The boards there were bare, the mats were frayed, the chairs were cheap. Here there was nothing frayed, nothing cheap that Flush could see at a glance... the high dark rooms were full of ottomans and carved mahogany: tables were twisted; filigree ornaments stood upon them; daggers and swords hung upon wine-dark walls; curious objects brought from ... East... stood in

recesses, and thick, rich carpets clothed the floors. (Pp.10-11)

Flush notices class distinctions also among dogs. Here in London all “dogs are not equal...”.

At Three Mile Cross, Flush had mixed impartially with taproom dogs and Squire’s greyhounds; he had known no difference between tinker’s dog and himself. Indeed it is probable that the mother of his child, though by courtesy called spaniel, was nothing but a mongrel, eared in one way, tailed in another. But the dogs of London, Flush soon discovered, are strictly divided into different classes. Some are chained dogs; some run wild. Some take their airings in carriages and drink from purple jars; others are unkepmnt and uncollared and pick up a living in the gutter... (P. 18)

Which class does Flush belong to?

... No sooner had Flush gone home than he examined himself carefully in the looking glass. Heaven be praised he was a dog of birth and breeding. His head was smooth; his eyes were prominent but not gozzled, his feet were feathered; he was the equal of the best breed Cocker. He noted with satisfaction the purple jar from which he drank ... (P. 18)

But London was even in the 19th century not a city only of class and courtesy; it was also a city of slums, crime and criminals, of filth and felony. Flush also gets the due share of all this. He is kidnapped for ransom. Kidnappers knew that his owner would not mind paying fifteen or even twenty pounds for the ransom of a dog of this class. So one day while strolling the street unchained and uncollared, Flush is kidnapped. Suddenly there is no carpet, no purple jar, nothing called Class. Differences are stark.

... one moment he was in Vere Street among ribbons and laces, the next he was tumbled head over heels into a bag, jolted rapidly across streets and at length was tumbled out - here. He found himself in complete darkness. He found himself in chillness and dampness. As his giddiness left him, he made out a few shapes in the dark low room - broken chairs and tumbled mattress. Then he was seized and tied tightly by the leg to some obstacle. Something sprawled on the floor here, the beast or human being he could not tell... (Page 51)

Flush could notice noble sentiments as well. That Browning’s visits left Barrett feeling happy unlike visits by Kenyon or Mitford was obvious to him.

... Now she still sat upright; her eyes still burned; her cheeks still glowed; she seemed still to feel that Mr Browning was with her. Flush touched her. She recalled him with a start... (P. 34)

Here is a dog’s eye view of the world of human beings. For students of the English language, here is an artist who knows the value of every word, uses them only to make a point. Woolf smells through the nostril of a dog the milieu of smell in a house of class.

But as Flush trotted up behind Miss Mitford who was behind the butler, he was more astonished by what he smelt than by what he saw. Up the funnel of the staircase came warm whiffs of joints roasting, of fowls basting, of soups simmering – ravishing almost as food itself to nostrils used to the meagre savour of Kerenhapock’s penurious fries and hashes. Mixing with the smell of food were further smells – smells of cedarwood and sandalwood and mahogany; scents of male bodies and female bodies; of mensevrants and

maidservants; of coats and trousers; of criolines and mantles; of curtains of tapestry, of curtains of plush; of coal dust and fog; of wine and cigars. Each room as he passed it – dining room, drawing room, library, bedroom – wafted out its own contribution to the general stew; while as he set down first one paw and then another, each was retained and caressed by the sensuality of rich pile carpets closing amorously over it... (P. 11)

Or, the way Flush reassures himself after witnessing street dogs and others:

... Heaven be praised he was a dog of birth and breeding, His head was smooth; his eyes were prominent but not gozzled, his feet were feathered; he was the equal of the best breed Cocker. He noted with satisfaction the purple jar from which he drank ... (P. 18)

For teachers looking for interesting material in simple words, here is a goldmine.

Additionally, in our anxiety to help weak students, we often ignore good students who already have some English and who might better be exposed to the nuances of style and subtleties of meaning. Flush will suit both the groups just as well, as he did at at Three Mile Cross and at 50, Wimpole Street.

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