

**Abstract**

Inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life and her cocker spaniel Flush, Virginia Woolf's fictional work *Flush* (1933) engages with the critical analysis of Victorian values through the eyes of a dog. In most of her novels, Woolf provides detailed descriptions of London with its gardens, buildings, family houses, work places and inhabitants, and she uses urban setting as a means to express her vision of women and their struggles in attaining independence in a patriarchal society. Moreover, in her works, London stands out as a character rather than merely a background setting. *Flush* is one of these works in which Woolf primarily concentrates on the depiction of London as a character in order to suggest her views about the status of women living in the metropolis. Throughout the text, Victorian London is attacked for its restrictive qualities and deeply-felt class distinction. Apart from London, two cities described in the novel are the Italian cities Pisa and Florence, which, with their liberating atmosphere, remove class distinction and encourage women to use their intellectual capacities. They serve as a foil to the domineering London. *Flush*'s respective experiences in London, Pisa and Florence point out the constraining human engagements and the ways for surmounting these obstacles. The aim of this paper is to analyze how these cities are used by Woolf to attack Victorian society and substitute it with a more liberating milieu.

**Keywords:** *Virginia Woolf, Flush, city as a literary character, woman.*

**Özet**

Virginia Woolf'un, Elizabeth Barrett Browning ve onun Spaniyel cinsi köpeği Flush'tan esinlenerek yazdığı kurgusal eseri *Flush* (1933), bir köpeğin bakış açısıyla Viktorya çağı değerlerinin eleştirel analizini yapar. Pek çok eserinde Woolf, Londra'yı detaylı bir şekilde tasvir eder ve kent hayatını ataerkil düzende bağımsızlıklarını elde etmeye çalışan kadınların mücadelelerini anlatmak amacıyla kullanır. Woolf'un eserlerinde Londra, arka planda duran işlevsiz bir dekor olarak değil roman karakterlerinden biri olarak göze çarpar. *Flush*, Virginia Woolf'un şehirlerde yaşayan kadınların toplumsal statülerine dair görüşlerini dile getirmek amacıyla Londra'yı bir karakter olarak yansıttığı eserlerinden biridir. Metinde Viktorya dönemi Londra'sı, kısıtlayıcı kuralları ve derinden hissedilen sınıf ayrımı nedeniyle eleştirilir. Londra dışında, romanda detaylı olarak incelenen iki şehir Floransa ve Pisa'dır. Özgürlükçü bir yapıya sahip bu iki İtalyan şehri, insanı tahakküm altına alan Londra'nın aksine, sınıf ayrımını ortadan kaldıran ve kadınların zihinsel kapasitelerini kullanmalarını teşvik eden bir yapıya sahiptir. *Flush*'ın Londra, Pisa ve Floransa'daki deneyimleri, bireyin kendisini geliştirmesine engel olan baskıcı unsurlara ve bunların nasıl bertaraf edileceğine dikkat çeker. Bu makalenin amacı, Virginia Woolf'un Viktorya çağı toplumunu eleştirmek ve onu daha özgürlükçü bir yapıya dönüştürmek amacıyla kent yaşamını nasıl yansıttığını incelemektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Virginia Woolf, Flush, edebi karakter olarak şehir, kadın.*

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### Introduction

*Flush* is a fantasy biography narrating the love relationship of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning from the eyes of a cocker spaniel. This book is one of Woolf's neglected works that received little critical attention since it was considered merely the tale of a dog. In one of her letters to Ottoline Morrell, Virginia Woolf (1982) writes that the idea of giving *Flush* a life was only a joke: "*Flush* is only a way of a joke. I was so tired after the Waves, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life" (p.161-162). However, recent critics underline that rather than being a joke, *Flush* is a serious attack on Victorian society. Pamela Caughie<sup>3</sup> (2007), for example, writes: "Those who do take the novel seriously read through the surface joke to the serious subtext beneath: its critique of London's class and sex oppression" (p. 158). Another critic, Kate Flint (2009), also underlines that the narration of events from the perspective of an animal enables Woolf "to examine the way assumed hierarchies function within society" and "make cutting observations about injustices and inequalities" (xvi). As the quotations suggest, it is misleading to consider the novel simply the comic story of a dog. *Flush*'s interaction with Elizabeth Barrett Browning as well as with the cities of London, Pisa and Florence give insights into the restrictive nature of Victorian society. Throughout the text, Woolf does not only write the biography of this purebred spaniel but also recounts the biographies of London and Italian cities Pisa and Florence, which are depicted as separate characters having different personal traits. By focusing on *Flush*'s and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's interaction with these cities, Woolf points out the repressive conventions preventing personal development, and she suggests her ideal city where people and animals can live freely and in harmony with their surroundings.

*Flush* is divided into six chapters. The setting of the first four chapters is London, and mainly Miss Barrett's "The Back Bedroom" in her family house in Wimpole Street. The first chapter starts with the satirical description of *Flush*'s lineage to point out human beings' over insistence on the importance of aristocratic ties. Being a spaniel, *Flush*'s rank among other dogs is considered highly prestigious:

*Long before the Howards, the Cavendishes or the Russells had risen above the common ruck of Smiths, Joneses and Tomkins, the spaniel family was a distinguished and apart. And as the centuries took their way, minor branches broke off from the parent stem. By degrees, as English history pursues its course, there came into existence at least seven famous Spaniel families –the Clumber, the Sussex, the Norfolk, the Black Field, the Cocker, the Irish Water and the English Water, all deriving from the original spaniel of prehistoric days but showing distinct characteristics, and therefore no doubt claiming privileges as distinct. (Woolf, 2009, p.6-7)*

The hierarchical order is not unique to the species of dogs. The laws of human species organized by classes and ranks highlight the significance of aristocratic lineage in Victorian society as well:

*But, if we now turn to human society, what chaos and confusion meet the eye! No Club has any such jurisdiction upon the breed of man. The Heralds' College is the nearest approach we have to the Spaniel Club. It at least makes some attempt to*

<sup>3</sup> In "Flush and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?," Pamela Caughie (1991) analyzes in detail why *Flush* is not considered part of the literary canon.

*preserve the purity of the human family. But when we ask what constitutes noble birth should our eyes be light or dark, our ears curled or straight, are topknots fatal, our judges merely refer us to our coats of arms. You have none perhaps. Then you are nobody. But once make good your claim to sixteenth quarterings, prove your right to a coronet, and then they say you are not only born, but nobly born into the bargain. Hence it is that not a muffineer in all Mayfair lacks its lion couchant or its mermaid rampant. Even our linendrapers mount the Royal Arms above their doors, as though that were proof that their sheets are safe to sleep in. Everywhere rank is claimed and its virtues are asserted. (Woolf, 2009, p. 7-8)*

By emphasizing Flush's prestigious status among other dogs and the rank and privileges some people have due to noble birth, Woolf points out how Victorian society is basically a class-based society in which the value of something is determined by rank and social prestige.

The first chapter of the novel ends with the meeting of Miss Barrett with Flush. For Miss Barrett, who is "cut off from air, light, freedom" (Woolf, 2009, p. 18) under the influence of her authoritarian father, the arrival of Flush marks the beginning of a lifelong friendship. In the following chapters, Flush tries to get accustomed to the rules of London life, and learns that he has to walk in chains in Regent's park and that "there is no equality among dogs: some dogs are high dogs, some are low" (Woolf, 2009, p. 23). Meanwhile, despite his jealousy, he learns to appreciate the relationship between Miss Barrett and Robert Browning. Moreover, when Flush is kidnapped by pet thieves, he also learns the ugly face of London driven by "poverty and vice and misery" (Woolf, 2009, p. 53). It is in the last two chapters of the novel set in Italy that Flush and Miss Barrett leave the oppressive London life behind and enjoy the freedom Pisa and Florence offer them.

The journey of Flush and Miss Barrett from London to Italy is not merely a physical one. There is also an emotional and intellectual journey. They become mature individuals who are conscious of their desires and aims in life. While narrating this journey, Woolf describes London, Pisa, and Florence as if they are the characters of the novel. The contact of Flush and Miss Barrett with these characters helps them to discover more about themselves and to grow up emotionally and intellectually.

### **The Representation of the City in Virginia Woolf's Works**

The places represented in literary works give insights as to the culture and people of a society. Place is "the locus where nature and culture converge to construct meaning and inform both individual and collective identity" (Balaev, p.160). The physical environment described in a literary text has a meaning beyond itself as it expounds individual and collective values that shape one's life and identity. It is, therefore, misleading to view place merely as a physical setting that is devoid of any meaning or value. Rather, it is the site where meaning is produced and feelings are exposed. As Balaev notes, "[p]lace is not only a location of experience, but, significantly, a facet of perception that organizes memories, feelings, and meaning at the level of the physical environment" (p.160).

Urban setting plays significant role in Virginia Woolf's novels, short stories and non-fiction works. She focuses particularly on London and its residents. London is the focal point of her novels *Night and Day* (1919) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and of her well-known essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). In these works, London is depicted as a powerful stimulus affecting the visions and choices of its inhabitants. While representing London and Londoners, Woolf gives prominence particularly to neglected or marginalized

people whose existence is unnoticed in the metropolis. In her essay "Virginia Woolf's London and the Feminist Revision of Modernism," Susan M. Squier (1991) mentions the concept of "split focus" to explain Woolf's views on the status of women writers in urban community. She also talks about how Woolf applies "a decentred perspective" in her works in order to place the marginalized figures at the centre. According to Squier, Woolf's first published London essay "Street Music" typically exemplifies the position of the woman writer, who is both an insider and outsider in literary circles. Like street musicians who are "poorly paid," unnoticed or found socially inferior by the elite society of the metropolis, women writers share the same problems and strive for the admission into the literary milieu of the period. Although they are part of this circle, still they are outsiders and remain in the periphery (1991, p. 106-107).

Squier (1983) notes that Woolf brings what is marginalized in urban setting to the foreground by means of her decentred perspective, a strategy she applies particularly in her London essays. In these essays, she writes about the lives of people who are consciously or unconsciously ignored in everyday life. In "Great Men's Houses," for example, Woolf mainly talks about the women in Thomas Carlyle's house who spend most of their time downstairs doing the housework. Squier posits that what Woolf narrates in this essay is the history of neglected women running the house while men are preoccupied with intellectual activities upstairs (1991, p. 495). It is possible to trace this decentred perspective in *Flush*, too, because Woolf chooses to recount the story of a dog and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who has to spend most of her life in a gloomy room in her father's house in Wimpole Street. Throughout the novel, except for a few scenes in which the oppression of the male figures are narrated, the focus is basically on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her dog Flush. Their desires, feelings, and thoughts on life are thoroughly reflected on.

Apart from Miss Barrett and Flush, London and Italian cities Pisa and Florence are described in depth throughout the work. These cities stand out as influential characters whose physical appearances and personalities are fully accounted. In other words, each of these cities has separate personalities peculiar to themselves. Rather than using these places as a background setting, a "topos," Woolf attributes them human characteristics. In the article "From *Topos* to Anthropoid: The City as Character in Twentieth-Century Texts," Jane Augustine (1991) argues that most American writers of the twentieth century represent cities as human-like characters sensitive to the effects of urbanization, and she explains how cities are represented as characters in literary works. Augustine writes that the city as character is observable if the characters of the novel, specifically the protagonist, are in continual movement as they are travelling, and not restricted to domestic environment either in the city or the country. Second, city as a character is present when the characters are confused, immature, weak, unsure of their identities, and not in touch with the established values. In addition, characters perceive certain aspects of the city as a force or will and produce responses accordingly. Moreover, the cities narrated in these works are large metropolitan cities such as Paris, New York, and London, which have rich histories and thus elicit from their inhabitants specific responses. Finally, the city as character is present when the power of sexuality is discovered by the characters of the novel (p. 74).

When all these aspects underlined by Augustine are considered, it can be said that the cities of *Flush* are different characters interacting with both Barrett Browning and her canine breed dog. First of all, travelling is used as a metaphor for change in the text and is central to character development. Both Barrett Browning and Flush go from London to Italy as they are not content with their existing life restricted by social norms and

oppressive figures, and their physical as well as psychological journey helps them to become mature individuals, who are sure of their own identities. Miss Barrett, who is economically dependent on her father, transforms into a self-sufficient writer in Italy. Similarly, Flush –a purebred spaniel – learns to become an individual when he frees himself from the pressure of his aristocratic heritage. Furthermore, the cities they live in affect their view of life and change their responses to their surroundings. While London with its class-based structure regulated by rigid rules prevent people, particularly women, from actively participating in urban life, Pisa and Florence help them lead a life that is free of restrictions. Finally, as it is apparent in Flush's free love relationships in Italy, Woolf underlines the significance of urban life in the construction of sexual identity. Flush discovers his sexual identity in Florence.

### **The Portrayal of London in *Flush***

In *Flush*, Woolf portrays London as a character having split personality. On the one hand, there is Wimpole Street associated with law, order and luxury. On the other hand, there is Whitechapel described by shabby and poor houses, which host underprivileged people, thieves and prostitutes threatening the order of the respectable society. Wimpole Street is defined as “the most august of London streets, the most impersonal” (Woolf, 2009, p. 13). It is impersonal because the uniformity of the houses and their inhabitants shaped by existing laws force everyone to act in a similar way and leave no space for self assertion:

*Indeed, when the world seems tumbling to ruin, and civilisation rocks on its foundations, one has only to go Wimpole Street; to pace that avenue; to survey those houses; to consider their uniformity; to marvel at the window curtains and their consistency; to admire the brass knockers and their regularity; to observe butchers tendering joints and cooks receiving them; to reckon the incomes of the inhabitants and 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 Corinth has fallen and Messina has tumbled, while crowns have blown down the wind and old Empires have gone up in flames, Wimpole Street has remained unmoved (Woolf, 2009, p. 13-14)*

Wimpole Street represents London's handsome but authoritarian face. The laws of Wimpole Street determine how a dog or a waitress should behave in this gentle society. The butlers have to wear a “green baize apron for cleaning silver” and a “swallow-tail black coat for opening the hall door” (Woolf, 2009, p. 14). Similarly, dogs sleeping on comfortable cushions and drinking water from purple jar “must be led in chains” (Woolf, 2009, p.22) while they are roaming in the streets.

In contrast to Wimpole Street, Whitechapel reveals the unruly and disordered nature of London. Whitechapel is like London's alter ego, a second personality that is underestimated and ignored by respectable and wealthy urban dwellers. While trying to rescue Flush from dog-stealers in Whitechapel, Miss Barrett becomes aware of the existence of this part of the city that is full of thieves, beggars, and prostitutes invading the streets at night. Alluding to Mr. Thomas Beames's work “*The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective*,” Woolf (2009) writes that people in the “ruined sheds” of Whitechapel “lived herded together above herds of cows –two in each seven feet of space” (p. 52). The chaotic atmosphere of the district becomes a constant threat for the aristocratic dwellers of Wimpole Street since their secure and secluded life is continually attacked by thieves and beggars. The only similarity between Wimpole Street and the

slums of Whitechapel is the dominance of male authority, represented particularly by Mr. Barrett, his son Henry, and Mr. Taylor, the head of dognapping gang.

The dual character of London and its patriarchal structure are observable in Miss Barrett's family house, too. In one of her London essays titled "Portrait of a Londoner," Virginia Woolf (2000) mentions Mrs. Crowe's house in which prominent and intellectual people come together and discuss various subjects. In this text, Woolf argues that one should have an understanding of "private houses" in London in order to make sense of urban life because a city is not merely a construction consisting of parks, opera houses, or cafe shops (p. 76). Thus, the soul of the city becomes apparent in privately owned houses. Miss Barrett's house in Wimpole Street at No.50 can be considered a microcosm of London because the juxtaposition of Miss Barrett's room and the rest of the house depict the split nature of this big metropolis.

When Flush is first brought from his cottage in the country to this house by Miss Mitford, his first impressions make it clear that this well-decorated place served by many servants resembles fine-looking Wimpole Street a lot. Flush thinks that "[h]ere there was nothing bare, nothing frayed, nothing cheap" (Woolf, 2009, p. 15). Conversely, Miss Barrett's dark bedroom is likened to a "ruined city" having "sour smells of decay and antiquity" (Woolf, 2009, p.16). Just like the people living in the slums of Whitechapel, Miss Barrett lives in this dark bedroom as "a bird in its cage" (Woolf, 2009, p. 33). Almost nothing in the room asserts Miss Barrett's identity because it is not a room of her own in the real sense. The shapes of the armchair and table are "amorphous" (Woolf, 2009, p.16). Everything here is characterized as "disguised" (Woolf, 2009, p.16). Just like Miss Barrett, "Nothing in the room was itself; everything was something else" (Woolf, 2009, p.17). Since "the laws of God and man" (Woolf, 2009, p. 14) ruling and shaping Wimpole Street and Whitechapel are in charge of this house, both Flush and Miss Barrett cannot feel free in the back room. Mr. Barrett, "the blackest, the most formidable of elderly men" visits her daughter regularly in order to check whether his commands had been obeyed or not (Woolf, 2009, p. 31). Because of the rules governing London and its houses, neither Flush nor Miss Barrett can actively participate in urban life and interact with London. What they do is to observe it as an outsider: "The traffic droned on perpetually outside with muffled reverberations; now and again a voice went calling hoarsely, 'Old chairs and baskets to mend', down the street: sometimes there was a jangle of organ music, coming nearer and louder; going further and fading away. But none of these sounds meant freedom, or action, or exercise" (Woolf, 2009, p. 24).

Even though Miss Barrett lives like a prisoner and treated as an "an invalid" (Woolf, 2009, p. 18), she reacts against male authority. First, she opposes his brother Henry and her father by going to Whitechapel in order to pay Mr. Taylor the ransom he asks for Flush. She resists Mr. Browning, who uses "all his learning, all his logic" in order to convince her not to give way to tyranny and blackmailers (Woolf, 2009, p. 60). Therefore, "[t]he 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" (Squier, 1985, p. 128). Barrett chooses the feminine and the personal by rescuing Flush from captivity. She also frees herself from imprisonment by eloping with Mr. Browning to Italy, where she and Flush discover their own identity.

### **The Portrayal of Pisa and Florence in *Flush***

Both Pisa and Florence have a different personality from that of London. Whereas England is described as “poor, dull, damp, sunless, joyless, expensive, conventional,” Italy is portrayed as a country of “freedom and life and the joy that the sun breeds.” (Woolf, 2009, p. 76). It has a revitalizing effect on both Flush and Barrett. First in Pisa and then in Florence, Flush becomes “his own master” and has “his own way in everything” (Woolf, 2009, p. 78). He freely roams in the streets without a leash and experiences “love pure, love simple, love entire; love that brings no train of care in its wake; that has no shame; no remorse” (Woolf, 2009, p. 79). In addition to his sexual awakening, Flush understands that all dogs are his friends, whether they are purebred or not. “[T]he laws of the Spaniel Club” demanding smooth head, rounded skull, and full eyes from a spaniel are no longer valid in Italy (Woolf, 2009, p.7). In Florence, he understands that these rules are not universal and that a more democratic society based on equality is possible:

*Flush too was making his discoveries and exploring his freedom. Before they left Pisa -in the spring of 1847 they moved on to Florence- Flush had faced the curious and at first upsetting truth that the laws of the Kennel Club are not universal. He had brought himself to face the fact that light topknots are not necessarily fatal. He had revised his code accordingly. He had acted, at first with some hesitation, upon his new conception of canine society. He was becoming daily more and more democratic . . . Now in Florence, the last threads of his old fetters fell from him. The moment of liberation came one day in the Cascine. As he raced over the grass 'like emeralds' with 'the pheasants all alive and flying,' Flush suddenly bethought him of Regent's Park and its proclamation: Dogs must be led on chains. Where was 'must' now? Where were chains now? Where were park-keepers and truncheons? Gone, with the dog-stealers and Kennel Clubs and Spaniel Clubs of a corrupt aristocracy! . . . He ran, he raced; his coat flashed; his eyes blazed. He was the friend of all the world now. All dogs were his brothers. He had no need of a chain in this new world; he had no need of protection. (Woolf, 2009, p. 77)*

Not only Flush but also Elizabeth Browning enjoys freedom in the cities of Italy. As Kate Flint (2009) writes, Flush’s “mental and [...] physical liberation goes in tandem with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s new found freedom” (p. xxiii). Like Flush, she changes both physically and mentally and turns from an invalid into a self-sufficient individual. “Instead of sitting in a carriage and rumbling along Oxford Street,” she wears “her thick boots and scramble[s] over rocks” (Woolf, 2009, p.75). Like “pretty women” of Pisa who can “walk alone” in the streets, she fully participates in urban life, not as an onlooker but as an insider (Woolf, 2009, p. 76). She now calls herself “Mrs. Browning,” but her marriage to Robert Browning is not the main reason behind her character change. Rather, getting rid of the repressive atmosphere of London and her authoritarian father encourages her to express her feelings and desires courageously.

As it has been stated, Miss Barrett’s family house in Wimpole Street can be considered like a microcosm of London. Similarly, Casa Guidi, her house in Florence, stands out as a microcosm reflecting the free nature of Italy. The rooms of this well-lighted and large house are not impersonal as in Barrett’s back bedroom in London. Rather, everything at Casa Guidi asserts her identity. Here, “The bed was a bed; the wash-stand was a wash-stand. Everything was itself and not another thing” (Woolf, 2009, p. 79). She becomes herself and stops suppressing her inner self and imagination. Together with Robert Browning, she writes freely and voices herself through the pages. Virginia Woolf (2005)

famously wrote: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (p. 4). In Florence, Mrs. Browning has a room of her own in the real sense, where she can concentrate on writing. Towards the end of *Flush*, Woolf (2009) writes, at Casa Guidi, “Mr Browning wrote regularly in one room; Mrs Browning wrote regularly in another” (p. 86), and hence she highlights that intellectual creativity can only be attained in an environment that is free of restrictions. Through the image of a man and a woman writing fiction in the same house, Woolf suggests her ideal city in which people can assert themselves and become autonomous subjects. In her ideal city, emotions are blended with thought just as women are united with men. The impersonal gives way to the personal, and it is considered a prerequisite for intellectual activity.

### Conclusion

*Flush* is a serious comment on the constraining structure of Victorian society. It attacks the patriarchal and class-based order of Victorian culture by contrasting oppressive London with liberating Pisa and Florence. The journey from London to these Italian cities helps Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Flush to discover their identities and gain self-confidence: Miss Barrett becomes an accomplished writer, and Flush understands the artificiality of aristocratic lineage and turns into a mature individual. While narrating these changes, Virginia Woolf depicts the cities of *Flush* as literary characters interplaying with the other characters of the novel. London, Pisa and Florence are present in the novel both physically and spiritually and have an influence on the consciousness of the characters. These places are not used simply as a physical setting where the action takes place. Rather, they stand out as the sites where individual and cultural values are formed and affect identity formation. In her article, Michelle Balaev (2008) notes that “*place* refers to a physical environment inhabited, viewed, or imagined by a person who attaches and derives meanings from it” (159). Both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Flush attach and derive meaning from the cities described in the novel. Their responses to these places change their outlook on life and shape their personalities. As they wander in the streets of London, Pisa, and Florence, they transform themselves as well as society.

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