

Flush: A Biography Study Guide

Flush: A Biography by Virginia Woolf

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Plot Summary

"Flush" by Virginia Woolf, is the biography of a red cocker spaniel that was owned by English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Woolf's inspiration was her own cocker spaniel, Pinka. Woolf had read the letters and poems that Browning had written about her dog, Flush. Woolf decided that he would be an interesting subject for a biography and although it is narrated in the third person, the book is written mainly from the perspective of the dog. As Virginia Woolf implied to a friend, "Flush" was really her dog, "Pinka," who she used as a model for the red cocker.

The book begins with a brief history of the cocker spaniel. The breed originated from Spain years before it was imported to England. The breed was named "spaniel" because it chased the many hares that the Carthaginians discovered on the land that would become Spain. The Carthaginian word for hare was "Span." It is obvious that the country Spain got its name from "Span" and the dogs that evolved to chase the robust hare population on the newly discovered land were called "spaniels." When the spaniels were imported to England, they became a favorite of royalty and were considered an aristocratic dog. There were organizations that allowed the breeding of only those spaniels that had the desired characteristics so that undesirable traits would not be passed along.

Flush began his life on a country farm called "Three Mile Cross." He loved to run free in the fields and chase rabbits and birds. But this all changed when his mistress gave him to an invalid friend of hers, the famous poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. After he moved to the posh neighborhood on Wimpole Street in London, Flush's life was confined to Barrett's dark bedroom. When he was taken out, he had to be on a leash and a chain. No longer could he run free.

But since Flush was an aristocrat, he came to accept his position as a companion for the quite gentle lady who suffered from ill-health. He learned to lay at the carpet in front of the couch where she spent most of her days. He bonded with Miss Barrett and even thought that he somewhat resembled the woman, he knew that she was a human and he was a dog. Although they had much in common, there were things that they could never understand about each other. He had no idea why on earth she spent her days passing a black stick over a white paper. For her part, she didn't understand that his nervous tick resulted from a cat having just passed by their closed door.

There were ups and downs in their relationship. When a gentleman by the name of Mr. Browning began to call on Miss Barrett, Flush felt threatened and jealous. Miss Barrett paid less attention to him and it seemed she was thrilled when this interloper came to visit. Flush became so enraged that he even bit Browning in the leg several times. He was beaten by Miss Barrett's maid for his bad behavior. But the worst punishment was how Miss Barrett totally ignored him. But Miss Barrett genuinely loved Flush, which she proved when Flush was kidnapped and she paid a ransom to get him back.



Miss Barrett and Mr. Browning married secretly and they, along with Flush, were soon off on a trip to Italy. At first he didn't know what to expect in his new home but he soon grew to love life in Florence. He was able to run free and could leave the house whenever he wanted. He loved to run in the streets and take in the large variety of scents wafting in the air. He became quite a lover and mated with as many female dogs as he cared to. But life was not without its obstacles. He picked up bad traits like jealousy and anger from his human consorts and the robust fleas who lived in Italy invaded his beautiful coat to the point that it had to be clipped off. He learned in Italy that there were no classes of dogs. Instead, they were all mongrels. He also learned that having a curly topknot was not the end of the world.

Flush grew old and his wayward days began to wind down. He sought the shade more than the sun. He preferred to watch the younger dogs play and fight than to join them. But he stayed close to Mrs. Browning and instinctively went home one day so he could be with the one person who loved him the most on the day he died.

Chapter One: Three Mile Cross

Chapter One: Three Mile Cross Summary and Analysis

The breed of dog known as "Spaniel," was indigenous to Spain. There were several explanations as to how the dogs came to be known as Spaniels. One story claims that early on, the land that would become Spain was populated with rabbits. To keep the population of rabbits from overrunning the country, dogs naturally evolved. When the Carthaginians landed in Spain, they reportedly shouted, "Span! Span!" "Span" was Carthaginian for rabbit. The country was named after the many rabbits that lived on the land and thus became Spain and the dogs who chased the rabbits were called Spaniels.

Another explanation was that the Basque word *espana* signified an edge or boundary. The country that became Spain was on the edge of a land mass and shared a boundary with the ocean. Others insisted that the breed of dog was called Spaniel because it was a pet name. Despite how exactly the Spaniel got its name, it was exported from Spain to Wales in the mid-tenth century where it became a breed that was held in high esteem and became a favorite of Kings and Queens.

As centuries passed, the Spaniel evolved into seven different branches: The Clumber, the Sussex, the Norfolk, the Black Field, the Cocker, the Irish Water, and the English Water. There were similarities among the Spaniel breeds but each had distinctive characteristics. Some features were considered undesirable such as a top-knot, curled ears, light eyes, and a pale nose. Desirable features that Spaniels were expected to have included smooth head, round skull, intelligent and gentleness. Dogs that possessed desirable features were those used for breeding. There was even a Spaniel Club to ensure that only those dogs with the desirable traits were bred. Even humans nobly born were not judged by their physical characteristics. Ironically, there was no Man Club to stop humans with undesirable traits from breeding.

The exact date of Flush's birth was estimated to be early in 1842. He was a descendent of Tray, a red red cocker spaniel of note. Flush had all the characteristics expected of his breed. As a puppy, Flush lived at Three Mile Cross at the home of Dr. Mitford and his daughter. They had fallen on somewhat hard times and could only afford one servant so Flush did not begin his life in luxury. After Miss Mitford finished her chores, she would walk her dogs in the fields. Flush loved to walk with her, taking in all the wonderful smells of the field. Sometimes he would pick up an extremely exhilarating scent, one so overwhelming that he would take off running after it to find that he was in the chase for wolves and rabbits!

Flush was overwhelmed by another instinct and would become a father before he was a year old. Although the family was in financial straits, when Miss Mitford was offered quite a nice sum for Flush from Dr. Pusey, she refused to sell him. She couldn't part with him. He was a special creature with a rare spirit and needed to be with someone who



was special. Miss Mitford decided that Flush belonged with none other than England's foremost poetess, Elizabeth Barrett. It was a sacrifice but one that had to be made. Miss Mitford led Flush to No. 5 Wimpole Street in London early one summer morning in 1842. The neighborhood was opulent but didn't have fields like those Flush was accustomed to. The butlers were slow to respond to Miss Mitford but they finally opened the door and allowed her and Flush to enter the house.

Though Miss Mitford had been at the house numerous times, it was all new for Flush. He was accustomed to the farm house at Three Mile Cross where the floors were worn and the furniture tattered. Here at this house, the curtains and carpets were plush and the furniture stylish and ornate. It must have been obvious to Flush that he was in the home of a rich family. But it was the scents that permeated throughout the house that made the biggest impression on Flush. He caught whiffs of roasting fowl. He smelled the robust aromas that emanated from the mahogany and sandalwood furniture. Flush did not miss the scent that wafted in the air from the many maids and servants who worked for the family.

Miss Mitford and Flush were taken upstairs to Miss Barrett's bedroom. After the door opened, Flush's eyes had to adjust to the darkened room. He was able to make out the outlines of several large pieces of furniture. The room was confusing to Flush. It was crowded with furniture and ornamental objects. There were several large mirrors that added to the distortion of the room. Suddenly, Miss Mitford was gone and Flush was shut up in the room alone. He heard the familiar footsteps of Miss Mitford descending the stairs and fading away. His freedom was gone and there were not any fields or rabbits. Miss Mitford had deserted him.

In his despair, he howled. Then a voice called his name. He had thought he was alone. The voice called again and he saw that it came from a lady lying on the couch. He trotted over to her. Her large eyes and the long curls that hung on either side of her face resembled his own features. But she was a human and he was a dog. She was an invalid and he was young and vibrant. But he settled in quickly and laid on the rug by her couch - a place that would be his forever.



Chapter 2: The Back Bedroom

Chapter 2: The Back Bedroom Summary and Analysis

Flush spent the summer in the bedroom with Miss Barrett. He was still confused by the furniture and items in the large room. The smell of cologne was abrasive. One day, the weather was not too hot nor too windy and was safe enough for Miss Barrett to venture out on a shopping trip with her sister. Flush followed her down the staircase and outside to the waiting carriage. He leaped in the carriage and sat beside her. As they rode down Oxford Street, the sights and sounds and scents of London were all new and exciting to Flush. They came to the market where gleaming silk was snipped with scissors and smells of China and Arabia were all about. When they returned to Wimpole Street, he was so exhausted that he was carried back inside.

The next day with the weather still agreeable, Miss Barrett ventured out once again. This time she was wheeled down the street with Flush on a leash at her side. The air was filled with bitter smells from gutters and iron railings. He was frightened by passing carriages but Miss Barrett held tight to his chain to keep him safe. At last they arrived at their final destination, Regent's Park. Flush was thrilled to be in grass and among the flowers and trees. He tried to run but was jerked back by a weight on his throat. Didn't this field represent freedom? Why was he being held prisoner?

But as he looked more closely, this field was not like the ones he had known at Three Mile Cross. The flowers were all aligned in rows. Men in shiny black top hats strolled ominously nearby. The men frightened him and suddenly he felt comforted by the protection of his chain. Flush concluded that in Regent's Park, dogs had to be led on chains. He also realized from the experience that dogs were not equal, but different. At Three Mile Cross, he had been superior to the tinker's dog and he saw differences between the Squire's greyhounds and tap-room dogs. Some dogs were even mongrels. Flush came to understand that there were classes of dogs.

In London, he realized from snatches of human talk that it mattered whether a dog had a topknot or curly ears. There was also mention of some dogs having the "best blood." Even the tone of the voices that spoke about the dogs indicated praise or derision. From his London experience, he realized there were high dogs and low dogs. To determine his worthiness, Flush looked in the mirror and was pleased to see that he was a fine dog of good breeding. Miss Barrett caught him looking in the mirror and mistook him for a philosopher who was meditating on the difference of reality and appearances. But she was wrong. He was admiring his aristocracy.

As summer faded into autumn, Flush was once again confined to the bedroom where Miss Barrett was once again secluded for the harsher weather to come. Flush's only escapes were when nature called and when Miss Barrett's maid, Wilson, took him outside. The room was warm and toasty from the fireplace and it was as dark as a cave.



Once in a while, he would hear the voice of a vendor from outside but it was not a call for his liberty.

At first when the winds blew, Flush would scamper about the room thinking about the partridges that must be running across the fields. But Miss Barrett would grab his collar and he would become docile although he didn't exactly understand why. There was a bond he felt with Miss Barrett. If his pleasure led to her pain then he would abandon it. Miss Barrett felt the bond as well. Flush wouldn't leave her side even when the bedroom door was open Miss Barrett was proud to call him friend and that he "loves me better than he loves the sunshine without" (p. 35).

But there was innate misunderstandings between the two friends. Miss Barrett would wonder why Flush would suddenly, for no apparent reason, tremble and whimper. There was no way she could know that one of her sister's dogs had just passed by the closed door. She could never know that Wilson's wet umbrella made Flush remember the fields he used to run in. He was equally at a loss when she would sit for hours and tear up at a white page over which she passed a black stick. Sometimes she would laugh and show Flush a smudge she made on the white paper. It had no scent and was meaningless to him.

Flush longed to comfort Miss Barrett when tears fell on her pillow. He wished he could make the mysterious sounds she made and wished he had fingers so he could wave that black stick over the white paper. But none of that would happen because during the year 1842 to 1843, he understood that Miss Barrett was an invalid and that he was a red cocker. Sometimes the darkness would be interrupted when someone opened the bedroom door and came in. Often it was Wilson with food or medicine. At other times, it was Arabel or Henrietta, one of Miss Barrett's sisters. Less frequently, one of Miss Barrett's seven brothers would visit.

At other times, Flush noticed that the room was neatened up and that Miss Barrett was wearing finer clothing. On those occasions Mr. Kenyon or Mrs. Jameson or even Miss Mitford might open the door and enter. Miss Barrett seemed to smile a lot on those days. Flush noticed that each of these humans had a distinct scent and tone of voice. Most of the time when these humans left the bedroom, they would pat Flush on the head. Miss Barrett would be sad and tired after they left, often unable to eat her dinner. She would pretend to eat her food but as soon as Wilson left, Miss Barrett would offer the mutton chop or the chicken wing to Flush who would practically swallow it whole.

Late at night there would often be a knock on the door that was frightening when compared to the others. It would be Mr. Barrett himself - Miss Barrett's elderly father. Flush would tremble as Mr. Barrett asked whether Miss Barrett ate her dinner. He would be satisfied to see the plates were empty. Mr. Barrett represented a dark force that Flush didn't understand and found difficult to bear.



Chapter Three: The Hooded Man

Chapter Three: The Hooded Man Summary and Analysis

Lesser dogs would have not held up under the isolation of living in the back bedroom. But Flush was no ordinary dog. He had an emotional sensibility that was cultivated out of necessity. His remote life changed him. He preferred the company of a silent cat rather than the barking and biting associated with another dog. Since it was just the two of them most of the time, Miss Barrett developed a sensitivity about Flush as well. She would ask why he trembled and moaned sometimes. She would play the harp apparently for his enjoyment. He didn't think the instrument was alive like she apparently did. When he was frustrated and didn't understand her, he would draw close and kiss her. Flush grew timid and was bitten and chased upstairs by the bloodhound, Cuba. He sought Miss Barrett's sympathy but was disappointed when she stated that he was no hero. Didn't she realize that he sacrificed noble traits such as courage all for her?

Flush became high-strung because of the pressures that he lived under. He'd sometime charge at Mr. Kenyon when he visited. He would whine when he couldn't sleep in Miss Barrett's bed and he wouldn't eat unless she hand-fed him. She knew he had grown to be difficult at times, but he was worth it because he loved her.

The years passed quickly and Flush was five years old. Nothing had changed. He was still confined to Miss Barrett's bedroom and Miss Barrett was still an invalid who barely left her room. Every day everything was as usual until one afternoon, Miss Barrett received a letter that seemed to have an unusual impact on her. She began receiving letters with her name written in the same scrawling every few days. Flush noticed that Miss Barrett didn't put the letter with her other papers. Rather, she put it in a drawer by itself. Flush knew Miss Barrett better than anyone. He sensed that she lived for the knock on the door when another letter would be brought to her. Flush began to wonder who was sending her the letters. He imagined it was a menacing figure or a man in a hooded cloak.

The letters continued and Flush noticed the change in Miss Barrett. She became irritable and restless. She couldn't write anything and she couldn't read anything other than those letters. She would read and re-read the letters. Once she read a line aloud: "Do you think I shall see you in two months, three months?" (p. 53). Flush picked up on her reply. She could see the person in the spring perhaps. He began to dread the spring. The entire month of April, Flush lived in fear of the hooded man every time there was a knock on her door. Near the end of May, Flush knew from the way Miss Barrett behaved that the terrible man would be visiting.

It was Mr. Browning. Flush noticed how Miss Barrett's cheeks flushed and eyes brightened. Mr. Browning walked in and grabbed Miss Barrett's hand and sunk into the



couch next to her. Flush had never felt so abandoned before. They didn't notice him even when he whined. When Mr. Browning finally left, Miss Barrett patted his head and smiled. She wasn't exhausted like she was when her other visitors left. Flush was upset. He didn't share the joy that she obviously felt. Her appetite returned and she ate all her dinner, leaving none for him. He was shocked that Mr. Barrett didn't seem to notice anything different about his daughter.

Miss Barrett changed. She began to go downstairs more and even walk to her sister's house. Flush was sure that only he knew the source of her recovered strength. Mr. Browning continued to visit. Hurt that he was left out of her thoughts, Flush began to dream again about running in the fields and chasing hares at Three Mile Cross. He noticed that the tone in their voices changed over the months. He was frightened when he noticed a sense of urgency in Mr. Browning's voice. Miss Barrett reacted with hesitation and gasps. Sometimes Mr. Browning patted his head but there was no real feeling behind his touch.

The fall and winter passed and it was spring again. Flush felt that something was changing. Boxes were being packed. The more enchanted Miss Barrett became with Mr. Browning, the more remotely she treated Flush. He was jealous and decided that he had to rid his life of his competitor. In July, Flush decided to take action and flung himself on Mr. Browning and chomped down on his leg. But his teeth sunk in barely enough to scratch him. Mr. Browning pushed him aside with a flick of his hand and resumed his conversation with Miss Barrett. After Mr. Browning left, Miss Barrett slapped Flush on his ears. But the worst punishment was yet to come. She told him she would never again love him. After making him suffer for some time, she allowed Flush to come to her as long as he was sorry for his actions. He rushed to her and kissed her face all over.

It didn't help Flush's feelings that Mr. Browning was magnanimous about Flush's behavior and appeared to be of higher character than Flush. Browning said he loved and respected Flush for his love for Miss Barrett. In another incident, Flush was further demoralized when he hurt his paw when getting off the carriage at Regent's Park and Miss Barrett had no sympathy for his injury. In fact, she thought he was shamming her. Just because he ran like the wind didn't mean he wasn't injured. But he ran off to scare her and mock her to show her that he was done with her. He violated the rules that said all dogs had to be on chains. He ran free. When he returned to her, she didn't scold him, slipped the chain on him and apparently barely noticed that he had run off.

Flush could not take any more. The next time Mr. Browning came, he was waiting in the foyer for him. He leaped on him and bit his leg. Wilson heard the commotion and pulled Flush away and beat him. Flush had been defeated again. He was led away by Wilson and Browning, unharmed, proceeded on to his visit with Miss Barrett. Later, Miss Barrett told Wilson she was right to beat Flush. Miss Barrett allowed him back in her room but wouldn't even look at him. Flush laid on the carpet confused and hurt. Miss Barrett shamed him further by telling him that he was ungrateful. Mr. Browning had brought special treats for him that day and he hadn't appreciated it. Flush ate the treats that had gone stale and promised to love Mr. Browning and never bite him again. It was amazing

how much better Flush felt after he let go of his hatred. Just when everything seemed wonderful, on a shopping trip with Miss Barrett and her sister, Flush was kidnapped.



Chapter 4: Whitechapel

Chapter 4: Whitechapel Summary and Analysis

Miss Barrett wrote to Mr. Browning about Flush's being stolen. She had forgotten to chain him to the carriage and when she returned to depart, he was gone. The year was 1846. London was a bustling and crowded city. Although there were many carriages about, most people were on foot. Mr. Thomas Beames was walking about that day and observed everything from the poorest to the poshest neighborhoods. In the Whitechapel neighborhood, "vice and misery had bred and seethed and propagated" (p. 80) for centuries. Thieves, prostitutes and beggars were the denizens of Whitechapel. Knowing that the neighborhood was dangerous and even unhealthy with cholera lurking about, Beames hurried through it.

Miss Barrett knew what she must do to get Flush back. She had to pay ten pounds to the gang leader, Mr. Taylor. If she did not pay, she would receive a brown parcel containing Flush's head and paws. Mr. Taylor reportedly made two or three thousand pounds a year returning lost dogs to Wimpole Street. Flush had been snatched and thrown in a bag and taken to a dark, damp cellar room. Flies circled on decaying meat on the floor. Children crawled on the floor and pinched his ears. When he whined he was beaten. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see that the cellar was crowded with dogs of all description and class. The only water to drink was green and rancid. He'd rather die than drink it.

Each time the door opened, Flush looked up hoping to see Miss Barrett. But it was always some horrid humans bringing in more stolen dogs. The ruffians drank and fought with one another. One man brought in a large cockatoo. Jewelry was dumped out on the table from stolen bags. In the meantime, Miss Barrett was concerned but was sure that Mr. Taylor would return Flush to her. Flush made sure not to moan to avoid beatings and continued to watch for Miss Barrett but the only humans who entered the room were more thieves.

Miss Barrett became quite anxious after several days had passed and Flush had not been returned. She feared she'd have to pay Mr. Taylor more but was willing to do so. She had to have Flush back. Flush watched as a red setter was taken from the room. He didn't know if they were taking the dog to kill him or return him to his owners. He decided it would be better to die than to remain in the awful place in which he had found himself.

Miss Barrett learned that her brother, Henry, had refused to pay a higher ransom. She was angry and ordered him to immediately pay Mr. Taylor the extra fee. She was even willing to venture down to Whitechapel herself. When word was spread around Wimpole that a ransom was being demanded for Flush's return, the community urged her to take a stand against the thieves. Even her father and brother were against her paying the ransom. Browning told her she was cooperating with thieves and blackmailers if she



paid Mr. Taylor. Browning, in fact, became the most aggressive opponent to cooperating with the thieves. But Miss Barrett would hear none of it. She responded to Browning's stance in a letter reminding him that Flush was helpless and that she was duty-bound to him. She would rescue Flush who loved her and was loyal to her even if she had to go to Whitechapel herself.

Miss Barrett told Wilson to order a cab. She and Wilson boarded the cab and were taken to a world that Miss Barrett had never seen before. Wilson was certain they would soon be murdered. Mr. Taylor wasn't home but Mrs. Taylor assured Miss Barrett that Mr. Taylor would return the dog that very day. They turned around to return home. Wilson was certain that they had barely escaped with their lives. The images of the faces of those horrid people she saw that day stayed in Miss Barrett's memory for years.

It was the fifth day of Flush's incarceration. He was weak and hopeless. Bugs crawled on him but he was too exhausted to shake them off his coat. Images of his life with Miss Barrett flashed through his mind. Mr. Taylor came by to see Miss Barrett but wanted more money. One of Miss Barrett's brothers cursed him and Mr. Taylor left in a rage, threatening that they'd never see Flush again. Miss Barrett was preparing to return to Whitechapel when one of her brothers volunteered to go instead and pay Mr. Taylor. A man entered the cellar room and snatched Flush up by the scruff of his neck. Flush had no idea if he was heading to freedom or to death.

That evening there was a rap on the door. Thinking it was a letter from Mr. Browning, Miss Barrett was shocked when Flush raced in. He headed for his water bowl and drank three full bowls. He was glad to be back in the bedroom but had learned the hard way that the world was really much bigger than he had realized. Whenever the door opened, he feared it would be one of his captors coming back for him. He came to distrust all of Miss Barrett's visitors sure that they were those horrible men disguised as friends. He clung as close to Miss Barrett as he could.

Miss Barrett had changed. She seemed edgy and secretive as if something was about to happen. Early one morning she and Wilson left together. Several hours later, she returned and Flush saw her take a gold band off her left hand and conceal it in a drawer. Flush was the only one who noticed how tense and on edge Miss Barrett had become. On another early morning several days later, Miss Barrett dressed again. This time she picked Flush up in her arms and slipped quietly downstairs. They entered the cab that was waiting for them. Miss Barrett told the cabbie to take them to Hodgson's. Flush, Miss Barrett and Wilson remained silent during the entire ride.



Chapter 5: Italy

Chapter 5: Italy Summary and Analysis

To Flush, it seemed to be an endless journey that Miss Barrett, Wilson and he were on. Flush seemed to understand that it was the policy of the railroad that dogs had to ride in boxes but that knowledge didn't make it any more comfortable. But he was resolved to endure it because they were escaping. At least they were together. Suddenly, they were outside and Miss Barrett was standing on a rock in a rushing creek. Flush sped through the water to her. They were in the middle of Petrarch's fountain in Pisa, Italy. Soon they were in a large bare room flooded with sunshine. Flush ran all over and sniffed and explored.

Wilson took him outside on a leash. The street was noisy and crowded with people and vendor carts. A troop of soldiers marched by them and a farmer drove a herd of goats across their path. Flush didn't know where they were but he felt at ease and slept soundly that night. Over the next few days, he saw many dogs outside but realized that there in Pisa there were no ranks or classes of dogs and that they were all mongrels. There seemed to be no Dog Club to make sure that only dogs with favored characteristics were able to breed. Flush realized he was the only aristocrat among the non-descript mongrels. There had always been a bit of the snob in Flush. When Mr. Browning joined them, Miss Barrett wrote that Flush seemed to think that Mr. Browning, her husband, was there to be at his service.

Miss Barrett had changed. She was more relaxed and drank more wine and slept soundly. Instead of calling cabs, she would pull on boots and hike on the rocks. She and Mr. Browning would take trips to the lake and mountains. Miss Barrett seemed to be flourishing. She preferred Pisa to London and made endless comparisons to the two cities. Wilson on the other hand seemed to miss her hometown. But the spirit of Pisa eventually wielded its magic on Lily Wilson. She fell head over heels in love with the Grand Duke's bodyguard, Signor Righi. Flush was exploring his new freedom and came to realize that a curly topknot was not a fatal flaw. Miss Barrett described how Flush was spending time with the mongrels and speaking Italian with them.

When Miss Barrett moved on to Florence where Flush ran in the fields with partridges flying everywhere, he realized that the rule at Regent's Park was wrong and that dogs didn't have to be chained. London had been a corrupt aristocracy that created thieves and kidnappers. If Mr. Browning was late in taking Flush for his walk, he would stand before him and bark reminding him that it was time to go. If Mr. Browning loitered, the now free and independent Flush would run out on his own. Mrs. Browning, as she now referred to herself, had grown a little emotionally remote from Flush. She had found another love and did not rely solely on his shiny red coat and big brown eyes to enchant her. But Flush didn't mind. The freedom that he now had also made him less reliant on Mrs. Browning.



With his new freedom, Flush found that he was free to pursue love and not with just one partner. He found he could love any number of the lovely female dogs who also ran free. Browning laughed at Flush's romantic escapades. Mrs. Browning laughed too when Flush returned home, exhausted from his love-making. After the Brownings' first anniversary, Flush noticed a change in Mrs. Browning. She was sewing—something she had never done before. He wondered if something was about to happen. He was also aware that Mrs. Browning barely left the house any longer.

One day Mrs. Browning didn't appear in the sitting room at all. Other people were coming in and out of the house all day long. Flush feared danger and hid under the couch most of the day. He couldn't even be lured out by the attractive brindle cocker who came calling. Mr. Browning and Wilson were decidedly different as well. No one cared that he hadn't eaten or had a drink of water all day. Finally Wilson appeared rather frazzled looking but strangely triumphant and carried him upstairs. He was stunned to see that Mrs. Browning was lying in bed with a new small animal that wiggled and cried.

Flush felt jealousy and rage all at once and rushed from the room to return to his solitude downstairs. Mr. Browning and Wilson tried to lure him back with treats, but he wanted no part of that disgusting new arrival. In fact, it was six months before Flush came out of his melancholy. But humiliation awaiting Flush for he now had to allow this baby to ride on his back and pull his ears. But something changed, this baby seemed to prefer him over people. And as a result, Flush grew to have real affection for him. They had a lot in common. They were nearly the same height and viewed the world from the same perspective. On long walks, the baby didn't seem to be impressed with scenery any more than Flush was.

As Flush matured, his greatest love became his sense of smell. It was so much more advanced than that of a human, a fact that even Mrs. Browning admitted. While Mrs. Browning wrote in one room, Mr. Browning in another and Wilson and the baby in the nursery, Flush would leave them behind and head out to enjoy the wonders that the variety of scents that the streets held for him. There were the street acrid smells that changed with the afternoon sun; there was baking bread to smell, garlic, leather, grapes and, of course, other animals—dogs and goats and rodents. Flush also had a cultivated sense of touch. His padded paws knew the streets of Florence like no human ever could. His senses had transcended any need for "words" like humans had to rely on to describe his city.

But Flush was not in paradise and did not live without obstacles. He possessed flaws like jealousy, anger and despair, emotions that he had learned from humans. In the summer, he was beset by fleas that bit him and made him edgy, thin and despondent. Mr. and Mrs. Browning sympathized with Flush's flea invasion and scrubbed his coat in an effort to eradicate them but to no avail. One day on a walk with Mr. Browning, Flush was outraged to hear a neighbor whisper the word "mange" in his presence. After all, he was an aristocrat. Mr. Browning took a huge pair of shears to Flush and to his utter dismay proceeded to clip his entire coat off, making him look like a lion. Flush was



horrified and deeply humiliated, emasculated, and shamed. Who was he now? Certainly, he was no longer a cocker spaniel.

After the first shock of looking in the mirror to see an image he did not recognize, Flush's spirit rose. The fleas were gone! In his nudity, he felt a freedom like never before. Clothes and cosmetics should all be piled up and burned. Soon after his new found freedom, the family was off again in a carriage. He had no idea where they were going. Was it Venice, Paris, or Rome? The destination did not matter to Flush. All countries were the same and all men were his brothers. But Flush's philosophical attitude would meet a true test. They were returning to London. The city seemed magnificent compared to Italy. They stayed on Welbeck Street where he was confined to a sitting room. When he ventured outdoors, it was always on chains, a reality which he understood. The aristocratic dogs who he reacquainted himself with seemed to welcome him back with no hard feelings. No less would be expected of a dog of high breeding. They ignored the rumors that he had "turned Moslem and had a son by a Chinese washerwoman" (p. 139). The London dogs were also refined enough to not disparage him for the awful state his coat was in.

Flush heard speculation that Mrs. Carlyle's dog, Nero, had lunged from a second-floor window in an effort to commit suicide. Flush understood how Nero must have felt—confined to his master's bedroom. Flush knew what an elixir liberty was and how poisonous its diametric opposite was. Flush was beginning to become quite dour over returning to confinement. A trip to the country where Flush could run and roam without the oppressive heat and the flea population of Italy lifted up his spirits. Mrs. Browning did not readjust to the dark confines of the big house. Flush feared that Mr. Barrett would lock them in the bedroom. All he wanted was to leave London and soon he found himself on a steamer to France. It was a rough crossing and Flush became very ill. When he began vomiting he was taken below. After all, the ship was an English ship and dogs just didn't behave that way. But to Flush, throwing up symbolized what he thought of his native land and was a parting "salute" to England.



Chapter Six: The End

Chapter Six: The End Summary and Analysis

Flush was growing old. The trauma of returning to London and the rough crossing had tired him out. It was noticed that he slept more and sought the shade rather than the sunlight. He'd dream about his early days in London and those most recent. Instead of lying on the stones by the fountain outside, he would seek the comfort of Mrs. Browning's bedroom carpet where his old bones were treated more gently. One day while dreaming he was deep in a jungle, he woke to quite a commotion. The table he had fallen asleep under was knocking and swaying.

It was common knowledge that spirits gathered under tables in London from the use of crystal balls that some saw fit to use to tell the future. It seemed as though Mrs. Browning had brought some of those spirits with her and that they were under the table in Italy. People were in the habit of conversing with the spirits under the table and asking them questions about the future. The table would respond with a coded message created by knocking its legs which the seer would decipher. In fact, while in London the spirits told Mrs. Browning she would be going to Rome.

Unbeknownst to Flush, he had fallen asleep while Mrs. Browning was holding a séance with a group of friends. That explained why the table was swaying and bouncing. The table was answering questions from Mrs. Browning's friends. As the table stood on only one leg, the humans reacted excitedly to its message. But Flush couldn't hear a thing. He bolted out and was scolded for upending the table. Flush looked at Mrs. Browning who had a look on her face that told him she was seeing something that he could not; something that was invisible. It frightened Flush.

Mrs. Browning abandoned trips outside in favor of sitting at the table and interacting with the invisible force that so beguiled her. She made Wilson sit with her at the table and convinced the healthy woman that she would soon fall sick. Flush detested the strange behavior but nothing frightened him more than that faraway gaze on Mrs. Browning's face. She would write about the spirits and totally ignore him, even when he pawed at her.

One afternoon, Flush couldn't bear it any longer and ran outside. He ran to the market where he found a shady spot. He watched the other dogs play and fight with each other. He drifted off and dreamed of his youth. But then he woke with a start and raced home through the streets. He leaped onto the couch where Mrs. Browning lay reading a poem she wrote many years ago when she lived an unhappy life on Wimpole Street. The poem was an ode to Flush. Now she was happy and they were both growing old. They had a lot in common but she was a woman and he was a dog. Flush grew silent and Mrs. Browning called to him but he didn't move. Flush had died and the room was perfectly still.



Characters

Flush

Flush was a red cocker spaniel who spent his puppy years on a farm in England called Three Mile Cross. He loved to run in the fields and chase birds and animals. He was of fine stock and aristocratic lineage. He realized that there were different classes of dogs just as there were for humans. His freedom was taken from him when his mistress gave him to an invalid friend of hers, the English poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He was confined most of his days to Miss Barrett's dark, stuffy overly furnished room. Even when he was allowed to go outside, he had to be on a leash and chain.

Flush wasn't particularly happy in his new digs but he reminded himself that with a high station in life came great responsibility. Flush realized that he had to be a loyal companion to the lonely woman who was struggling with ill-health. He was a noble dog and he would sacrifice his freedom in exchange for her comfort.

There were obstacles in their relationship and his mettle was roundly tested when an interloper came on the scene. Mr. Browning began to visit almost daily. And, when he didn't visit, he wrote Miss Barrett letters. It nauseated Flush how she gushed over those letters. Flush resented Mr. Browning's presence especially when Miss Barrett began to ignore him.

But Miss Barrett proved her love for Flush when she paid a high ransom to have him returned after he had been kidnapped by thieves and blackmailers. After biting Mr. Browning several times, Flush learned that in order to keep Miss Barrett's love, he'd have to promise to never bite Mr. Browning again.

Miss Barrett and Mr. Browning eloped and settled in Italy where Flush was allowed to run again and enjoy a satisfying and full life. He also realized that he was no better than the mongrels on the streets that he romped and played with. He spent his last days in freedom but remained ever faithful to the human who loved him the most - Miss Barrett.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

As the story of Flush unfolds, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a famous poetess who lives in her family home on Wimpole Street, a posh address in London, England. Miss Barrett is in ill-health and lives the isolated life of an invalid. Her friend, Miss Mitford lives on a farm outside of London. She has several dogs including a young red cocker spaniel. Miss Mitford refuses to sell the dog to anyone but decides that the aristocratic dog belongs with someone of high-standing. She offers the dog to Miss Barrett who happily accepts the dog she names Flush.

Miss Barrett lives with her domineering father who, it seems, wants her to remain dependent on him. Although her father's motivation is not clear, one could assume that



he wants to keep his famous daughter close to him and perhaps share in her limelight. Miss Barrett spends all her time in her bedroom and when she takes in Flush, he is confined as well. The two form a life-long bond. Through the narrator we learn that Flush actually thinks they look alike.

Miss Barrett begins receiving letters and visits from Robert Browning. Flush has a little jealousy problem with the attentions Mr. Browning is showing to his mistress but he eventually adjusts. Miss Barrett proves her love for Flush when she pays a ransom to a thief who stole the dog. To escape her miserable life, Miss Barrett elopes with Mr. Browning and they move to Italy and bring her beloved pet with them. Mrs. Browning flourishes in the sun and freedom of Italy as does Flush. The two friends remain loyal to one another and grow old together. Miss Barrett is reading a poem she wrote years before about her beloved Flush when he returns from the street, leaps on the couch next to his mistress and passes away.

Robert Browning

Robert Browning begins writing to Miss Barrett and visiting her. Flush is jealous of Mr. Browning and bites his leg several times to discourage his visits. They eventually become friends.

Miss Mitford

Miss Mitford was the first owner of Flush. She lived on a farm in Three Mile Cross where Flush was free to run in the fields. Miss Mitford gave Flush to Elizabeth Barrett Browning because she deserved an aristocratic dog like Flush.

Lily Wilson

Lily Wilson was Miss Barrett's personal maid. When Flush bit Mr. Browning, Wilson beat him. Lily met a royal guard in Italy and fell in love with him.

Edward Barrett

Edward Barrett was Miss Barrett's father. He was domineering and checked on his daughter each night to make sure she ate her dinner. Flush was frightened of him.

Mr. Taylor

Mr. Taylor was the dog thief who stole Flush and held him for ransom. Miss Barrett willingly paid the ransom to get her dog back.



Cuba

Cuba was the family dog. He was an old bloodhound who mainly just laid around all day.

Arabel and Henrietta

Arabel and Henrietta were Miss Barrett's sisters. They would accompany Miss Barrett on shopping trips to the market and London shops.

Henry Barrett

Henry Barrett was one of Elizabeth's seven brothers. Miss Barrett became enraged with Henry when she learned that he had refused to pay the ransom to Mr. Taylor to get Flush back.



Objects/Places

Three Mile Cross

Flush, the red cocker spaniel, began his life on a farm named Three Mile Cross. He loved running in the fields where he chased birds and animals.

Wimpole Street

Flush was given to Elizabeth Barrett Browning who lived on Wimpole Street in a posh section of London, England.

Miss Barrett's Bedroom

Flush stayed in Miss Barrett's bedroom most of his days on Wimpole Street. She was sickly and didn't go out of her room often.

Regent's Park

On occasion, Miss Barrett would take Flush to Regent's Park in London where she would take him for a walk. All dogs had to be on chains in the park.

Whitechapel

One day at the market, thieves stole Flush and took him to a rundown and crime-ridden neighborhood known as Whitechapel.

The Cellar

After Flush was stolen, he was thrown into a horrible cellar room with other stolen dogs. He spent five days there before Miss Barrett was able to ransom him.

Pisa, Italy

After Miss Barrett and Mr. Browning married, they honeymooned in Pisa, Italy. They took Flush with them on the trip.



Florence, Italy

The Brownings and Flush settled in Florence, Italy, where he was able to run free with the other dogs in the city.

Casa Guidi

Casa Guidi was the name of the house that the Brownings lived in during their time in Florence, Italy. The door was always open so Flush could come and go as he pleased.

The Railway

Miss Barrett and Flush traveled on a rail car after leaving London. Although Flush was humiliated having to travel in a crate, he put up with it because they were escaping from London.



Themes

Freedom

One strong theme that emerges from "Flush" by Virginia Woolf is liberty. Flush, a red cocker spaniel, begins his life on a country farm where he relishes running freely in the fields where he chases partridges and hares. His world is turned upside down when he is given to poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Miss Barrett is sickly and stays in her bedroom the majority of the time. As her personal pet, Flush is forced to stay in Miss Barrett's dark, gloomy bedroom. He longs for the freedom he enjoyed on the farm but it has all been stripped from him. Even when he is taken to a park in London, he must remain chained and leashed.

There are different kinds and degrees of imprisonment. Some are even self-inflicted or enabled by another person. Miss Barrett is a kind of prisoner herself. She is confined to her bedroom. She writes and reads and eats all her meals there. Everyday she is visited by her father who ostensibly wants to ensure that his daughter ate all her dinner. But in reality, it seems that he, with his dominating nature, wants to make sure that his daughter is in place and hasn't escaped. He wants to keep her in his home perhaps to share the limelight of her fame. Miss Barrett is trapped in a life without freedom but as it turns out one from which she had been able to escape from all along—she just didn't know it. She elopes with Mr. Browning and settles in Italy. There she is not confined to her bedroom. She flourishes in the sunshine and freedom. Her health improves and it is obvious that she had been deluded into believing that she was sickly by her own father.

Flush is happy to return to his gloomy bedroom life after being incarcerated in a horrid cellar by a dog thief who stole him and held him for ransom. His five days in a real prison made him realize that life with his kind mistress, albeit it in a dreary bedroom, was quite delightful after all. In Italy, Flush has more liberty than he had ever imagined. He is able to go and come as he pleases and mate with as many female street dogs as his heart desires. Flush, who once thought of himself as an aristocrat replete with a silky red coat, attains complete freedom when an infestation of fleas causes his entire coat to be clipped. After being free of fleas, Woolf attributes to Flush the thought that all cosmetics and clothes should be put in a pile and burned. There is no doubt that Woolf intended that sentiment more for humans than for dogs.

Classism

Flush, the red cocker spaniel who belonged to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was a high-born aristocratic dog. His lineage included dogs favored by kings and queens, and dogs that were perfect looking with smooth heads, round skulls and desired traits such as intelligence and gentleness. When he was a young puppy, Flush realized there was a difference in dogs. There were mongrels who had no desirable traits at all and there were dogs who belonged to lower class people with whom he would never associate.



Just as with humans, dogs had their place in society and he was in the highest class of all dogs. With that status came a responsibility. He realized that in order to be a loyal and responsible companion to Miss Barrett, he had to be willing to sacrifice—he had to give up running in the fields and chasing hares and birds. He also had to wear a chain whenever he went outside. But he was an aristocrat and he understood the importance of his station in life.

But Flush's world view changed 360 degrees when he was abruptly moved to Italy. There he was allowed to run free; however, he was forced to run with mongrels—dogs of no breeding or lineage to be proud of. But Flush realized that running with the mongrels had its benefits. It was liberating. Although he was forced to breed once upon a time, he became quite a lover in Italy where he was allowed to mate as often as he wanted to and with the mongrels of his choosing. Woolf uses a parable to illustrate that a life that is confined and isolated is unsatisfying and meaningless despite how lofty one thinks he is. She successfully contrasts that life with one of being free to act independently and to share love and pleasure with people of all walks of life. When Flush becomes a "lover" in Italy, he is not concerned with the breed of those he mates with.

As an aristocratic cocker spaniel, he had always been extremely proud of his coat. However, when it is cut off to rid him of fleas, he feels completely liberated. When Woolf describes his thought of burning all cosmetics and clothing, she is telling her readers that the false facades that people cling to stand in the way of living life to its fullest.

Friendship

Flush and Miss Barrett had a genuine and lasting friendship. However, like any true friendship, Flush and Miss Barrett didn't always understand one another and their relationship underwent some rough times. Flush was a young, free-spirited dog when he was given to Miss Barrett. Flush's new master was an invalid and confined to her room the majority of her day. Flush had to adjust to being in a dark, gloomy room all day and on a chain and leash when he was taken outside. Woolf portrays the aristocratic Flush as having an understanding of Miss Barrett's limitations and that his role was to support and comfort her. Due to his noble birth, he knew that with his high station in life came responsibility and a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of a friend.

Just like all friends, Flush and Miss Barrett had a lot in common. When he first saw her, he thought immediately that they resembled each other. They both had large brown eyes and curly hair that hung down the sides of their faces. But there were differences between them that they never fully understood about each other. Flush couldn't fathom why Miss Barrett waved a black stick over a white paper all day. Miss Barrett didn't know why Flush whined for no apparent reason. She had no idea that a cat that Flush could smell and hear was lying just outside the door.

Flush was jealous of Miss Barrett's new friend, Mr. Browning. He didn't understand why she was paying more attention to this new human than to him. He was so upset that he



decided to take his competitor out and bit him several times. Flush was in big trouble and realized that he had to accept Miss Barrett's new friend. He promised to never bite him again and eventually he developed a friendship with Mr. Browning. Miss Barrett realized that Flush needed to be free to run and live his life to the fullest.

What Woolf shows in her biography of Flush is that true friendship can endure differences, conflicts, and misunderstandings. Kindness, patience, forgiveness, and tolerance are ingredients that are necessary in any solid relationship. Each party must be willing to give a little in order for a relationship to stand the test of time.



Style

Perspective

"Flush" by Virginia Woolf is told in the third-person and limited omniscient perspective. The story is told mainly from the perspective of Flush and to a lesser degree from that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The reader is privy to the thoughts and reactions of Flush as he encounters changes and conflicts in his life. From his perspective, the reader learns about Flush's hopes and dreams and about his resolve to be a loyal friend to Miss Barrett—despite the fact that he's had to sacrifice his freedom to do so.

The narrator explains that there are some things the two friends will never understand about each other. Flush can't imagine why Miss Barrett spends all day waving a black stick over a white paper. For her part, Miss Barrett is disturbed by Flush's moaning and whining for no apparent reason. But her senses of smell and hearing are inferior to Flush's. He whines and moans because he knows that the family cat is lounging just outside the closed door. Miss Barrett doesn't understand that Flush had to bite Mr. Browning because he was taking all her attention from him.

Through the individual thoughts and reactions of Flush and Miss Barrett, the reader can enjoy the strong and lasting relationship that develops between them.

Tone

"Flush" by Virginia Woolf is ostensibly a light read and is written in a whimsical, tongue-in-cheek style. But layered within the whimsy is a tribute to the special relationship between a human and a beloved animal. Digging even deeper, there are serious human issues that are addressed such as classism, independence, jealousy, misunderstanding, conflict and artificiality. However, the gentleness in which these profound subjects are approached takes the sting off their messages.

Time after time, Woolf uses humor to make her point. Although the story is told through third-person narrative, it is told mainly from the perspective of Flush. Woolf sparks in the reader the image of a loyal dog sitting at its master's feet, watching and wondering exactly what the master is up to. Flush wonders why in the world Miss Barrett spends hours passing a black stick over a white paper. It makes no sense to him.

But the misunderstanding among the two friends is not just one-sided. Miss Barrett is concerned because Flush whines and moans for no apparent reason. The narrator explains the situation by pointing out that Miss Barrett had no idea that the family cat just passed in front of their closed door. Flush was able to detect the animal's presence with his superior senses of smell and hearing; while Miss Barrett, equipped with only human sensory perception, could not.



Flush is liberated time and again in his biography. When he is free of chains and leashes in Italy, he becomes quite a Lothario and the Brownings laugh at his escapades when he returns home exhausted from his love-making. When the formerly aristocratic dog must suffer the humiliation of losing his coat after being infested with fleas, he at first is morose. But when he understands that the fleas are gone, he is jubilant and suggests that all cosmetics and clothing should be stacked in a pile and burned.

Virginia Woolf, one of the greatest of modern writers, gets her point across time and again in a gentle, humorous way that is effective but never harsh or combative.

Structure

"Flush" by Virginia Woolf is separated into six chapters all of which are of medium length. The story is fundamentally structured in a chronological order. The first chapter, "Three Mile Cross," describes the early life of Flush, a red cocker spaniel. It also provides a brief history of spaniels—where they originate from, how they got their name and the various spaniel breeds. The second chapter, "The Back Bedroom," describes Flush's life when he was confined in the bedroom of poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning who was a shut-in.

The third chapter, "The Hooded Man," describes Flush's observation that Miss Barrett was acting erratically and that a dangerous man was destined to destroy his life with her. The fourth chapter, "Whitechapel," tells of Flush's horrific experience as a stolen dog. "Italy," the fifth chapter, describes the happy life that Flush lived in Italy with Mr. and Mrs. Browning. The final chapter, aptly titled, "The End," covers Flush's later years.

There is an introduction the precedes the first chapter. Miss Woolf also includes a section she called, "Authorities," in which she credits references and sources for the work, many of which were directly from the writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. The "Notes" section defines some of the references Miss Woolf used in her book that warrant explanation.



Quotes

"The Spaniel of the King is a pound in value." (Chapter 1, p. 5).

"But to sell Flush was unthinkable. He was of the rare order of objects that cannot be associated with money." (Chapter 1, p. 14).

"Between them, flush felt more and more strongly, as the weeks wore on, was a bond, an uncomfortable yet thrilling tightness; so that if his pleasure was her pain, then his pleasure was pleasure no longer but three parts pain" (Chapter 2, p. 35).

"'Flushie,' wrote Miss Barrett, 'is my friend—my companion—and loves me better than he loves the sunshine without'" (Chapter 2, p. 35).

"Do words say everything? Can words say anything? Do not words destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words?" (Chapter 2, p. 38).

"So a savage couched in flowers shudders when the thunder growls and he hears the voice of God" (Chapter 2, p. 43).

"Mr. Browning was Miss Barrett—Miss Barrett was Mr. Browning; love is hatred and hatred is love" (Chapter 3, p. 70).

"If Miss Barrett gave way to Taylor, he wrote, she was giving way to tyranny; she was giving way to blackmailers; she was increasing the power of evil over right, of wickedness over innocence" (Chapter 4, p. 90).

"Pisa with a ll its bells, its mongrels, its camels, its pine woods, was infinitely preferable to Wimpole Street and its mahogany doors and its shoulders of mutton" (Chapter 5, p. 115).

"Fear was unknown in Florence; there were no dog-stealers here and, she may have sighed, there were no fathers" (Chapter 5, p. 118).

"So might a great beauty, rising from a bed of sickness and finding her face eternally disfigured, make a bonfire of clothes and cosmetics, and laugh with joy to think that she need never look in the glass again or dread a lover's coolness or a rival's beauty" (Chapter 5, p. 135).

"'Flush,' Mrs. Browning wrote to her sister, 'is wise.' She was thinking perhaps of the Greek saying that happiness is only to be reached through suffering. The true philosopher is he who has lost his coat but is free from fleas" (Chapter 5, p. 136).

Topics for Discussion

How did the Spaniel get its various names? How many such theories are there? Describe them all.

How many original breeds of the Spaniel were there? Name them. What were signs that Flush and Miss Barrett were bonding?

What were signs that Flush and Miss Barrett were bonding? What differences did they have that made it difficult to understand one another at times?

Why was Flush so vicious toward Mr. Browning? What did Mr. Browning think of Flush?

Although Miss Barrett was an invalid and very weak, what incident showed that she was actually a very strong person? What did she learn about herself and what did her new-found strength lead to?

What did Flush learn when he was confined in the cellar after being kidnapped? What did he learn after having his coat clipped?

What were signs that Miss Barrett wasn't as ill as it seemed? What family member was partially responsible for her staying weak and "ill" while still in her family home and why? Why did she elope? Perhaps doing a little more research about Elizabeth Barrett Browning would be enlightening.