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DISCIPLINE AND AFFECTIVE CONTROL IN ANNA SEWELL'S *BLACK BEAUTY* AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *FLUSH*

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ABSTRACT

This research takes an innovative approach to the narratives of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* and Virginia Woolf's *Flush.* It finds that their texts may not straightforwardly represent animal subjectivity; instead, they are systems that produce new disciplined forms of feeling, behaviour and relationality in animals and humans alike. This paper does not ask how animals are represented but rather how these narratives show how animals are tied to the idea of obedience and control. *Black Beauty* identifies suffering with docility within systems of labour and domestication. In contrast, *Flush* throws this disciplining logic off with its valorization of sensory excess and instability with an animal perception that refuses to conform.

Based on posthumanist theory, companion species philosophy and Animal Studies, the paper argues that these texts do not simply critique anthropocentrism, they also regulate interspecies relations. The novel *Black Beauty* creates an effective economy in which the animal is legible, patient, and morally instructive for ethical recognition. Although the *Flush* narrative is managed from the human perspective, the author occasionally exploits smell, desire and movement for loss of control.

Reception theory also shows how the texts situate the reader within this framework. The clear-cut morality of *Black Beauty* creates stability in reader response; *Flush's* uncertainty, by contrast, pushes readers to deal with non-assimilable forms of experience. In the end, the essay shows that animal narratives are more than sites of ethical reflection; they also govern the animal and human in literary and cultural systems.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocentrism, Posthumanism, Animal Studies, Interspecies Relations, Discipline and Control, Companion Species

INTRODUCTION

The research aims at a study of animals focusing on the disciplinary functions of narrative in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* and Virginia Woolf's *Flush* rather than the representation of the animals. Instead of inquiring how animals are depicted, it looks at how these texts regulate behavior, affect, and interspecies relations. *Black Beauty* sets up a framework whereby suffering becomes a means by which animals are made obedient and morally legible, inserting animal subjectivity into systems of labour and domestication. On the other hand, *Flush* creates instability in these disciplining frameworks with its excess of the senses, entangled relationships, and uncertainty over knowledge.

By integrating Posthumanist theory, companion species philosophy, and Reception Theory, this research argues that animal narratives act as systems that shape both animal bodies and reader responses. These texts do not just critique anthropocentrism; they are entangled in it, both reinforcing and challenging its structures. Ultimately, the research positions literature as an active space where interspecies relations are created, governed, and contested.

This research is significant because it goes beyond traditional readings of animal narratives that focus only on empathy, representation, or ethical awareness. Instead, it emphasizes how literature actively shapes power relations between humans and nonhuman beings. By looking at narrative as a way of enforcing rules, the study shows how even texts that seem compassionate can still uphold systems of control, hierarchy, and domestication. This has wider implications for understanding how cultural forms influence attitudes toward animals in everyday life, including work, consumption, and care.

Additionally, the research adds to the Posthumanist and Animal Studies scholarship by showing that while anthropocentrism is challenged, it is also subtly maintained through literary form and reader engagement. It highlights the role of emotion in shaping ethical responses, illustrating how readers may be guided toward specific feelings that can limit resistance or alternative ways of relating. In doing so, the research introduces new ways of reading animal narratives, not as clear reflections of animal life, but as complex spaces where knowledge, power, and perception intersect.

In a contemporary context of ecological crisis, species extinction, and growing focus on nonhuman agency, this research is particularly relevant. It emphasizes the need to rethink how humans imagine and connect with other species and how cultural narratives influence

these ideas. By revealing both the strengths and weaknesses of literary representations, the study calls for more critical and ethically mindful engagement with nonhuman life. Ultimately, it shows that literature is not just a means of reflection but a strong force in shaping how interspecies relations are understood, negotiated, and experienced.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative approach and focuses on close reading textual analysis. The primary texts include Anna Sewell's Black Beauty (1877) and Virginia Woolf's Flush: A Biography (1933). These works are compared to understand how narrative strategies create and regulate animal subjectivity and interspecies relations.

The study uses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that includes Posthumanism (Cary Wolfe), Animal Studies (Margo DeMello) and companion species theory (Donna Haraway), as well as Derrida's critique of logocentrism and Reception Theory's idea of the implied reader by Wolfgang Iser to analyze reader positioning. Close reading serves as the main method to identify patterns of discipline, emotional control, sensory representation, and narrative authority within the texts.

Secondary sources, including journal articles and theoretical texts, support and contextualize the analysis. The methodology emphasizes how narrative form acts as a mechanism of control, rather than limiting the study to thematic interpretation.

1: *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewwell: Suffering, Obedience, and the Discipline of the Body

Black Beauty constructs a narrative in which suffering is not merely depicted but organized into a system of moral training. The horse's voice functions as a regulatory mechanism, transforming experiences of pain into lessons about patience, endurance, and submission. It presents itself as a moral narrative advocating for the humane treatment of animals; however, a closer examination reveals that it functions as a sophisticated system of discipline that regulates both animal behaviour and readerly response. Rather than simply exposing cruelty, the novel organizes suffering into a framework that produces obedience, internalizes submission, and reinforces anthropocentric hierarchies. Through its narrative voice it transforms the animal subject into a disciplined body whose value is determined by its capacity to endure, comply, and remain legible within human-defined ethical structures.

From the outset, the novel constructs obedience as an inherent quality rather than a learned behaviour. Beauty recalls that he was "This was my first time of wearing a bearing rein, and I must say, though it certainly was a nuisance not to be able to get my head down now and

then, it did not pull my head higher than I was accustomed to carry it." (Sewell 128). This statement is significant because it naturalizes discipline, presenting it as an essential aspect of the animal's identity rather than as a condition imposed through training. The language of "accustomed" suggests gradual normalization, where repeated acts of control become internalized as voluntary conduct. Beauty's early training emphasizes obedience as a virtue. He recalls being taught to respond calmly to human commands, suggesting that discipline is internalized as part of his identity. This internalization aligns with broader systems of domestication, where animals are valued not for autonomy but for their ability to conform.

The mechanisms of this discipline are not only psychological but also deeply inscribed onto the body. The use of the bearing rein exemplifies how control operates through physical constraint, as the horse says that "he jerked me hard with the rein. The new bit was very painful, and I reared up suddenly; this angered him still more, and he began to flog me" (Sewell 44), highlighting the tension between imposed aesthetic ideals and bodily suffering. The rein forces the horse into an unnatural posture, transforming the animal into an object of visual pleasure while simultaneously restricting its movement. Yet, despite the explicit acknowledgment of pain, the narrative does not legitimize resistance. Instead, suffering is reframed as part of the horse's duty, reinforcing compliance.

This process aligns with the idea that the category of the human is not fixed but historically constructed through systems of differentiation that define and regulate nonhuman life. "Anthropocentric orientations are thus not exclusive to cultures in which humans are classified as categorically distinct and superior t o animal others." In this framework, the animal is positioned outside the category of the human and is shaped through discipline to conform to its subordinate role in the hierarchy as humans are considered as the source of "value" (Weitzenfeld and Joy 4)

Later, the horse ends up becoming a commodity, "At last he drove me quite without a bearing rein, and then sold me as a perfectly quiet horse to a gentleman in the country" (Sewell 50). "Animality" is positioned as inferior to humans and which can be "conquered and exploited" (Demello 49-50). This distinction of animals is made through categories like "edible, or food, and those that we consider family members, or pets" (Demello 62). He says that when an animal is known "in only a limited, commodity form, it is inconceivable to think of the animal in any other way" (Demello 17). The capitalistic system focuses on profit and sees animals as a being which can be affectively controlled, rather than viewing them as a sentient being.

The transformation of suffering into moral obligation is central to the novel's disciplinary function. This is reflected by the line, "we horses must take things as they come, and always be contented and willing so long as we are kindly used" (Sewell 60), encapsulates the internalization of labour as an unquestioned necessity. The modal verb "must" conveys inevitability, suggesting that work is not merely assigned but accepted as intrinsic to the animal's existence. This acceptance reflects Plumwood's idea that the privileging of human interests within anthropocentric systems, where nonhuman life is valued primarily in terms of its "instrumentality" which should be rejected and nonhuman animals should be valued based on their "intrinsic value" (Grey 98). Here, the horse's identity is inseparable from its function as a labouring body, and its worth is measured by its capacity to serve.

The novel briefly introduces an alternative to this model of obedience through the character of Ginger, whose resistance exposes the constructed nature of discipline. Ginger admits, "At last, after a terrible struggle, I threw him off backwards" (Sewell 44), articulating a refusal to submit to imposed control. Her response demonstrates that obedience is neither natural nor inevitable but produced through specific conditions of training and coercion. However, the narrative ultimately contains this resistance by associating it with suffering and instability. Ginger's trajectory serves as a cautionary example, reinforcing the idea that survival within the system depends on compliance rather than defiance.

Wolfe's critique of humanist ethics is particularly relevant in this context. He argues that ethical frameworks often extend concern to animals without challenging the assumptions that underpin their exploitation, emphasizing that "humanism is, in so many words, its own dogma, replete with its own prejudices and assumptions" (Wolfe xiv). *Black Beauty* exemplifies this limitation. While it encourages compassion, it does so within a system that continues to define animals in relation to human needs. The horse is worthy of care not because it possesses autonomy but because it can be understood, empathized with, and ultimately managed within human ethical frameworks.

Moreover, the novel's disciplinary function extends beyond the animal subject to the reader, shaping how emotion and interpretation are structured. As Maziarczyk explains, "predispositions the text includes and attempts to impose on a real reader" (82). In *Black Beauty*, this structure directs the reader toward a specific emotional response, where empathy is aligned with recognition of suffering but not with resistance to the system that produces it. The reader is positioned as a moral observer, encouraged to feel compassion while accepting the broader framework of domestication, resistance and labour.

This dynamic reveals that *Black Beauty* operates not only as a narrative about animals but as a mechanism that produces disciplined forms of feeling. The reader's response is carefully regulated, ensuring that sympathy reinforces rather than disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies. In this sense, the novel functions as a technology of affect, training both animal and human subjects within a shared system of control.

Ultimately, *Black Beauty* demonstrates that discipline in animal narratives is not limited to physical coercion but encompasses psychological internalization, moral instruction, and readerly engagement. By naturalizing obedience, normalizing suffering, and containing resistance, the text constructs a world in which domination is both inevitable and ethically justified. The animal subject becomes a site where power is not only exercised but reproduced, revealing the extent to which narrative itself participates in the organization of interspecies relations.

2: *Flush* by Virginia Woolf: Sensory Perception, Relational Control, and the Instability of Discipline

Virginia Woolf's *Flush* departs significantly from the disciplinary clarity of *Black Beauty*, yet it does not abandon structures of control altogether. Instead, it reconfigures them through a narrative that foregrounds sensory excess, relational entanglement, and instability. While Sewell's text produces a disciplined subject through moralized suffering, *Flush* complicates the very possibility of discipline by presenting an animal whose experience cannot be fully contained within human modes of understanding. However, this instability does not dismantle anthropocentric structures entirely; rather, it exposes their limits while simultaneously remaining entangled within them.

At the centre of Woolf's narrative is a radical reorientation of perception. Flush experiences the world not through vision or language but through smell, as the narrator observes that "Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived" (Woolf 138). This formulation is crucial because it disrupts the sensory hierarchy that underpins anthropocentric epistemology through the idea of "logocenticism" where rationality and language are privileged as primary modes of knowledge (Derrida 95-96). He rejects this idea by saying that meaning is never fixed and language is unstable and always shifting. The focus on smell as perception creates instability and resistance to precise articulation. The presence of a sensory world that cannot be fully assimilated into human knowledge. The dog's experience exposes the limits of anthropocentric frameworks, revealing that human modes of understanding are neither universal nor sufficient.

However, this ethical engagement avoids reproducing the assumptions it seeks to challenge, emphasizing that ethics must extend beyond the human without reproducing humanist assumptions". *Flush* operates within this tension. While it resists full translation of animal experience into human terms, it still relies on narrative structures that mediate and interpret that experience for the reader. The animal remains partially inaccessible, but never entirely outside the framework of representation.

This sensory reorientation aligns with the idea that subjectivity emerges through relational processes rather than isolated identity. As she writes, "To be one is always to become with many" (Haraway 4), emphasizing that beings are constituted through their interactions with others. Flush's experience is not self-contained but embedded within a network of environmental and relational stimuli, where meaning is constantly shifting. The dog does not simply perceive the world; he is shaped by it in ways that resist narrative stabilization.

At the same time, *Flush* does not abandon structures of discipline but relocates them within affective and relational domains. Flush's attachment to Elizabeth Barrett Browning exemplifies this dynamic: "With one bound Flush splashed through the stream and reached her" (Woolf 118). This bond appears as affection, yet it also functions as a mechanism of control. The dog's behaviour is regulated not through overt coercion but through emotional dependency, illustrating what Haraway describes as the co-constitution of "companion species" as "We make each other up" (16). Similarly the idea of "becoming with" explains "another kind of entanglement of becoming with one another that is attentive to the asymmetries of power" (Haraway 309). Love, in this context, becomes a subtle form of discipline and creates a hierarchy which shapes the animal's movements and desires.

Unlike *Black Beauty*, where discipline is internalized and stabilized, *Flush* introduces moments where control becomes precarious. The urban environment disrupts the possibility of regulation. When Flush encounters the streets of London, he is overwhelmed by the streets and smells which overwhelm him at once. The accumulation of sensory stimuli produces disorientation, undermining the coherence that discipline requires. The animal body is no longer fully governed by relational attachment but is instead drawn into a chaotic field of experience that resists containment.

This instability becomes even more pronounced in the episode of Flush's kidnapping, where the illusion of domesticated security collapses which exposes the vulnerability of the animal within human-controlled systems. Here, discipline is revealed not as a stable structure but as contingent and fragile, subject to disruption by forces beyond the immediate relational framework. Yet, even in moments of apparent escape, the narrative does not offer a complete

break from control. This freedom is temporary, quickly reabsorbed into the structures of domestication. The oscillation between freedom and control highlights the incomplete nature of resistance within the text. Discipline is neither absolute nor absent; it is continually negotiated and reasserted.

At the level of readerly engagement, *Flush* produces a markedly different effect from *Black Beauty*. Rather than guiding the reader toward a stable moral interpretation, it introduces gaps and uncertainties that require active negotiation. According to Maziarczyk, "the implied reader embodies the role which the reader is to play to actualise the text" (82), yet in Woolf's narrative, this role is deliberately incomplete. The reader is positioned within a space of interpretive tension, where meaning is not given but must be constructed in the face of partial understanding.

This interpretive instability challenges the reader's habitual modes of engagement. Without clear moral directives, empathy becomes uncertain, forcing the reader to confront the limits of their own perception. The inability to fully access the animal's experience becomes an ethical encounter in itself, highlighting the inadequacy of anthropocentric frameworks.

At the same time, the narrative does not entirely abandon the structures of discipline that shape both animal and reader. Instead, it reveals their instability, demonstrating that control is never total and that resistance, while possible, is always constrained. The animal subject in *Flush* is neither fully disciplined nor fully free, but exists within a fluctuating system of power, care, and perception.

Ultimately, *Flush* reconfigures the function of animal narrative by shifting the focus from moral clarity to epistemological uncertainty. Through its emphasis on sensory excess and relational entanglement, it exposes the limits of discipline while remaining implicated within its structures. The text does not resolve these tensions but sustains them, offering a vision of interspecies relations that is dynamic, unstable, and continually negotiated.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research reveals that *Black Beauty* and *Flush* function as distinct yet interconnected narrative systems that organize discipline and affect across species. *Black Beauty* stabilizes discipline through the internalization of obedience, the normalization of suffering, and the moralization of labour. The narrative constructs an animal subject whose value is determined by compliance, while simultaneously guiding the reader toward a controlled emotional response rooted in sympathy but not resistance.

In contrast, *Flush* disrupts this disciplinary coherence by foregrounding sensory perception, particularly smell, which resists anthropocentric modes of knowledge. The text introduces instability through relational entanglement and affective bonds, where control operates subtly through attachment rather than overt coercion. However, this instability does not fully dismantle discipline; instead, it exposes its limits and contingency.

Together, the findings demonstrate that animal narratives are not passive representations but active mechanisms that shape how interspecies relations are imagined and regulated. While *Black Beauty* reinforces disciplinary structures, *Flush* complicates and destabilizes them, creating a space of interpretive uncertainty. Both texts remain embedded within anthropocentric frameworks, highlighting the persistent tension between control and resistance in literary representations of nonhuman life.

CONCLUSION

This research argues that Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* and Virginia Woolf's *Flush* should be understood not merely as narratives that represent animal life, but as literary systems that actively organize discipline, affect, and interspecies relations. By shifting the focus from representation to function, the analysis reveals how these texts participate in shaping both animal subjectivity and readerly response within broader anthropocentric frameworks.

In *Black Beauty*, discipline is stabilized through the internalization of obedience, the normalization of suffering, and the moralization of labour. The narrative constructs an animal subject that accepts its role within a hierarchical system, where endurance becomes a virtue and resistance is contained. Through carefully structured emotional appeals, the text trains the reader to respond with sympathy, yet this sympathy operates within limits that leave the underlying structures of domination intact. As Wolfe suggests, ethical concern that remains grounded in humanist assumptions risks reinforcing the very systems it seeks to critique. *Black Beauty* exemplifies this tension, extending compassion while maintaining the centrality of human authority.

In contrast, *Flush* destabilizes the possibility of such disciplinary coherence by foregrounding sensory excess and relational entanglement. Woolf's emphasis on smell and embodied perception disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies of knowledge, exposing the limits of human understanding. At the same time, the text does not fully escape structures of control; rather, it reveals their instability. Relationships of care and attachment function as subtle forms of discipline, even as they open up spaces of unpredictability and resistance. Haraway's notion

that beings are co-constituted within networks of power and care becomes particularly relevant here, as *Flush* presents interspecies relations as dynamic and unresolved.

Together, these texts demonstrate that animal narratives operate as a space that regulates behaviour, perception, and feeling. They shape how animals are imagined, how humans relate to them, and how readers are positioned within systems of ethical response. While *Black Beauty* reinforces discipline through clarity and moral instruction, *Flush* unsettles it through ambiguity and sensory disruption. Yet neither text exists outside the structures it engages; both remain entangled within anthropocentric systems that continue to define the boundaries of meaning and value.

Ultimately, this research suggests that the significance of animal narratives lies not only in what they depict, but in how they function. By examining the ways in which discipline is produced, internalized, and destabilized within these texts, we gain a deeper understanding of literature as a site where interspecies relations are not simply represented but actively constructed and contested.

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