

“BLESSINGS ON THEE, DOG OF MINE”: DOGS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AS A REFLECTION ON SOCIETY

Sophia Vincent

The Victorian era stands as a transformative period in British history, witnessing profound changes in societal attitudes. Victorians experienced a shift in culture towards issues such as class roles, gender, sexuality, and even environmentalism. Prominent literary publications of during the time facilitated the movement. As reflected in Victorian society, literature holds a peculiar ability to shape societal beliefs and mold the new philosophies of the time, as it can reach a wide range of demographics and disseminate new, modern ideas in a creative manner. Alongside cultural revolution, a growing concern for animal welfare emerged, reflecting a progressive moral responsibility toward the treatment of animals in Britain. It was during this time that dogs, of all domestic creatures, began to capture the most room in the hearts of the Victorians.

The transition from working animals to irreplaceable household companions was sparked and fueled by the continued publication of many works which promote kinder attitudes towards dogs, creating widespread movements across the country. The depiction of dogs in Victorian literature reflects evolving human-canine relationships throughout society, elucidating the ever-changing dynamics between humans and their dogs. Through an analysis of Thomas Hardy's portrayal of faithful dogs in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Michael Field, and scholarly insights from a variety of academic articles, I intend to explore the canine presence in Victorian literature and demonstrate how it reflects and

facilitates the evolving nature of the human-dog relationship within the broader Victorian society.

The progression of animals as utilitarian creatures to indispensable companions can be traced chronologically. As I will explore below, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, animals were viewed only as a means to an end. Works such as Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* highlighted these attitudes and helped usher in a new age for the animal welfare movement, marked by the legislative actions and organizations that were founded. In addition, during the middle of the century, Charles Darwin's groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species* reshaped society's perspectives towards animals, proving that each creature shares a common ancestral link, thereby destroying lingering divisions between humans and animals. Following these advances, the Victorians began to classify and develop distinct breeds of dogs and associate them with certain social classes. The trend was entrenched by the public presence of Queen Victoria and her intense love for dogs. Ultimately, in the 1870s and beyond into the present, dogs began to make a renowned debut into literature. Here, authors such as Michael Field were able to express their love and devotion to their dogs, representing the culmination of dogs' journey through Victorian society. Dogs became a permanent fixture among British households, popularizing the idea of a domestic pet that would soon spread across its empire and throughout the globe.

Working Animals During the Industrial Revolution (1830s-1840s)

As British society transitioned from the 18th to 19th century, cultural perspectives began to shift significantly regarding the role of dogs. During Victorian times, society as a whole pivoted from an agrarian civilization to an industrial society, marked by the rise of machinery, technology, and the factory system. While altering the landscape of Britain, it also reformed the relationships between humans and their pets. Dogs were once viewed from a utilitarian

perspective in terms of their capacity for work and labor. Instead of being seen as sentient individuals, they were viewed in their ability to decrease the physical labor load from humans in the course of their work as is profoundly visualized in Gabriel Oak's relationship with his two farm dogs in Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Far from the Madding Crowd, set in the fictional English farming community, follows Bathsheba Everdene and her complex romantic aspirations while she navigates the male-dominated agricultural society. As the relationships between Bathsheba and other characters of the novel evolve, Hardy also illustrates a deep relationship between animals and humans. Such exploration is executed particularly through Gabriel Oak, a farmhand with considerable love for his sheep and dogs. Hardy explains that George, the eldest of Oak's two sheepdogs, was initially owned by a "shepherd of inferior morals and dreadful temper" (Hardy 43). The shepherd demonstrated the prevailing notions towards animals at the time. If the sheepdog did not do the labor it was expected to perform, it would be punished: "Long experience had so precisely taught the animal the difference between such exclamations as 'Come in!' and 'D---- ye, come in!' that he knew to a hair's breadth the rate of trotting back from the ewes' tails that each call involved, if a staggereer with the sheep crook was to be escaped" (Hardy 43). Unlike the battle-weary George, Oak's second dog, who remains unnamed, is inexperienced in utilitarian work. In fact, when he fails to demonstrate his ability to work successfully in a shepherding environment, he is "taken and tragically shot at twelve o'clock that same day" (Hardy 46). Oak's ill-fated second dog is not the only dog who is the victim of mistreatment at the hands of human beings for no other crime than exhibiting playful behavior acceptable for a young dog. The third dog that Hardy illustrates in his novel saves Fanny's life by helping her reach the poorhouse before her untimely death. Fanny, a secondary character who had been abandoned by her lover, Sergeant Troy, is struggling to find shelter during her ninth month of pregnancy. On

her way to a poorhouse, Hardy compassionately describes how a stray dog offers support and comfort to Fanny in her final moments. Hardy writes, "The dog, who now thoroughly understood her desire and her incapacity, was frantic in his distress on these occasions; he would tug at her dress and run forward. She always called him back" (Hardy 280). Unfortunately, despite the shocking amount of humanity that the stray dog portrayed to Fanny, he was still punished by society. When Fanny finally arrives at the poorhouse and finds the dog missing, she questions, "'Where is he gone? He helped me'" (Hardy 281). A cold-hearted man at the poorhouse, who represents overwhelming Victorian notions of the time, comments, "'I stoned him away'" (Hardy 281).

Cruel treatment towards dogs aligns with the broader perspective of Victorian culture. The Humane Society's 2005 Course Award winner and scholar Teresa Mangum explains that in the early nineteenth century, "'mad dogs' — which often meant any dog roaming the streets unmuzzled—were beaten, placed under observation, or shot" (45). Despite societal realities, Hardy still portrays them in a kind, compassionate light. Dr. Clapp-Itnyre adds that, "Anyone who reads Hardy notices his deep concern for animals suffering, and we know for a fact that he loved his animal companions" (Clapp-Itnyre "Thomas Hardy Animal Studies" Canvas Page). Hardy reflects lamentably on their poor treatment in Victorian society, commenting on the tendency after the shooting of the sheepdog, which he viewed as "another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs" (Hardy 46).

Legislation & Associations (1840s-1850s)

Thomas Hardy, through his character of Gabriel Oak, represents the shifting sentiments toward dogs as Victorian society began its shift from rural to urban. Urban, industrial environments have a distinctive ability to amplify societal issues and impose tangible change. The animal welfare movement began to gain tremendous popularity in

urban areas, and Dr. Clapp-Itnyre credits its swift rise to “the Industrial Revolution, revolutionary spirit, and Evangelical revivals...across Anglo-American society.” She continues, “As people moved to towns as part of the Industrial Revolution, and thus were further removed from the harsh, day-to-day realities of agrarian life, their sympathy for animals increased” (Clapp-Itnyre *British Hymn Books for Children*, 1800-1900). As sentiments for animals increased and grew prominently in public spheres, one of the most notable organizations in Britain’s welfare movement came into being: the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). During its initial foundation in 1824, the RSPCA was only known to the public as the Society for the Protection of Animals. However, the shifting perspective towards dogs and other animals had attained a level of influence to reach the Queen herself, who “sponsored the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals, and awarded it the honorary ‘Royal’ prefix in 1840” (Babilas 299).

In addition to the development of the RSPCA in 1824, a landmark legislative act was passed ten years later: the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1835. The passage of the Act was a seismic shift in society’s perspective toward dogs, and other animals in general. It mirrored the broader cultural shift in Victorian England as people began to view dogs with sentience and empathy. It was around the time that dogs and other domestic animals began to make their debut in Victorian literature.

In 1844, Elizabeth Barrett Browning published a groundbreaking poem titled, “To Flush, My Dog” which immortalized her pet, Flush, in literary history. Where the vast majority of British society viewed dogs as lowly animals, Barrett Browning helped spark the movement in which pet owners saw their dogs as companions and members of their households rather than creatures for utility which then challenged existing British culture in a way that was perceived as unimaginable throughout communities nationwide. In “To Flush, My Dog,” Barrett Browning tenderly portrays Flush in the poem, emphasizing their strong human-canine bond, which had been largely unseen in Britain

before this time. Of Flush, Barrett Browning writes, "Therefore to this dog will I, / Tenderly not scornfully, / Render praise and favour!" (79-81) During its publication, Barrett Browning's poem was before its time. Poetry about animals had been primarily unexplored, making it a risk on Barrett Browning's part to venture in such new territory. She recalls her fear about the piece as she writes in a letter to her mentor Hugh Stuart Boyd, "'As for Flush's verses, they are what I call cobweb verses, thin and light enough' and their significance is not 'worth a defense'" (qtd. in Scheidegger).

Rise of the Middle Class & Scientific Discoveries (1850s-1860s)

Throughout the 1850s-1860s, Britain saw the evolution and emergence of the middle within its striated society. As families broke free from the economic limitations imposed upon the lower classes, they were granted a larger income, disposable money, and revolutionary leisure time. Considering the increase of these factors, more families used their new resources to add a new member to their family in the form of a canine companion. In her article "Queen Victoria's Canine Companions," Dorota Babilas reflects how the increased income resulted in the "growing popularity of keeping pets by middle-class city dwellers" (300). Babilas continues that "animals as companions of people featured prominently in Victorian moral ideology exalting loyalty, dutifulness and an idealized vision of family life" (300-301). Therefore, owning a dog reflected on individuals and represented their own values of respect and empathy. This allowed not only the development of human-canine bonds, but also the bonds of humanity within societies.

Another catalyst in the rise of dogs within the Victorian home was the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (Mangum 43). Released in 1859, Darwin's research supported an uncommon idea that animals and people were descended from a "common ancestor." While each line from *On the Origin of Species* was

revolutionary for scientists and scholars at the time, one of the lines that stood out claimed that “It is a truly wonderful fact—the wonder of which we are apt to overlook from familiarity—that all animals and all plants throughout all time and space should be related to each other in groups, subordinate to groups” (Darwin). The publication had rippling effects across the nation at large, leading people to develop a realization for the deep sense of interconnectedness with every aspect of nature. Thus, Darwin’s findings broke down barriers which had unknowingly existed between the two species. More people became comfortable with sharing their home and families with dogs and domestic creatures, facilitating empathy and fostering a sense of nurturing to be shared amongst the two groups.

Development & Popularity of Dog Breeds (1860s-1870s)

As love for dogs expanded exponentially following Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, formal organizations within British society surged rapidly. Teresa Mangum writes that “In the second half of the century, exhibitions of dogs became enormously popular, leading to the formation of the British Kennel Club in 1873 and an obsession with establishing clearly distinguished breeds and sub-breeds” (36). From Darwin’s work, Victorian scientists were able to understand the origins and relationships between different dog breeds. This allowed them to create a framework to breed dogs to express desirable traits, abilities, and appearances. Intentional breeding, called selective breeding, became a lucrative field and further distinguished different breeds of dogs for a variety of purposes and intentions.

A prominent example in Victorian society was the prevalence of a certain breed of dog within the upper echelons of society; the visibility of these dogs was spearheaded by a single woman with the capacity to shape the perception of the animal across her empire: Queen Victoria. The Queen’s diary contains a record of “more than 640 of her dogs, belonging to more than 30 different breeds, during the 63 years of the

longest reign in the history of Britain” (Babilas 299). Queen Victoria was a profound champion of the animal welfare movement as it grew in popularity across Britain. Dorota Babilas writes that “Victoria treated her canine companions on a par with humans. She perceived them as individuals with distinct personalities, worthy of her feelings and capable of reciprocating them” (306). It even became a running joke in Victorian society that “Victoria was never as lenient towards her children as she was towards her pets” (Babilas 304). Victoria fueled the nation’s growing love for dogs as she was constantly accompanied by one of her various dogs during her public appearances. Many sources offer competing assumptions as to which breed Queen Victoria preferred the most throughout her reign, though both England’s Border Collie Museum and the Royal Family’s webpage corroborate that Queen Victoria favored “smooth haired collies” (Taylor; “Royal Dogs”). Of the 88 collies Victoria has been recorded owning, her favorite was called “Sharp.” Sharp became a prominent public figure in Victorian society, as a photo of Victoria and her dog became a “‘carte-de-viste’ which was widely published and sold to the public like a postcard” (“Royal Dogs”). Despite the disputing record of Victoria’s preferred dog, it is undeniable that her affinity and fierce love for her companions helped shape Britain’s culture and behavior towards dogs. Since Victoria’s rule, each subsequent monarch for Britain has had a designated “favorite breed.”

As dogs became intertwined with the concept of royalty, dogs were soon treated as royalty themselves, representing a new zenith in the treatment of animals across Britain. For example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog Flush is reported to have been hand-fed only “meals of cakes, custards and scraps of meat (beef — Flush did not like mutton and his bread had to be thickly buttered)” (Hooper). Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself details in her poem, “To Flush, My Dog,” as she writes, “Pretty collars make thee fine, / Sugared milk make fat thee! / Pleasures wag on in thy tail” (lines 92-94). Teresa Magnum comments from a

more widespread perspective that “dogs of fashion not only had their own day spas and wardrobes, but their own society veterinarians” (36). In these lines, Browning offers a testament to how far animal treatment has evolved in little under half a century, considering how brutally Hardy expressed the treatment of dogs within *Far from the Madding Crowd*. In the era, shooting a dog like George’s son would have been unthinkable, and even punishable by law.

Attention and awareness for animal welfare could only multiply; Victorian culture soon began spreading its love for animals to the nation’s most powerful voice – children. In 1875, a group called Bands of Hope was established to “educate children about animal welfare” (Clapp-Itnyre *British Hymn Books for Children*, 1800-1900). The group expanded rapidly across the nation, and soon partnered with the RSPCA in 1882. Just ten years later, Britain was already home to over 800 individual chapters of the Bands of Hope (Clapp-Itnyre *British Hymn Books for Children*, 1800-1900).

Prevalence of Human-Canine Relationships in Literary Works (1870s & beyond)

Inspired by Queen Victoria and the exponentially growing national appreciation for dogs, literature was soon published at a tremendous rate of which dogs were the primary focus. While Elizabeth Barrett Brown had been the pioneer of the niche genre, many other poets and authors soon followed her example as their lives were touched by the companion of their dogs. In addition to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “To Flush, My Dog,” the poet Michael Field soon published a remarkable volume of works regarding their own pet. Michael Field, the pseudonym for the poetic pair Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, made an impact on Victorian literature due to their unusually intense affection for their dog, Whym Chow. Their bond with Whym Chow has been characterized as an “extreme act of nonconformity” due to their immense and unconventional love for the

dog (Mackie "Triangle of Love"). Whym Chow's tragic death profoundly affected both women, leaving an enduring mark on their literary works.

Bradley and Cooper owned Whym Chow and treated him as one of their own from 1898 until 1906, when he suddenly died from meningitis (Mackie "Triangle of Love"). While the origin of the peculiar name is unknown, the two women often addressed him in affectionate terms, including "little Chow" "Whymmie" (qtd. in Ehnenn). The love between the women and their dog eventually became so intense that they referred to themselves as a trinity in their poem "Trinity": "O God, no blasphemy / It is to feel we loved in trinity" (Field 3-4). The deep connection shared by the three permeated their lives and creative works, as Whym was often a muse and common theme for their poetry, when not exploring sapphic love. Whym Chow was an integral part of their lives and supported them emotionally. Whym's death sent Bradley and Cooper into a spiraling depression from which they never recovered. In response to their crippling grief, both poets converted to Catholicism in 1907 (Snyder).

After his death, the women put aside the past work and focused primarily on the immense feelings of grief and loss that came from the death of their beloved dog. Their poems, compiled in *Whym Chow Flame of Love*, demonstrate the heart-breaking and emotionally charged connection that Bradley and Cooper were able to develop with Whym. They mourn the loss of their dog with astonishing grief, as emphasized in their poem "Requiescat":

And I must traverse these grand vaults to hear
The patter of thy feet, my little Chow,
Driven soft of frenzy on and on—the drear
And winter bee-note at thy stricken brow. (Field 5-8)

Field's excerpt highlights profound grief and longing for Whym. The vivid imagery of the narrator traversing the "grand vaults" (5)

and listening for their Whym's footsteps evokes the strong sense of yearning and emptiness within their lives that Whym had once filled with "the patter of thy feet" (6). Katherine's and Edith's use Chow's affectionate pet name, "my little Chow" (6), emphasizes the deeply personal and intimate nature of the relationship between the three. In another poem, "Absence," Katharine and Bradley write, "Woe of they little face left so forlorn! / Woe of its weft and woof untwined, / The stuff of all its gold aimless and torn" (8-10). The poem also addresses the Field's grief through imagery and metaphor, creating a portrait of innocence in Whym's "little face left so forlorn" (8). The repetition of "Woe" in each line (8, 9) emphasizes the depth of their despair, evoking an atmosphere of lamentation in response to Whym's death. The grieving process that Field presents in these poems is comparable to the elegies written for humans during the era; prior to Field's poetry, it was highly uncommon for such lengths to be taken in response to the death of an animal.

Following the publication of *Whym Chow Flame of Love* in the early 20th century, the nation only saw improved attitudes toward dogs in the eyes of Britain. Now, Dr. Richard Howell suggests that it was Britain who "invented" the modern dog. He writes that Britain has become "a nation of dog lovers." Britain certainly earned its name: scientific advancements compounded and increased, creating progress in veterinary care and improving the longevity of domestic animals. Taking such progress into account, the popularity of dog ownership continued to rise steadily, solidifying the presence of dogs in British households as family members. Now "almost a quarter of households have at least one" dog (Howell).

The evolution of dogs' prevalence in the lives of humans plays a crucial role in shaping society, particularly regarding class and overall societal structure. Prior to Darwin's work, dogs were viewed primarily as working animals only to be utilized for hunting or farming. However, Darwin's research led to a completely altered understanding of these

animals, and eventually their prominence in family homes; the trend was particularly evident among the middle and upper classes, who had the resources to groom and pamper their dogs. Because of these societal shifts, the presence of dogs in the family home often reinforced their social standing and socioeconomic ranking in society. Harriet Ritvo, in her novel *The Animal Estate*, writes that British society created a largely hierarchal pedigree structure which “projected an obsessively detailed vision of a stratified order which sorted animals and, by implication, people into snug and appropriate niches” (93). For example, some breeds of dogs, specifically those which were pure-bred for generations were seen to “maintain old values and old stock” and represented only “aristocratic fanciers” (Ritvo 84). These dogs were prized for their breed and heritage, and often acted as symbols of their wealth and class. Mixed-breed dogs or “mongrels” were often consigned to lower classes, indicating a lack of elite nature and heritage. Ritvo describes that any “lapse from purity” would label dogs as “useless” and “miserable,” evicting them from elevated societal ranks (91). These “half-castes” were often associated with lower class Victorians and commoners (91).

The stratification of dogs throughout society also played a strong hand in shaping the socioeconomic environment in Victorian Britain. Among the high and middle classes, dogs were often used as a means of blackmail and exploitation to squeeze money from rich pet owners who were particularly attached to their companions. Ritvo explains that “Professional dog stealers would abscond with a cherished animal, then offer to restore it for a price...individual Londoners paid from £2 to £50 to ransom favorite pets” (86). Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog Flush was a victim of one such robbery; these events were so common throughout Britain that a series of laws were passed to criminalize the theft and trafficking of dogs (Hooper).

The progression of the human-canine companionship in Victorian literature replicates and reinforces the broader societal shifts of the

nation. Once viewed merely for their working capacity and shot down as Hardy describes, they have come to be beloved companions, as Field and Barrett Browning illustrate. Considering these many literary works and the scholarly discourse that supports it, Victorians filled dogs with a newfound dignity and reverence through literature, art, and legislation. With the facilitation of literature, including Hardy's novels and the range of poetic works featuring dogs, they became to be recognized as not merely beasts of burden, but as sentient beings deserving and capable of love, respect, and companionship. As Dr. Howell traces their prevalence through Britain's history, culminating in the 21st century, he quips, "perhaps we love them too much." ■

WORKS CITED

- Babilas, Dorota. "Queen Victoria's Canine Companions." *Zarząd Główny Towarzystwa Literackiego im*, 2014, pp. 299-309. http://rcin.org.pl/Content/69523/PDF/WA248_83331_P-I-1269_babilas_o.pdf. Accessed 10 April 2024.
- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "To Flush, My Dog." *Poetry Foundation*, 1844, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43726/to-flush-my-dog>. Accessed 8 April 2024.
- Clapp-Itnyre, Alisa. "Reforming Society: Missionary, Bands of Hope, and Bands of Mercy Hymns." *British Hymn Books for Children, 1800-1900: Re-Tuning the History of Childhood*. Routledge, 2019, Chapter 5.
- "Thomas Hardy Animal Studies" Canvas Page. For English L391, Indiana University East, Spring 2024.
- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. *Project Gutenberg*, March 1998, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1228/1228-h/1228-h.htm>. Accessed 1 April 2024.
- Ehnenn, Jill R. "'Drag(ging) at memory's fetter': Michael Field's personal elegies, Victorian mourning, and the problem of Whym Chow." *The Michaelian*, vol. 1 no. 1, 2009. The Latchkey, http://www.thelatchkey.org/Field/MF1/ehennnarticle.htm#_edn1. Accessed 26 April 2024.
- Field, Michael. "Absence." *Cove Collective*, 1914, <https://editions.covecollective.org/edition/whym-chow-flame-love/whym-chow-flame-love#chapter12>. Accessed 19 April 2024.
- "Trinity." *Cove Collective*, 1914, <https://editions.covecollective.org/edition/whym-chow-flame-love/whym-chow-flame-love#chapter5>. Accessed 19 April 2024.
- "Requiescat." *Cove Collective*, 1914, <https://editions.covecollective.org/edition/whym-chow-flame-love/whym-chow-flame-love#chapter1>. Accessed 19 April 2024.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2005.

- Hooper, Richard. "Then & There Flush With Love: A Jealous Heart and a Stolen Dog." *Middleburg Life*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.middleburglife.com/flush-love-jealous-heart-stolen-dog/>. Accessed 22 March 2024.
- Howell, Phillip. "How the dog found a place in the family home – from the Victorian age to ours." *University of Cambridge*, 15 May 2015, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/how-the-dog-found-a-place-in-the-family-home-from-the-victorian-age-to-ours>. Accessed 19 April 2024.
- Mackie, Kwency. "Triangle of Love: Michael Field and Whym Chow." *Cove Collective*, <https://editions.covecollective.org/edition/whym-chow-flame-love/triangle-love-michael-field-and-whym-chow>. Accessed 19 April 24.
- Mangum, Teresa. "Dog Years, Human Fears." *Representing Animals*, edited by Nigel Rothfels, Indiana University Press, 2002, pp. 52-64.
- Ritvo, Harriet. *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*. E-book, Harvard University Press, 1987.
- "Royal Dogs." *The Royal Family*, <https://www.royal.uk/royal-dogs>. Accessed 26 April 2024.
- Scheidegger, Allison. "Reception of E. B. Browning's and Virginia Woolf's Dog Writing | Armstrong Browning Library & Museum." *Blogs at Baylor University*, 15 June 2022, <https://blogs.baylor.edu/armstrongbrowning/2022/06/15/reception-of-e-b-brownings-and-virginia-woolfs-dog-writing/>. Accessed 22 March 2024.
- Snyder, Kelly. "Whym Chow, Michael Field, and Grieving for Animals." *Cove Collective*, <https://editions.covecollective.org/edition/whym-chow-flame-love/triangle-love-michael-field-and-whym-chow>. Accessed 19 April 24.
- Taylor, Barry. "BC Museum: Queen Victoria." *Border Collie Museum*, 13 July 2013, <https://www.bordercolliemuseum.org/QueenVictoria/QueenVictoria.html>. Accessed 26 April 2024.

Sophia Vincent's article derives from her research in a Victorian Literature course taught by Alisa Clapp-Itnyre.