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**“Unleashing the Underdog”:  
Technology of Place in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush***

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**Introduction**

“Technology,” as both technical and common term, is often associated with scientific and industrial tools, techniques, and procedures. This academic paper, however, propounds that the term “technology” in its etymological roots epitomises not only the objectivity of science but also the subjectivity of arts. The concept of technology oscillates between binary poles of the concrete and the abstract and, by so doing, merges and disrupts those seemingly fixed binary oppositions. The dynamism of technology manifests itself most clearly in our understanding of place. “Technology of Place,” the means by which an individual comes to understand place, embodies not only the concrete “architectural textures” perceived through sensory reception, but also the abstract ideas or “textual architectures” which form understandings of, and feelings towards, a particular place. Since it is made up of both tangible and intangible layers of texts, place can be “read” and approached as a text. Through the literature of place, one is able to read through the surface of place and interrogate its embedded discourse of power and technology of production. The hypothesis and conclusion of this essay will be attested and illustrated in a close analysis of Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*, her “underdog” text which depicts the life story of the underdogs: the Victorian poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her pet. Published in 1933, this biography of a cocker spaniel investigates how dogs and women perceive the world and how they come to understand their places in it.

**Part One: Theories of Technology**

**What is Technology?**

Nowadays when we hear the word “technology,” especially when placed side by side with the word “science” as in “science and technology,” we tend to conjure up images of machines and scientific innovation ranging from mobile phones and

desktop computers to satellites and spacecrafts. Any ordinary item we see and use in daily life, say, a wooden table, can be regarded as a product of technology and an embodiment of the concept of technology itself. We might be able to imagine, for example, when we touch the wooden surface of a table, how trees were cut down and woods collected before being taken to a factory in order to be processed, polished and assembled into furniture. The term “technology,” therefore, tends to summon up images of raw materials being processed and manufactured into utilities for our comfort. However, it is interesting to note that the word “technology,” which now seems to be inseparable from science, was, in fact, first used in the arts as its etymological root is composed of two Greek words: *téknē* (Onions 906), meaning “art” or “craft,” and the suffix *logiā* (Hoad 270), meaning “speech” or “discourse.” Why, one should ask, is technology so important? The most popular answer can be found in Kranzberg and Pursell’s essay “The Importance of Technology in Human Affairs,” in which they bring to attention humanity’s underlying urge to overcome nature for survival reasons:

We have come to think of technology as something mechanical, yet the fact remains that all technical processes and products are the result of the creative imagination and manipulative skills of human effort. The story of how man has utilized technology in mastering environment is part of the great drama of man fighting against the unknown. (10)

It can be inferred from the extract that human beings set up and utilise technology as a scheme or tool to fulfil their basic needs. Also, the term “technology” can be fluid and dynamic since it oscillates between the borders of science and arts, between the concrete and the abstract. “Technology,” assert Kranzberg and Pursell, “is much more than tools and artefacts, machines and processes. It deals with *human work*, with man’s attempts to satisfy his wants by human action on physical objects” (6). This tension between the urge to create mechanical systems and the creativity of the human mind gives the term “technology” an ambivalent tone as it sustains and, at the same time, questions the fixity of the dyad: tangible and intangible.

The term “technology” is used not only among scientists and historians but also among philosophers. Michel Foucault, in “Technologies of the Self,” a seminar given at the University of Vermont in October 1982, categorises these “technologies” into four different types: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self (146). Despite the seemingly

clear-cut differences between these four categories, Foucault nevertheless stresses that they are all intertwined, linked together through their shared mission to fashion and monitor an individual's judgement and conduct (147). Technology, therefore, can also refer to the ways in which people form their knowledge of themselves and of the world.

One of the clearest examples of Foucault's "technologies of the self" is the act of writing. The traditions of letter writing and keeping diaries are important technologies of the self. To elaborate, as we write on a piece of paper or in our diaries, we also "write ourselves" as writing reflects our attempt to sum up and contemplate our thoughts and actions: "A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of self was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent" (153).

Aside from the act of writing as a personal experience of selfhood, religious and educational institutions also constitute technologies of the self as they play prominent roles in moulding and regulating an individual's identity, viewpoint and behaviour. For instance, as Alan Sheridan points out:

With the nineteenth century, society increasingly developed mechanism for policing the individual's behaviour. The school was one of the most important sites for the play of power-knowledge; the sexuality of schoolchildren was of paramount interest to all those concerned with education, from the architects who designed the buildings to the teachers who taught in them. The distribution of the pupils in a classroom, the planning of recreation, the shape of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without curtains), the rules for bedtime and sleep periods – all this was directed at the child's sexuality. A whole learned literature proliferated around the schoolboy and his sex. (172)

Rigid schedules, syllabuses, and even dormitory architecture are all part of the technology which tends to sanction fixed ways of living and impose fixed ways of thinking which, in the case described above, seek to control an individual's sexual orientation.

Irvin C. Schick expands the usage of the term "technology" to signify not only the means and mechanisms by which an individual constructs their sense of self, but

also “the discursive tools with which knowledge of social realities and institutions is constructed” (8). The term “technology,” despite its singular form, is perceived in the plural sense in order to highlight the multiplicity of the tools and discourse of power which make up the concept of technology. This essay retains the term “technology” in singular form, along with its ambivalent and multifaceted implications. It will use the term “technology” as a starting point from which it sets out to conceptualise what is to be defined as “technology of place” in the following section.

### **What is Technology of Place?**

In order to combine both the concrete and abstract aspects of place and of the means and tools by which an individual understands place, this essay refers to Schick’s definition of the term “technology of place” in his book *The Erotic Margin*:

I suggest using the term *technology of place* to describe the discursive instruments and strategies by means of which space is constituted as place, that is, place is socially constructed and reconstructed. (9)

The term “technology of place” signifies the tools and methods which shape our understanding of place. Using Schick’s broad notion of the term as a foundation on which this essay articulates and develops its own specific concept of technology of place, three main significant points and definitions of the term will be stated as follows:

Firstly, this essay proposes that the term “technology of place” signals an amalgamation of one’s sensory perceptions, ideas, and imagination of a place. Place is not only a physical location. Concrete experience perceived through sensory reception is only one way in which we encounter place. We can also construe the images of a place we have never been to from fragments of information we pick up by, for example, reading or watching the television. These, of course, are only examples of the abstract notions of place which an individual is capable of constructing. Here, in blending the concrete and the abstract, the term “technology of place” both sustains and questions the fixity of binary oppositions tangible and intangible. Such ambivalence suggests the dynamicity and multiplicity of place. In a life-long attempt to make sense of our own existence, we have to take into account the many different factors which form our knowledge about the place we live in.

Secondly, “discourse” and “ideology” are often deemed separable from the term “technology,” as they refer to abstract manipulative forces behind the concrete

patterns and mechanism one sees. To return to Sheridan's example, the nineteenth-century schoolboy's sexual awareness and identity are configured and monitored by place which serves a web of discourses. Homophobia, patriotism, and the need to groom future disciplined officers to feed the demands of colonial administration are, to name but a few, parts of the discourses or ideologies behind the solid architecture and rigid schemes. They are embedded in school buildings, in the designation of teachers, and in set texts of certain subjects. They are behind the partitioning of concrete space as seen in the compartmentalisation of dormitory rooms, and of abstract time as seen in the allocation of breaks and time for activities. However, this essay proposes that the term "technology of place" potentially embraces or includes the abstract drives behind the solid or corporeal space, buildings, countries, or any tract of land sensorally perceived. When discourses of power or ideologies of the state are considered side by side with physical places, intriguing clashes between the intention behind the construction and designation of a particular place and its practical use can be uncovered. Public parks, for instance, are often built using government funding to function as spaces for family recreation and public welfare. The planting of trees, the positioning of flower pots and benches, the locations of bistros or snack bars, the layout of the park, to name but a few, are all carefully planned. The discourse behind such schemes can probably be traced to the need to sustain the family institution, to keep teenagers away from drugs, to promote exercise for the benefit of health, and so on and so forth. However, in practice, the original intention can be distorted or disrupted as some unwanted groups of people might usher themselves into public parks and make these child-friendly or family-friendly domains their own "homes" or territories. The homeless, for example, might disturb the equilibrium of family gatherings by occupying the spaces on the benches and making use of the colonnades of trees. When both abstract idea and concrete device are considered as parts of the technology of place, the clash within the term itself emerges to emphasise the dynamicity of place.

Thirdly, this essay proposes that the term "technology of place" should bring to attention its contrived nature and its sense of utility. Technology can be used as an instrument to assert one's identity or to sound one's voice. Returning to the example of parks as public spaces meant for family recreation, the homeless are able to turn the benches into their beds and the garden into their homes. Thus, the technology of place, which construes the images and ideas of what a park is supposed to be in our

minds, is used by the marginalised to mark their own spaces, and thus overturns the intention of the planners or builders. Such clashes, therefore, add up to the fluidity and dynamicity of place as a concept.

In the next section this essay turns to Virginia Woolf's work *Flush*, in order to illustrate the proposed argument by means of textual analysis.

## **Part Two: *Flush* and Technology of Place**

### **Technology of Place in Virginia Woolf's *Flush***

*Flush* (1933) is often regarded as a "light" text, a diversion from the much "heavier" *The Waves* or *The Years*. Though the text can be read as a spoof biography like *Orlando*, it is often dismissed as being less political in its comments on the traditions of biographical writing and linear narrative. Some critics view it as a playful scribble, a bestseller to boost sales. However, there is more to this "underdog" text than the deceptively simple plot and canine subject belies.

Written from the point of view of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, *Flush* can be regarded as an exploration of the world of the senses and as an investigation of how dogs as well as human beings perceive the world and come to understand their places in it. In terms of the analysis of place as a concept and in terms of technology of place, this particular work is most interesting as it can be read as an illustration of the very definition of the term "technology of place" propounded earlier in this essay. The juxtaposition and, at the same time, amalgamation of the abstract and concrete aspects of place, of personal ideas and sensory perceptions of place, and the clashes between discourse behind the construction of place, and the practical usage of place, all paradoxically blur the traditionally fixed boundaries between the binary oppositions by which we tend to construct our own understanding of place: the abstract/concrete, the mind/sensory faculties, spatial structure/spatial usage. These points will be explored in three separate units.

### **Place: The Abstract and the Concrete**

*Flush* is Miss Mitford's gift to her friend Miss Barrett. He has been brought from a cottage near Reading to a house on Wimpole Street, London. 50 Wimpole Street, where Miss Barrett's back bedroom is located, is one among the symmetrically built and laid out residences of that street. This sense of proportion and conformity

exuding from standardised architecture and urban planning are the trademarks of Wimpole Street:

Even now perhaps nobody rings the bell of a house in Wimpole Street without trepidation. It is the most august of London streets, the most impersonal. Indeed, when the world seems tumbling to ruin, and civilization rocks on its foundations, one has only to go to Wimpole Street; to pace that avenue; to survey those houses; to consider their uniformity; to marvel at the window curtains and their consistency; to admire the brass knockers and their regularity; to observe butchers tendering joints and cooks receiving them; to reckon the incomes of the inhabitants and infer their consequent submission to the laws of God and man— (13-14)

The concrete form and elements which constitute a place like Wimpole Street can be seen in the homogeneity of house style which proclaims the inhabitants' social and economic status, the brass knocker which awaits visitors on each door, and working-class people like cooks and butchers who labour to prepare meals for their employers. Such physical elements contribute to the forming of the abstract idea of Wimpole Street as metaphor for middle-class stability and symbol of English urban culture. It is here, in Wimpole Street, that the "laws of God and man," be they laws of social hierarchy or of religious institution, are most strictly adhered to. However, the seemingly solid and stable Wimpole Street is not so solid and stable as it looks. To unearth the technology of place is to see through the symmetry of houses with brass knockers, and to follow the cooks and butchers to their quarters. The point of view and the extremely sensitive perception of a dog can be deemed essential in this respect. It takes the eyes, the ears, the paws, the nose of a dog to challenge the received notion of fixed stereotypes of a place and to point out the possibility that Wimpole Street also needs its so-called opposite to distinguish itself from other places. This can be seen in the following extract. Here, in his first summer in London, a city often depicted as and believed to be "the heart of civilization" (Woolf 20), Flush accompanies Miss Barrett up and down Wimpole Street:

He smelt the swooning smells that lie in the gutters; the bitter smells that corrode iron railings; the fuming, heady smells that rise from basements—smells more complex, corrupt, violently contrasted and

compounded than any he had smelt in the fields near Reading; smells that lay far beyond the range of the human nose. (21)

Underneath the stability of buildings and elegant iron railings, underneath the abstract ideas of civilisation, empire and the glory of capital cities, Flush is able to detect corroding smells of decay. Waste decomposing in gutters is a metonymy for the putrefied living conditions of the slums and gutters of London. Slum areas, in particular, are spaces designated for the poor, the social misfits and marginalised. The idea of slums as dangerous territories, as a whole different world from the well-proportioned residences in cities, is part of the technology by which individuals come to understand their place and identity. Here, places like Wimpole Street can never function or maintain their equilibrium without the idea that somewhere there is a place completely different and alien, completely “other”:

But there were certain quarters, of course, which had long been given over to the poor and were left undisturbed. In Whitechapel, or in a triangular space of ground at the bottom of the Tottenham Court Road, poverty and vice and misery had bred and seethed and propagated their kind for centuries without interference. A dense mass of aged buildings in St Giles’s was ‘wellnigh a penal settlement, a pauper metropolis in itself’. Aptly enough, where the poor conglomerated thus, the settlement was called a Rookery. For there human beings swarmed on top of each other as rooks swarm and blacken tree-tops. Only the buildings here were not trees; they were hardly any longer buildings. They were cells of brick intersected by lanes which ran with filth. All day the lanes buzzed with half-dressed human beings; at night there poured back again into the stream the thieves, beggars and prostitutes who had been plying their trade all day in the West End. (53)

Whereas the people in Wimpole Street are able to hire cooks and butchers who work their best to satisfy their palates, the people in Whitechapel or St Giles’s steal food. They scurry away after having swooped down and snatched whatever they can, just like rooks. Whereas the architectural structure of Wimpole Street is consistent and well-balanced, the buildings of Whitechapel or St Giles’s are “hardly any longer buildings,” a complete chaos, a filthy rookery. Rooms in Wimpole Street are juxtaposed with “cells of brick” in Whitechapel or St Giles’s with its criminological connotations. The idea of a “penal settlement” and “pauper metropolis” infested with

“half-dressed human beings” might perhaps remind us of colonial settlements, penal colonies, and colonial metropolises which often label indigenous people as “half-dressed human beings.” It is interesting to note that, as London needs its slums to define what it means to be the capital of England, an empire also needs its colonies, its exotic “other,” to define what it means to be an empire, the seat of civilisation. Such is the working of the technology of place with its parallelism in both the level of metropolis and the level of countries and empire.

The proximity of ghettos to the well-groomed neighbourhood challenges the ingrained sense of difference and problematical boundary lines between the complacent urban culture and its corrupted “other”: “Splendid buildings raised themselves in Westminster, yet just behind them were ruined sheds in which human beings lived herded together above herds of cows” (52). Slums are demarcated as off-limits to aristocratic dogs and aristocratic women alike. The need to protect, to confine, to put chains on both dogs and women is intensified and, at the same time, mocked by the fact that those dangerous areas are located at such close proximity: “Behind Miss Barrett’s bedroom, for instance, was one of the worst slums in London. Mixed up with that respectability was this squalor” (53). The tension between the abstract notions of “respectability” and “squalor,” therefore, are interrogated by the concrete spatiality.

When Flush is kidnapped by “dog-fanciers,” or dog-stealers, of Whitechapel while accompanying Miss Barrett in her shopping expedition, he is suddenly taken away from the colourful shops of Wimpole Street to a dark and claustrophobic dungeon where he is confined. Such displacement significantly overturns his understanding of place and, therefore, marks the ambivalence of the technology of place:

Flush woke from a trance that had veiled his eyes and once more realized the truth. This was now the truth—this room, these ruffians, these whining, snapping, tightly tethered dogs, this murk, this dampness. Could it be true that he had been in a shop, with ladies, among ribbons, only yesterday? Was there such a place as Wimpole Street? Was there a room where fresh water sparkled in a purple jar; had he lain on cushions; had he been given a chicken’s wing nicely roasted; and had he been torn with rage and jealousy and bitten a man

with yellow gloves? The whole of that life and its emotions floated away, dissolved, became unreal. (57)

The physical existence of Wimpole Street and Miss Barrett's bedroom is immediately put into question. The memories of those places slowly evaporate into thin air as Flush experiences, with all of his senses, the suffocating dampness, the horrible voices, the ultimate terror of his prison. Here, Flush's technology of place, which combines both abstract and concrete aspects of place, finally deconstructs itself. The world of the senses shapes and reshapes the world of reality. The concrete experiences of place inform the making of our own concept of place. Such disillusionment of place as a result of being dislocated leads to the next topic on the tension between discourse and disillusionment.

### **Place: Discourse and Disillusionment**

As explored earlier, the agenda behind the construction of place, behind the pattern and architectural structure of a building, produces and propagates the discourse of power in a particular historical time and context. Place is often defined by rules and regulations which are issued to sustain conventional values of a dominating group of people. Public parks, as mentioned earlier, are controlled spaces, artificial forests for show. Parks promote the urban culture with the culture of the promenade. Parks provide socialising spaces where women can walk about with parasols and chat among themselves, where men can sit on the bench and read or discuss politics. Flush, familiar only with the natural forests in Three Mile Cross, gets taken aback by the man-made laws and etiquette of Regent's Park:

At last, with every nerve throbbing and every sense singing, he reached Regent's Park. And then when he saw once more, after years of absence it seemed, grass, flowers and trees, the old hunting cry of the fields hallooed in his ears and he dashed forward to run as he had run in the fields at home. But now a heavy weight jerked at his throat; he was thrown back on his haunches. Were there not trees and grass? He asked. Were these not the signals of freedom? (22)

The juxtaposition of "here" and "there," the problematic park and the natural fields and forests he used to roam in, can be seen in Flush's musings: "Here, he observed, the flowers were massed far more thickly than at home; they stood, plant by plant, rigidly in narrow plots. The plots were intersected by hard black paths" (22). Such

contrast is further intensified by the decree that “dogs must be led on chains” when they are in public parks:

[H]e had arrived at a conclusion. Where there are flower-beds there are asphalt paths; where there are flower-beds and asphalt paths and men in shiny top-hats, dogs must be led on chains. Without being able to decipher a word of the placard at the Gate, he had learnt his lesson—in Regent’s Park dogs must be led on chains. (22)

Gradually, Flush begins to formulate his new understanding of place. Experience has taught him that whenever he sees the physical elements which make up a public park, be they “flower-beds,” “asphalt paths,” “men in shiny top-hats,” he must automatically conform to the rules and gladly accept the chain on his neck. Technology of place here modifies Flush’s mindset and, at the same time, is itself modified by Flush’s own experience. Discourse, which is part of the technology of place, successfully manipulates Flush’s thoughts and actions.

However, the validity and universality of discourse can be questioned when places with different sets of rules, or indeed, without any rules and regulations at all, are experienced. This can be seen when Flush accompanies his mistress and Mr Browning in their elopement to Italy. In Florence, where there are no “flower-beds,” no “asphalt paths,” and no “men in shiny top-hats,” Flush soon realises that the rules are played differently here. This new experience leads to his disillusionment of the stern prohibitions of Regent’s Park:

Flush suddenly bethought him of Regent’s Park and its proclamation: Dogs must be led on chains. Where was ‘must’ now? Where were chains now? Where were park-keepers and truncheons?... He ran, he raced; his coat flashed; his eyes blazed. He was the friend of all the world now. All dogs were his brothers. He had no need of a chain in this new world; he had no need of protection. (77)

Flush learns that the imperative “must” is a context-bound word. Its demanding existence is not at all universal but constructed. The chains do not naturally belong on his neck as he had understood them to.

Disillusionment is a process of the mind. In terms of a more concrete level, transformation of technology of place can be seen in its practical usage. The last section, therefore, will explain how appropriation of place can physically challenge the discourse of power behind a spatial construct.

## **Place: Discourse and Appropriation**

The strict allocation of spaces or rooms in the Barretts' house mirrors the strict designation of social status according to the social hierarchy:

The Barretts never left London. Mr Barrett, the seven brothers, the two sisters, the butler, Wilson and the maids, Catiline, Folly, Miss Barrett and Flush all went on living at 50 Wimpole Street, eating in the dining-room, sleeping in the bedrooms, smoking in the study, cooking in the kitchen, carrying hot-water cans and emptying the slops from January to December. The chair-covers became slightly soiled; the carpets slightly worn; coal dust, mud, soot, fog, vapours of cigar smoke and wine and meat accumulated in crevices, in cracks, in fabrics, on the tops of picture-frames, in the scrolls of carvings. (34)

The extract starts with the family's patriarch, Mr Barrett, then goes on to mention the brothers, then those on the lower levels of the hierarchy: the women of the family, maids, Miss Barrett the invalid, and pet dogs, respectively. The constant rhythm of routine life upheld by the people in this household manifests itself in their being extremely faithful to the discourse behind the production of each room: the dining-room is for all except dogs and maids to dine in, the study is for men to smoke and discuss politics in, the passages in the hallway are for maids to tread in and out carrying water pails and chamber pots. Everything seems to be in order. The technology of place of this Victorian house seems to be working perfectly. However, as Flush has sensed, dirt accumulates from such rigid conventions of room use. Such physical decadence signals and foreshadows the social decadence seen in the depiction of the ghetto:

[H]ere was an old mansion formerly belonging to some great nobleman. Relics of marble mantel pieces remained. The rooms were paneled and the banisters were carved, and yet the floors were rotten, the walls dripped with filth; hordes of half-naked men and women had taken up their lodging in the old banqueting-halls. (52)

The dilapidated mansion which once belonged to an aristocrat has been appropriated by the poor. Banqueting-halls in which once might have hosted grand dinners and balls are now spaces where a massive number of slum dwellers lay their heads, build their homes, and demarcate their own territories. Such physical transformation of place demolishes not only the stability of house structures, those like 50 Wimpole

Street, but also disrupts the discourse behind stringent room allocations and routine of life. True, the relics of old furniture, architectural decorations and carved staircases still bear witness to the discourse and glory of the house's aristocratic past. However, the rot, the filth, and the decay permeate the air and gnaw away both the abstract concept of place and the concrete bits and pieces of things which make up the house.

## **Conclusion**

Technology of place amalgamates both the abstract ideas and the concrete elements which construct place and, at the same time, reveals the clashes between the discourse and the practical usage of place. It is through the tensions between these binary oppositions that we are able to question the authority and universality of one discourse and one technology of place above the others. The imposition of one way of thinking, one way of looking at and understanding place, imprisons the mind. In *Flush*, the victims of such confinement are those who are often excluded from certain places and are often conditioned to embrace their predicament without question. Mistresses of the house, servants, and dogs are allocated in certain spaces: back bedroom, kitchen and hallway. They are excluded from the masculine domain of the study. Maids dine in the servant's quarter, not the dining room where they work and serve food. Women are forbidden to roam the streets without coaches, bath-chairs and escorts. Dogs belonging to these women are forbidden to roam the streets and public parks without chains.

It is through the eyes of the "underdog," though the point of view of the lowest marginalised being in Victorian social hierarchy, animals and women, that we might perhaps come to "read" through the surface of place and interrogate its embedded discourse of power.

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