Plain Beasts: The Social Dimension and Animalistic Presence of Dogs in Fontane’s *Frau Jenny Treibel* and *Effi Briest*

Des bêtes à part entière : la dimension sociale des chiens dans *Frau Jenny Treibel* et *Effi Briest* de Theodor Fontane

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Fontane’s Realism in View of Posthumanist Theories

Frau Jenny Treibel, Theodor Fontane’s 1892 novel, which takes as its main focus the lifestyles and social dispositions as well as the discrepancies and dissimulations of the contemporary Berliner middle-class, incorporates in its opening scene among other representative objects of the time, a small dog:

An einem der letzten Maitage, das Wetter war schon sommerlich, bog ein zurückgeschlagener Landauer vom Spittelmarkt her in die Kur- und dann in die Adlerstrasse ein und hielt gleich danach vor einem, trotz seiner Front von nur fünf Fenstern, ziemlich ansehnlichen, im übrigen aber altmodischen Hause, dem ein neuer, gelbbrauner Ölfarbenanstrich wohl etwas mehr Sauberkeit, aber keine Spur von gesteigerter Schönheit gegeben hatte, beinahe das Gegenteil. Im Fond des Wagens saßen zwei Damen mit einem Bologneserhündchen, das sich der hell- und warmscheinenden Sonne zu freuen schien.¹

Undoubtedly, it is of considerable significance that Fontane chooses to present a dog in the opening paragraph of his novel, even before he acquaints his readers with any of the human protagonists in the elaborate plot. Nevertheless, it seems that the “pooch” (Hündchen) put onto center stage here is only one of several static artifacts that the author employs to visually characterize the bourgeoisie world, whose boundaries frame his narrative. The imagery of the animal is coupled with specific urban weather conditions, geography and buildings’ architecture, with emphasis on colors and aesthetic. One might argue that the individual figure of the dog itself is not really of importance within this fictional world it populates; however, it rather serves as a prosaic instrument for typification of a certain human society. Significantly, while the reader only learns of the dog’s race in the beginning, its name (Czicka) is

not uncovered until more than one hundred pages later.\textsuperscript{2} This point mainly stresses the significance of the animal’s typicality. However, the last sentence of the paragraph, which considers the Bolognese’s delight towards the warm weather, partially takes another stance in alluding to the dog’s perspective and its own mental state. Doubtlessly humorous and contributing once again to the figuration of the human owners, the sense of such a comment should not be underestimated. As I will attempt to show in what follows and by focusing on two of the author’s main works, \textit{Frau Jenny Treibel} and \textit{Effi Briest}, it is precisely this modest if mundane regard that grants dog figures in Fontane’s fictional world with their original, by-no-means negligible meaning.

On the face of it, it is difficult and perhaps even somewhat coercive, to ascribe such a substantial role to the dogs in Fontane’s texts. Although these creatures are a recurring motive in almost all of his narratives,\textsuperscript{3} they do neither occupy the center stage nor do they have obvious protagonistic roles. Moreover, as one of the major representatives of 19th century German realism, Fontane was primarily interested in his literature’s social dimensions. His main concern was a sharp representation of the multifaceted reality of the contemporary society,\textsuperscript{4} an attitude that ostensibly focused on ‘the human’ and was less inclined to include animals in its compass. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that Fontane’s dog figures do possess a meaningful status in his work, and that on a broader level these figures may reveal to us something very substantial about animal symbolism. I will demonstrate this point by looking at the dog figures, and more specifically at the kind of animalistic dimension present in it, in light of recent theories that may be subsumed under the heading “posthumanism”. My objective will neither be to redefine Fontane as a posthumanist author nor to assert that the dog figures in his work exhibit agency to such an extent that we cannot fully comprehend his work without attending to the dogs’ case. Rather, I will demonstrate that through the lens of posthumanism, we can reach a better understanding of the meaning of these very specific animal motives in the texts. By studying the aspects that dogs represent in his novels, we may then also be able to take the opposite direction and ask how reading Fontane may contribute to the enrichment of our perceptions regarding animal symbolism in general.

Posthumanist theories have recently gained significance in the field of literary studies and works of fiction, thus asserting the central role of non-human beings within human society and culture. Fundamentally, posthumanism maintains that

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one cannot grasp the human in isolation and autonomously since every human phenomenon and domain is essentially embedded with creatures or things non-human. As Cary Wolfe suggests, one of posthumanism’s main ventures is the recontextualization of the human condition. Therefore, posthumanism does not place being human onto a disembodied status, categorically separated from everything devoid of reason, consciousness, intellect and so forth, but rather onto a status in which its “constitutive dependency” and exterior entities is deliberately manifest. Instead of blurring transhuman circumstances and highlighting the essential individuality and indisputable superiority of the human race through an ultra-modern stance, posthumanism brings all of those interactions, relations and communications with “foreign” elements that co-constitute us into focus. As Wolfe further argues, this kind of posthumanist perspective does not aim at the deconstruction of the category of the Homo sapiens, but rather at its radical redefinition in a way that will account much more strongly for its “polycontextual” situation and the bonds to non-human beings which we cannot honestly deny.\footnote{\textit{Cary Wolfe: What is Posthumanism?} Minneapolis 2010, p. ix-xxxiv, 115-126; see also: Bruno Latour: \textit{Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies.} Cambridge Mass. 1999, p. 174-215; Greg Garrard: \textit{Ecocriticism.} New York 2004, p. 166-168.}

Within the scholarly field of Human-Animal-Studies, it is probably Donna Haraway who is the most influential advocate of a posthumanist stance. Writing mainly about pet dogs, Haraway maintains that in relation to “companion species,” keepers and animals influence each other reciprocally, such that both develop mutually and in direct response to each other. Through this relationship, both the kept pet and the human keeper are being impacted by each other’s ‘counterpart’; it would be misguided to speak about active and powerful humans acting upon passive and subordinate brutes exclusively. For Haraway “species companionship” in the frame of pet-keeping is most of all about co-shaping and attentiveness to the “invitations” of contact and response one receives from the other part of the ‘collective.’ In effect, both sides are getting remodeled and constituted anew when facing each other directly and sincerely. The animal (co)shapes the human, it is ‘invading’ the ‘protected sphere’ of the modern individual and manages to some extent, but not one-sidedly, to transform it.\footnote{\textit{Donna J. Haraway: When Species Meet.} Minneapolis 2008, p. 3-45, 205-246. For a highly informative theory of the historical aspects of such a co-evolution between human and non-human organisms, see: Edmund Russel: \textit{Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth.} Cambridge 2011.} In the midst of such a picture the stale modern narratives concerning the radical separation between nature and culture and the total and inevitable domination...
of the latter over the former is getting relativised and re-opened so that new possibilities may emerge:

Dogs are about the inescapable, contradictory story of relationships—co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all. Historical specificity and contingent mutability rule all the way down, into nature and culture, into naturecultures. There is no foundation.\textsuperscript{7}

One can obviously approach the study of literary texts by drawing insights about the necessity to handle animal appearances in works of literature not as mere symbols or elements of the human sphere, which allows humanity alone to remain as the focus of our view. As John Simons puts it, normally, in literary representations “the human experience bulks too large and is so important to us that it tends to blot out all other concerns whenever we encounter them”.\textsuperscript{8} Against such a human centeredness it may be fruitful to consider the presence of animals in such works in their own right, represented not merely as images of something outside of them, which all in all, does not truly consider the animal itself. An approach that aims at working against the human totality in literary narratives should treat the animal figures surrounding them as equal protagonists to some extent, thus elaborating upon their roles, characters, whereabouts, actions and dispositions, perceptions and maybe even interests or ‘strategies’ as a theme in itself. Inasmuch as the animals in this framework cease to function as estranged, uninteresting figures, so too shall we have a precise basis for their own existence and peculiarity.\textsuperscript{9}

Yet, this kind of literary practice is especially troublesome when dealing with pets. As a distinctively modern phenomenon that is firmly linked to modern developments such as industrialization and urbanization,\textsuperscript{10} pets, in

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one way or another have always been suspected of being too tightly subsumed under the human umbrella and therefore less ‘animal.’ Calling forth a recent example, when Timothy Clark deplores the alienated manner in which animals are usually represented and treated in contemporary culture, he reserves pet-keeping a place in his list of ‘not real animals’:

In sum, the non-human, whether sentimentalized as Bambi, bred and slaughtered for a civic or religious feast, sterilized and cosseted as a pet, watched on television or revered in its ‘rarity’ on some eco-tourist holiday, is caught up claustrophobically in various kinds of human practice and self-image, and yet for all that still extraordinarily remote.¹¹

In this light, the pet appears not to be a concrete creature whose presence is genuine, but rather an abstracted image that people created for their own amusement and out of their own essentially limited culture. With these words, Clark writes in the tradition of John Berger, who in his famous canonical essay “Why Look at Animals” lamented the crucial disintegration of the bonds between people and animals characteristic of capitalistic western societies. Concerning the hobby of pet-keeping, Berger uses very incisive words: “It is part of that universal but personal withdrawal into the private small family unit, decorated or furnished with mementoes from the outside world, which is such a distinguishing feature of consumer societies”.¹² Here pets are degraded to the status of images, ornaments and artifacts (Berger refers to pets also as puppets), creatures that have nothing authentic about them, perhaps not even real themselves. They have an artificial and deformed nature, totally trapped within the borders of the modern human culture, which itself is false.

In seeking out the active animalistic impact on human society, Haraway focuses primarily on dogs, and with that her approach is among other things a direct backlash against those more ‘common-sense’ argumentations about the lack of authenticity and animalness displayed by pets. In her account, which is largely based on concrete interactions between owners and their dogs, Haraway enables us to see pets beyond their status as mere objects, utterly engulfed by modern culture with all its well-known characteristics or even clichés. For Haraway companion animals do not just symbolize some modern human condition but are themselves real living beings occupying in their non-human distinctness concrete spaces where we move about. As she maintains,

¹¹ Timothy Clark (footnote 8), p. 185.
[...] it is essential for a human being to understand that one’s partner is an adult (or puppy) member of another species, with his or her own exacting species interests and individual quirks, and not a furry child, a character in Call of the Wild, or an extension of one’s intentions or fantasies.\footnote{13}

However, it is important to emphasize that for Haraway this concreteness of the companion animal is by no means to be found in the sphere of those animals’ isolated existence, but rather in the relation to humans, in the sociability between people and pets.

Returning to Fontane after this long revue about the chances and risks of applying contemporary posthumanist theories to literary representations of pets, I would like to argue that although his works are heavily socially-based, they feature the presence of dogs in the midst of human communities as a considerable theme. On the one hand, those animal representations receive their power and meaningfulness precisely due to the face-to-face and palpable relations they are part of; on the other hand, their adaptation to the sturdier social workings around them does not constitute a mute point. I would maintain that thanks to this kind of synthesis, Fontane’s dog characters serve to exemplify one of posthumanism’s main concerns: the genuine integration of non-human animals into contemplation of the consistency of the human realm.

The Status of the Pet: Dogs as Social Markers in a Fictional Human Microcosm

As the example with the Bolognose makes clear, one main social function of dogs in Fontane’s world is to display group distinctions.\footnote{14} The demonstration of class affiliation is indeed a key issue in \textit{Frau Jenny Treibel}, that to some extent arranges its overall concept.\footnote{15} The make-up of the main character, a middle-aged woman who owing to her marriage climbed up the social ladder from her petite bourgeoisie origins to a Berliner industrialist family, is portrayed with


\footnote{15 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 192-193.}
vast emphasis on her outward appearance and the impression it awakens among her social counterparts, here in the context of a domestic feast:

Frau Jenny präsentierte sich in vollem Glanz und ihre Herkunft aus dem kleinen Laden in der Adlerstraße war in ihrer Erscheinung bis auf den letzten Rest getilgt. Alles wirkte reich und elegant.\(^{16}\)

The narrator leaves no room for doubt, that her domicile was auf "Repräsentation gestellten Hause".\(^{17}\) In another place she is being characterized as the "ganz ausschließlich auf Äußerlichkeiten gestellte Jenny".\(^{18}\) In this respect it is noteworthy to distinguish those external social markers which function no less as material objects, such as buildings, vehicles and clothes. At times those are deployed in a completely explicit manner, in sentences like: "Draußen hielt eine Droschke zweiter Klasse".\(^{19}\)

In the most extreme case, the human body itself clearly displays a materiality which possibly becomes the central issue at stake: Helene, Jenny’s daughter-in-law and to a large extent her analogue character, demonstrates this in the way she attempts to shape the appearance of her small child Lizzi. In her efforts in this endeavor, she attaches great importance to the proper constitution of the girl’s very body parts:

So war Lizzi, die übrigens zu weiterer Genugtuung der Mutter einen Herzmund hatte. Freilich, die zwei blanken Vorderzähne waren immer noch nicht sichtbar genug, um Helenen eine recht volle Herzensfreude gewähren zu können, und so wandten sich ihre mütterlichen Sorgen auch in diesem Augenblicke wieder der ihr so wichtigen Zahnfrage zu, weil sie davon ausging, daß es hier dem von der Natur so glücklich gegebenen Material bis dahin nur an der echten erzieherischen Aufmerksamkeit gefehlt habe.\(^{20}\)

Fontane, hence, is extremely sensitive to the mediation of social status through the material, which is exhibited outwardly. Further, the material objects that fall under this formula are not readily visible outside the individual himself; they rather form an integral part of his personal configuration. As Fontane himself noted: "der Mensch ist ungemein abhängig von dem Kleid, das er trägt".\(^{21}\) In this context, the role of the pet animal in the plot is seemingly self-evident. Indeed, as illustrated through the reference to the dog in the opening scene of the novel, the pet is another individual artifact, instrumentalized to display gentility. We find many examples of this throughout the narrative: Frau von

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\(^{16}\) Theodor Fontane (footnote 1), p. 30.
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 160.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 156.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 93.
Ziegenhals, a noble guest at the Treibel’s villa, calls Mr. Treibel’s attention to his domestic environment, after the latter expressed his discontent about his current living conditions:

Lassen Sie doch die Dinge gehen. Sie [...] haben eine Villa wie diese, darin wir eben ein Ragout fin einnehmen, das seinesgleichen sucht, und haben draußen im Garten einen Springbrunnen und einen Kakadu, um den ich Sie beneiden könnte, denn meiner, ein grüner, verliert gerade die Federn und sieht aus wie die schlechte Zeit.22

The home pet-cockatoo is positioned here in the same lineup with inanimate objects, forming part of the house’s decoration. The motivation for such pet-keeping is not expressed through the longings for cordial companionship but rather through an interest in aesthetic pleasures and producing impressions of exclusiveness. The material constitution of the animal per se, its colors, external body parts, along with its external visuals, are the only relevant facets. If we try to position this view into the historical context in which Fontane’s writings is placed, we might contend that in his stark realism he represented one central aspect of the phenomenon of the contemporary pet-keeping. Returning to the portrayal of the dog, as Jutta Buchner demonstrates, the owning of pure-bred dogs that were subsumed under well-differentiated race categories, had much to do with display and appearance, which in turn served the constitution and maintenance of class structures in Wilhelmine Germany. Dogs of this type counted as luxury “commodities,” which people from the upper echelons of society alone could afford to obtain. This meant that their race along with the particular anatomic properties tied to it became clear signals of class affiliation in the public sphere and the realm of everyday life (for instance as an element of the promenade culture). The thoroughbred dogs were to be seen by others, by ‘opponents’ in the social field, thus perpetuating certain mechanisms of segregation and class-related constellations by means of their visuality.23

22 Theodor Fontane (footnote 1), p. 35.
23 Jutta Buchner: “‘Im Wagen saßen zwei Damen mit einem Bologneserhündchen’: Zur städtischen Hundehaltung in der wilhelminischen Klassengesellschaft um 1900”. In: Siegfried Becker/Andreas C. Bimmer (eds.): Mensch und Tier: Kulturwissenschaftliche Aspekte einer Sozialbeziehung. Marburg 1991, p. 119-138, here p. 120-124, p. 129, p. 134-136; it is no coincidence in this respect that Fontane, who apparently commanded sound cynological knowledge, chose the Bolognese race in order to represent the economical bourgeoisie and its display ambitions: Jean Bungartz, one of the leading figures in the dog-breeding scene in Germany at the turn of the century, refers to the Bolognese, as “beautiful ornament for the boudoirs of genteel ladies”. Bungartz further notes, in view of the particular importance of this dog’s physical appearance, that its fur “entails a very attentive maintenance and
From a posthumanist point of view, this reflection enables us to see the strong connection Fontane creates between pets and a specific human social and cultural constellation that is well bounded in time and place. In this case, the concreteness of pets in humans’ lives is quite manifest, insofar as the pets concerned are not only located in society’s midst, but their presence there is completely tangible and has much to do with substantial issues that lie at the base of social systems. Furthermore, this opens a way to substantiate historical explanations of modern pet-keeping as a leisure activity: the historical arguments presented thus far tend to refrain from locating modern pet-keeping in concrete social contexts, preferring mostly to raise arguments about abstract psychological and sentimental reasons as underlying the phenomenon instead. In contrast to this line of argument, Fontane, in stressing the material and visual presence of pets in modern society, endows the phenomenon with a greater sense of tactile quality.

On the face of it, however, we have here a paradigmatic example of the aforementioned representational human engulfment of all things non-human. A posthumanist may criticize that Fontane is actually providing pets with a mere object-status and hence, as an author, does not afford them any essential

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weight in his work. Even so, we are obliged to take into account another
major point that is revealed in *Frau Jenny Treibel*, namely the blurring of
the boundaries between the internal and the external, and consequently of the limit
between subject and object. In one of the key scenes of the novel Jenny visits
the house of the teacher Schmidt, a member of the lower educated bourgeoisie
(*Bildungsbürgertum*) in order to reproach Schmidt’s daughter Corrina for
manipulating her son Leopold for agreeing to engage her. If realized, such an
engagement would mean social degradation for the Treibels. After listening to
Jenny’s exhaustive imputations against her immoral, crafty behavior, Corrina
replies in an unexpected manner, as she confirms more or less the assumption
of manipulation on her side, albeit refuses to perceive it as a misconduct. She
tries to explain her position to Jenny by way of an analogy:

> Ich bin keine Schönheit, habe nur eben das Durchschnittsmaß. Aber
> nehmen Sie [...] für einen Augenblick einmal an, ich wäre wirklich so
> was wie eine Schönheit, eine Beauté, der Ihr Sohn nicht hätte widerstehen
> können, würden Sie von mir verlangt haben, mich das Gesicht mit
> Ätzlauge zu zerstören, bloß damit Ihr Sohn, mein Verlobter, nicht eine
durch mich gestellte Schönheitsfalle fiele? [...] Ich habe meinen guten
> Verstand und bin offen und frei und übe damit eine gewisse Wirkung
> auf die Männer aus [...] soll ich mich dessen entkleiden? [...] soll ich das
> bißchen Licht, das mir geworden, unter der Scheffel stellen? Verlangen
> Sie, daß ich bei Begegnungen mit Ihrem Sohne wie eine Nonne dasitze?

What Corrina is actually claiming here, is that there is no real difference
between objective outward guise and mental capabilities such as the talent
she has to psychologically exert influence over men. What the person as a
willful subject strategically designs is not primarily different from the kind of
advantages that her ‘natural’ and ‘objective’ physical appearance provides her
with in the arena of social contentions and struggles. One might ultimately
conclude then, that everything and everyone is a facade, which is to say that
even the most sharp-witted persons have the status of an object. In the modern
bourgeois display system, outwardness and materiality are not negligible
elements but actually the most fundamental and ‘active’ (subject-like) ones.
In this respect, the Bolognese Czicka, clearly a facetious “signal of [...]”
haughtiness” on the side of the industrial bourgeoisie, as the dog is most often
perceived by the Fontane critic, is not really a minor character in the novel but
possessing within its fabric an immanent value. Contrary to him, Rollo, the
main dog figure in *Effi Briest*, the second of Fontane’s work to be referred to
here, comes much closer to the status of a protagonist-subject. Nevertheless,

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Rollo’s presence, too, appears rather on the periphery of the narrative. Similar to Czicka though, it is precisely his minority and ‘objectivity’ as an animal that bestows his figure with rich meaningfulness and affords him a central place within the ‘human universe’ of Effi Briest.

**Pets In-The-World of the Novel: A Newfoundlander’s Matter-Of-Fact Role**

In Effi Briest, ‘the social’ looms thoroughly over the whole text as well. In one of the most cited scenes of the novel, Geert von Innstetten, Effi’s husband, just after finding out that his wife had been having an affair with the officer Crampas, attempts to explain to his friend von Wüllersdorf why he cannot possibly refrain from conducting a duel with the person who injured his honor and from sending his wife away. Although the affair had been taking place six years prior to its current revelation, when the couple was still living in the Eastern Pomeranian province, and even though Innstetten admits that personally he is not at all possessed by feelings of vengeance, he proclaims he cannot by any means escape the obligation he has in this regard in the eyes of society. The omnipotent social gaze, to which he is exposed as a person who belongs to a collective, is what forces him to act in a certain way that is consistent with the rules that dominate the interactions between the members of such a group. In fact, the individual himself, with his own emotions or personal morals, has only minor influence on his fortunes or even his concrete decisions; everything is controlled by the ‘others’, the ones with whom he is inextricably interwoven:

> im Zusammenleben mit den Menschen hat sich ein etwas ausgebildet, das nun mal da ist und nach dessen Paragraphen wir uns gewöhnt haben, alles zu beurteilen, die andern und uns selbst. Und dagegen zu verstoßen geht nicht; die Gesellschaft verachtet uns, und zuletzt tun wir es selbst und können es nicht aushalten […] Also noch einmal, nichts von Haß oder dergleichen, und um eines Glückes Willen, das mir genommen wurde, mag ich nicht Blut an den Händen haben; aber jenes, wenn Sie wollen, uns tyrannisierende Gesellschafts-Etwas, das fragt nicht nach Scharm und nicht nach Liebe […] Ich habe keine Wahl. Ich muß.27

Wüllersdorf agrees:

> Die Welt ist einmal, wie sie ist, und die Dinge verlaufen nicht, wie wir wollen, sondern wie die andern wollen. Das mit dem ‘Gottesgericht, wie manche hochtrabend versichern, ist freilich ein Unsinn, nichts davon, umgekehrt, unser Ehrenkultus ist Götzendienst, aber wir müssen uns ihm unterwerfen, solange der Götte gilt.28

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In the midst of this gloomy image of an omnipotent society that can determine every single aspect of the individual’s life, one might wonder how animals could be integrated in a way that substantially endows them with their ‘shared due’ into the novel’s fabric. Or rather, in what manner can they be positioned alongside the unassailable impasse of the “social paragraphs”?

On the face of it, Rollo, the Newfoundlander dog in Effi Briest, assumes a quite conventional and dull role in the plot. Rollo is first and foremost Effi’s dog, which was given to her by her husband after they married. Therefore, the dog’s ‘mission’ is to be a kind of personal safeguard, lying on the mat in front of his mistress’s bedroom during Innstetten’s frequent absences as a Prussian district administrator with numerous duties. In the dog’s first appearance in the novel, Innstetten introduces him to Effi at the foot of their bucolic home and tells her that, “solange du den um dich hast’ so lange bist du sicher und kann nichts an dich heran”.

Positioned in the storyline in such a manner, Rollo seems to be playing from now on an absolutely conventional role, that of the guarding and faithful dog by the side of his human owner. During a murky night alone at her bed, Effi obtains some sense of security thanks to Rollo’s presence at the threshold of her door:

Nebenan hörte sie das Ticktack der Uhr und draußen Rollo, der, seit es dunkel war, seinen Platz in der Remise aufgegeben und sich, wie jeden Abend, so auch heute wieder, auf die große geflochtene Matte, die vor dem Schlafzimmer lag, ausgestreckt hatte. Das Bewußtsein seiner Nähe minderte das Gefühl ihrer Verlassenheit, ja, sie kam fast in Stimmung.

Yet in another instance:

Effi nahm die Lampe und ging in ihr Schlafzimmer hinüber. Richtig, auf der Binsenmatte lag Rollo. Als er Effi kommen sah, erhob er sich, um den Platz freizugeben, und strich mit seinem Behang an ihrer Hand hin. Dann legte er sich wieder nieder.

These depictions and many others of this kind throughout the book might make one suspect that Rollo is not much more than a banal middle-class cliché of the selfless devoted dog (at one point Rollo is referred to by Effi as “das gute, treue Tier”). If this interpretation is appropriate, it would not be unreasonable to maintain that Fontane created here a rather lame literary symbol that has a lot to do with the aforementioned problematic of animal representations completely encircled by human considerations.

29 Ibid., p. 48.
30 Ibid., p. 71.
31 Ibid., p. 73.
32 Ibid., p. 77.
Furthermore, the role of Rollo may be construed here as corresponding to one more 'humanistic' cliché, namely that of the pet as a sentimental substitute for unsatisfying or lacking relations between humans. At times this supposition is brought by the narrator explicitly to the fore, as a case in point in the following scene shows:

Rollo kam dann wohl und legte sich vor sie [Effi] hin auf den Kaminteppich, als ob er sagen wollte: 'Muß nur mal wieder nach dich sehen; ein anderer tuts doch nicht.' Und dann beugte sie sich nieder und sagte leise: 'Ja, Rollo, wir sind allein."

During her first visit to her parents’ home after leaving to be Innstetten’s wife, Effi reveals to her father some of the issues that burden her about her husband. During the conversation she turns to mention Rollo and the support she receives from him. The father replies: “Immer Rollo […]. Wenn mans nicht anders wüßte, so sollte man beinah glauben, Rollo sei dir mehr ans Herz gewachsen als Mann und Kind”. After Effi argues that this would be a dreadful idea, the father goes on to launch a monologue in which he calls into question the hierarchic opposition between humans and animals:

Ja, das sagt man immer, aber ich habe da doch so meine Zweifel. Das mit der Kreatur, damit hats doch seine eigene Bewandtnis, und was da das Richtige ist, darüber sind die Akten noch nicht geschlossen. Glaube mir, Effi, das ist auch ein weites Feld.

Yet, old Briest substantiates the critical distinctions between the human and the non-human with the precise human cliché we broached earlier: that of the selfless dog. He states that a dog like Rollo would run unflinchingly on brittle ice in order to pull back to shore a person in trouble, and if the person were already dead, he would have laid himself next to him and remained there until he himself had perished:

Und das tut solch Tier immer. Und nimm dagegen die Menschheit! Gott, vergib mir die Sünde, aber mitunter ist mirs doch, als ob die Kreatur besser wäre als der Mensch.

Hence, in order to raise the animal into the status of the human, Briest seems to erase the animal and enfold him with human visions. This type of crude anthropomorphism does not leave much space for the concrete dog and in doing so seems to stand as a good example for Wolfe’s assertion that

Just because we direct our attention to the study of nonhuman animals, and even if we do so with the aim of exposing how they

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33 Ibid., p. 105.
34 Ibid., p. 122.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
have been misunderstood and exploited, that does not mean that we are not continuing to be humanist—and therefore, by definition, anthropocentric.37

Nonetheless, one can also find indications in the novel that the deconstruction of such anthropomorphic stereotypes as the faithful dog actually points to other symbolisms the character of the dog may feature. One of Rollo’s analogous figures is Roswitha, the nursemaid of Effi’s daughter, Annie. Effi employs her after finding her sitting alone and helpless in the cemetery in front of the grave of her former mistress. Out of thankfulness for Effi’s kindness in her time of need, Roswitha, one of the most ingenuous characters in Effi Briest, serves her and her family with unconditional devotion and proves her loyalty to her even after Effi’s banishment by her husband and her parents. Interestingly, Rollo, whose character traits are evidently similar to the ones of Roswitha, is playing a role at the said first meeting at the cemetery as well. After the poor woman shared with Effi her forlorn situation due to her losing her source of livelihood, Rollo approaches her and places his head on her knee. This gesture has an immediate effect on the lonesome woman, who is being filled afresh with cheerfulness and the will to live. It is precisely in this moment that Roswitha continues telling Effi about the way she was mistreated by her now deceased mistress. The tone is set for the good-natured animal as an antipode to the shrewish human being. Nevertheless, exactly at this point Roswitha’s words destabilize the truism of the trusty dog and makes it become a subject of irony; when asked by Effi what she purports to do after losing her previous job, she answers she has nothing planned and would preferably stay in the cemetery, sitting in front of the grave until she herself drops dead.

Und dann würden die Leute noch denken, ich hätte die Alte so geliebt wie ein treuer Hund und hätte von ihrem Grabe nicht weggewollt und wäre da gestorben. Aber das ist falsch, für solche Alte stirbt man nicht; ich will bloß sterben, weil ich nicht leben kann.38

With these last words, Roswitha turns the reader’s attention to the more mundane reality of the meaning of ‘dogness’ in the novel. When the dog dies at the feet of his deceased keeper it does not necessarily mean this was a result of a certain generic altruism dogs principally manifest toward their guardians, a property that cannot but stem from the realm of emotions. Rather, it may also have to do with plainly mundane circumstances like losing one’s facilitator in

38 Theodor Fontane (footnote 27), p. 115.
life, in a relationship in which the animal is asymmetrically dependent upon his owner for existence. When Fontane turns our look towards the profane and prosaic, and thereby the less clichéd dimension of the reality of human-dog-relations in his novel, I would also suggest that he provides us with a unique animal representation which takes the very presence of the non-human beings seriously.

Beyond the portrayal of Rollo’s fidelity, his presence in the novel is indeed somewhat austere. The small gestures of friendliness I already alluded to, like bending his head toward his human companions or lying down on the mat at the doorstep of Effi’s bedroom are simple bodily movements. These form the bulk of his actions during the narrative. Therefore, it is in a sense difficult to ascribe to his character dramatic meanings, but on the other hand it gives his presence first-hand value. Rollo shows up in the novel unmasked and this very fact situates him in some respect at the front of the narrated image rather than offstage. Additionally, this endows his ‘typical doggish’ characteristics with increased plausibility. During the scene in which Innstetten introduces Rollo to Effi, for instance, he speaks of the dog’s kindness without having to add to his depiction any flowery attributes: “Es ist aber bloß ein Neufundländer, ein wunderschönes Tier, das mich liebt und dich auch lieben wird”.39 Accordingly, the kind of interactions between Rollo and Effi, Innstetten or other people he is fond of, are intentionally of a very simple nature and do not really exceed those mere physical gestures mentioned above. The description of the first acquaintance between Effi and Rollo, characteristically, is as follows:

Und nun ließ Rollo ab und setzte sich vor Innstetten nieder, zugleich neugierig zu der jungen Frau aufblickend. Und als diese ihm die Hand hinhielt, umschmeichelte er sie.40

When, much later, Effi returned to Berlin after a visit to her parents, Innstetten welcomed her in the railway station, “mit ihm Rollo, der, als sie plaudernd durch den Tiergarten hinfuhren, nebenher trabte”.41

Rollo’s last major engagement in the book, when he joins Effi during her final days at her parent’s house before passing away, sees him acting in quite a moderate, but sincere way, alongside his keeper. A moment that could be introduced in a highly stirring manner is being illustrated using a very down-to-earth tenor:

Mit seinen Zärtlichkeiten blieb er sparsam, wie er beim Wiedersehen sparsam mit seinen Freudenbezeugungen gewesen war, aber in seiner Treue war er womöglich noch gewachsen. Er wisch seiner Herrin nicht

39 Ibid., p. 48.
40 Ibid., p. 50-51.
41 Ibid., p. 224.
Hence, even at this late point in the novel, Rollo remains bound to the concrete reality. His is the world of material things: rush mat, breakfast table, sundial, straw hat, parasol, corridor, street and field. It is alongside those everyday worldly objects that he reveals his vividness and his benign traits as a real-world companion animal.

According to Haraway, the kind of relationship between humans and companion species she speaks about is never a predetermined. Both sides, person and animal, find themselves in a reciprocal bond that makes them transform according to the 'demands' of the other side; the “companion species is a permanently undecided category”.

The roles are not assigned in advance, and therefore we cannot possibly talk of an inevitable condition of dominating humans and dominated animals, or respectively loving owners and meek, selfless pets. Every relationship is being constituted concretely, always anew and in its own contingent way. For Haraway, this contingency means that in order to gain such a posthumanist understanding of the interdependencies between humans and animals we must face the real and present dog, meaning, we have to “meet the dog” “in-the-world” and not in some general and “well-known” conceptual scheme. As she states, speculations about dog-keeping should emanate from “the concrete and detailed situation of here” and by viewing the “painstaking detail”. Hence, not even the love and fidelity of the dog is a given.

This is not a relation of unconditional love, but one that is dependent upon the actual form that the mutual development takes and the practical ways in which human and animal affect each other: “We […] live with each other in the flesh in ways not exhausted by our ideologies”; “It’s time to return to the ordinary knots of daily multispecies living in a particular place and time”.

42 Ibid., p. 295-296
43 Donna J. Haraway (footnote 6), p. 165.
44 Ibid., p. 93.
46 Ibid., p. 278.
47 Ibid., p. 300.
If we read Rollo’s matter-of-factly and essentially in-the-world presence in the novel through the glances Haraway equips us with here, then we could take his simplicity to be not really a sign of the character’s banality or marginalized status, but, on the contrary, as a way to acknowledge its real salience. It is part of Fontane’s perception of literature that material and profane elements possess particular importance and that those familiar everyday things of life originate the ‘larger’ meaning and the artistic value of the work.48 For Fontane realism means focusing on “things as such” and the “unpolished” instead of abstract images that only lead to “false sentimentality” and “effusiveness”. The sensory and the tangible have far greater significance than outlooks or principles. The bestial is allegoric here as well; in his work, Fontane also wants to integrate the “smell of the dairy market” or the “potency of the estrus”.49 Of particular importance to a posthumanist perspective is the fact that Fontane aims at letting those material elements “speak their own language” and “lead their own life” (Eigenleben). The author should refrain from imposing his own diction on the things he treats in his work, but fundamentally also let his writing be influenced by them, that is narrate “out of the objects” themselves.50 It means, amongst other things, that if Rollo, the Newfoundlander, is being portrayed in a somewhat homespun manner it is done precisely in order to that he may bear his own, peculiar, subjectivity in the text, instead of one that is imposed upon him by a virtuoso author or a heavily anthropomorphic and values-laden society. Rollo’s strength as character is in his plain dog-status.

This analysis still begs the question of the sense in which Rollo forms part of the social complex of Effi Briest, with its specific dynamics, features and “paragraphs”. As a matter of principle, Rollo, thanks to his mundane and unvarnished design, is not a superficial counter-image to the shady sides of modern society as it is represented in Effi Briest, (i.e. he is not the incarnation of a human, timeless utopia). Fontane’s self-proclaimed interest was directed primarily to the norms, rules and principles predominant in a certain milieu. It was through the normal rather than the exceptional or pathological that he attempted to portray social interlaces or tensions and conflicts characteristic of his period. In view of this fact, the material objects he presented in his fiction were themselves, as part of the ordinary scenery of the novel, indications of social codes and norms and it is mainly in this manner that they should be construed.51 This is, of course, what Czicka in Frau Jenny Treibel clearly reveals in his function as an artifact of display, as well as Rollo in his assigned role as

49 Ibid., p. 416, p. 419-421.
50 Ibid., p. 424.
51 Ibid., p. 423, p. 425-426.
guardian and comforter in the service of his noble owners. Hence, Rollo’s status in the text is not to be found outside of society and its “tyrannizing” criteria, just like Effi, his closest companion, is not a simplistic near-natural character but indeed herself a socialized being acting in a basically social world. Effi is not playing out her spontaneity and joviality in an isolated Arcadian sphere but within human society and all it implies.  

Parallel to Effi, we should not mistake Rollo to be a purely animalistic figure that symbolizes a pastoral dimension at the margins of an alienated late 19th-century Gentry. Nonetheless, as we stressed above, Rollo should also be regarded beyond society’s clichés, hence to some extent also beyond its obsolete ‘normalities’. Fontane’s society is not one-dimensional, but built out of dynamic constellations that do not allow for their subsumption in one dominant single pattern. Actually, for Fontane the ‘social’ is not necessarily what is identical of various people, what is typical to them all. Much more than that, his society, when looked at in its concrete form and not in an idealistic-stereotypical manner, is filled with nuances, differences and discrepancies that intermingle in a dynamic way. Consequently, his characters as well as the commonalities they emblematize are multifaceted and speak in many voices. It is indeed via their individuality, their otherness, that they unfold themselves in society and thereby make it to what it is. Their unique personality and subjectivity is deployed by them in relation to others and not on an autonomic level, but this does not mean they get flattened out. This holds true in equal measure for the material objects in the text. Their direct, evident presence in the textual images notwithstanding, they have various possible symbolic meanings that are by no means clear cut but rather widely open to diverse and disparate interpretations. Needless to say, this is the case with animals too, which are naturally more complicated objects. This perspective allows a reading of Rollo’s deviations from his ‘typical’ doggish selflessness and loyalty, like when not bursting in enthusiasm when

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53 Hugo Aust (footnote 4), p. 419; Dorothee Römheld (footnote 2), p. 279; Norbert Mecklenburg (footnote 14), p. 17-19, p. 21, p. 23, p. 278; This synthesis between society and individuality that mainly Mecklenburg locates in Fontane’s fiction, is, in my opinion, extremely relevant for posthumanist thinking that aims at maintaining the particular subjectivity of animals but at the same time also at highlighting the multifarious connections between them and human collective structures.


55 See Reinhard Wilczeck (footnote 14), p. 146.
getting reunited with the expelled Effi. And this is the wider framework for the acknowledging of the level of his more creatural gestures.56

This becomes clear during his last act in the novel: while having the morning coffee in their house garden, Effi’s parents touch upon the most problematic question for them, whether they bare responsibility for their daughter’s tragic death on the basis of them having talked her into a marriage of convenience at such a young age. Rollo, who during this conversation was lying in front of Effi’s tombstone and “bei diesen Worten aufwachte, schüttelte den Kopf langsam hin und her”.57 On the face of it the dog, out of his simple reason and empathy toward his keepers, answers with negation. Yet, this facile interpretation is dependent upon an anthropomorphic view and one that engulfs dog’s gesticulation completely with the logic of human speech. Conversely, Rollo’s bodily movement, looked at from an animalistic point of view, can be regarded as an instinctive gesture that does not allow for any single, unequivocal interpretation and consequently leaves the guilt conundrum unsettled.58

On that basis, we can conclude, that Rollo’s membership in the fictional human community of the novel and the socio-critical challenge he poses,

56 Mecklenburg points out that even though Fontane’s (human) protagonists are bounded in eminent social structures, they still retain some possibility of intervention and at times act in alternative ways, such that transgress the norms and constraints of these structures. See: Norbert Mecklenburg (footnote 14), p. 18, 187-188. I suggest here that this freedom of action is revealed by Fontane’s dog figures too, and this primarily in relation to their more animalistic behaviors.

57 Theodor Fontane (footnote 27), p. 301.

58 Similarly, Czicka too, ‘refuses’ to fulfill in completeness his assigned role as a distinctive display artifact. It is characteristically in his more ‘bestial’ moments, that his tendency to deviations, even to contrariness, comes to the fore. A key scene in this respect is the one in which he wishes to release himself from the leash during a “promenade” in the Treibels’ garden in order to chase a guinea fowl that strayed there from the yard (a further example of an animal that transgresses the space it was assigned to). Honig, the governess of the Treibels, reacted to this mischievousness with a slap at the dog’s body: “Czicka seinerseits tat einen Blaff und warf den Kopf hin und her, so daß die seinem Röckchen […] dicht aufgehängten Glöckchen in ein Klingchen kamen”, Theodor Fontane (footnote 1), p. 112. The Maltese’s digression from his display-function in this moment of instinctual ‘rebelligiousness’ is made clear through the reference to the dog’s dress and the noisy little bells, that in this instance cease to serve their projected goal and are re-utilized by the animal for wholly alien purposes. Significantly, bestially active in this manner, this is also the first time that the reader learns about the dog’s individual name after until this part of the novel he only knew him through his race affiliation. For a similar interpretation of this scene, see: Dorothee Römhild (footnote 2), p. 276-279. For the ironic dimension of Czicka, cf. Reinhard Wilczeck (footnote 14), p. 139-140.
has its source in his peculiarities as a creature of a non-human species. Rollo has only little to do with human, bourgeois virtues that are being projected by people upon their pets. But his worldliness, his materiality, his standing beyond ideologies and humanist images, his animalness, is what affords him his due place in this human universe, that from this point of view also genuinely starts being a little less human. It is from the ‘opposite’, but not detached, side of human society that Rollo provokes it to rethink itself. It is the true, fleshly dog, the one that is elusive to human-centered representations that fulfills this function. Only in view of this context is it possible to read Effi’s father’s suggestion during his above-mentioned conversation with her, that the commonplace hierarchy between people and animals should be reconsidered, as something more than an empty shibboleth: “Gott, vergib mir die Sünde, aber mitunter ist mirs doch, als ob die Kreatur besser wäre als der Mensch.” And then again to his wife, relating to Rollo’s mournfulness after Effi’s death and his persistent attending of her grave:

Ja, Luise, die Kreatur. Das ist ja, was ich immer sage. Es ist nicht so viel mit uns, wie wir glauben. Da reden wir immer von Instinkt. Am Ende ist es doch das Beste.

Within Fontane’s fictional social universe dogs are not inhabiting a major space. Indeed, it is no simple project to integrate animals to a literary tableau that in a sense focuses primarily on utterly human concerns like cultural norms, class distinctions, group interests etc. Such a venture is ineluctably exposed to the risk of uncautiously engulfing animals with facets of the human domain and thus operating in a sociobiological manner, effacing any substantial differences between the human and (organic) non-human worlds. Fontane’s writing is aware of this problematic and therefore does not simplistically attempt to anthropomorphize pets or animalize people. The “significant otherness” of dogs, and other non-human species in Jenny Treibel and Effi Briest, is being

60 Theodor Fontane (footnote 27), p. 122.
tenaciously preserved. Even so, this sustained ‘bestiality’ of the pets is exactly what affords them their truly due place in the thoroughly modern society that Fontane positions them in. Because they conduct themselves mostly in an imprudent, instinctual and worldly manner, and because the stress is laid first and foremost on the bodily nature of their actions, the reader can discern them most intelligibly in their presence opposite the companion persons they have something to do with. This noted proximity to the human protagonists makes them necessarily also part of the very social matters the latter are almost obsessively involved with. The character of Rollo cannot be understood without attending to the specific nature of the relations between Effi and Innstetten, which in turn are rooted in a specific social convention in the service of practical interests—the convenience marriage. Nevertheless, as once again Rollo best demonstrates, the strange dimension the dog adds to the socially-laden story also contributes to a subtle relativization of this culture of strict interpersonal norms and rules. As Effi states after her banishment by her husband, she wishes to be at least reunited with Rollo, since he does not bear ill-will toward her, for “die Tiere [sich] nicht so drum kümmern”.62

Hence, pets’ membership in human society is not a one-way-street but one that fundamentally challenges its normalcies and commonplaces. In the framework of Fontane’s poetic methods, animals function as a mean to magnify the multilayeredness and complexity of society’s image. On the other hand, as especially Frau Jenny Treibel exemplifies, the integration of animals into the realm of the human does not necessitate the latter’s ‘naturalization’ or dehumanization. Stressing human-companion animal interactions does not mean that human-human interactions should be faded out. Genuine relationships between pets and their persons, as the ones that Rollo, but in some respect also Czicka are part of, are not played out in a society-free zone. To this end, it is once again the dog’s ‘less-human’ side, namely its conspicuous physicality, that is being intermingled here with utterly human social matters. It is this entanglement of the display function of the dog in service of class distinctions and its substantial materiality, and then again bestiality, as a non-human being that serves the character of Czicka with a pinch of irony and subsequent multidimensionality. Fontane’s animal figures operate then in a symbiotic process that goes incessantly in both directions: from the human to the animal and from the animal to the human. And this very ambiguity is what makes his fiction relevant to truly posthumanist approaches

62 Theodor Fontane (footnote 27), p. 292. Rollo is inasmuch as that an example for the fact that, as Effi’s father maintains when he and his wife discuss the possibility of renewing their contacts with her despite her publicly renowned ‘sin’, that “die ‘Gesellschaft’, wenn sie nur will, kann auch ein Auge zudrücken”. Ibid., p. 282-283.
aiming to rethink the human and the animal or the natural and the social, as part of a common suit.