

The Politics of Gender Representation in Charles Bukowski's Poetry: Between Ambivalence and Misogyny

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ABSTRACT

The German poet and novelist Charles Bukowski has always been surrounded with controversy throughout his life. However, interestingly, it is his politics of gender representation that mostly triggers feminists and researchers together to condemn him for being misogynist, showcasing a degrading image of female characters in his prose writings. The latter genre is seemingly insufficient to directly accuse Bukowski and his literary works of misogyny. While some of his novels attest to a demeaning yet controversial representation of women, his poetry offers a nuanced version wherein heterogeneous portrayal of women becomes prevalent and therefore allowing the space for readers to encounter poems with an amalgamation of positive representations of women—being independent and intellectual. Because the misogynistic representation in Bukowski's works is open to various interpretations, rushing into a compilation of hateful judgments concerning the author himself lacks justification and argument. In line with this background, the present paper discusses the limitations of the conclusions drawn with regard to Bukowski's gender politics, arguing that there is a space in-between worth exploring in his literary works. Through a close reading method of textual analysis, the paper concentrates on selected poems from Bukowski's collection *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) in order to contrast the positive and negative depiction of women. The paper, in other words, strives to bring into question the extent to which misogyny and ambivalence take roles in Bukowski's gender representation of the female characters. The analysis undertaken has revealed significant results, in which Bukowski's poetry comes to expose a more ambivalent and realistic approach towards gender—a reading which is highly needed in order to consider the different perspectives and possible interpretations of an author's work before limiting it, or the author in person, to a set of stereotypical judgment.

1. Introduction

Charles Bukowski has attracted considerable attention among readers and critics alike. Because of his honesty and a down-to-earth view of life, he has been thrown by a bunch of negative judgments, often categorizing him as an underground writer who embodies a high dose of misogyny in his writings. In other words, Bukowski's politics of gender representation is what triggers feminists and scholars to shed light on the degrading image he showcases through his prose writings. Nevertheless, it is quite excluding to draw such a conclusion, claiming nonchalantly that the author is, par excellence, a misogynist. While most of Bukowski's novels represent women in a demeaning and controversial way, his poetry presents a heterogeneous portrayal of women since on many occasions the reader encounters poems about independent and intellectual females who actually play a significant role in the speaker's life or in life in general; the readers do often meet poems revolving around female characters with positive characteristics. Needless to say, the misogynistic representation in Bukowski's works is open to various interpretations. This kind of representation might be intended to reflect the pains of women in a society that privileges men or could be justified

by the progress of Bukowski's artistic creations. In this sense, it is made explicit that the idea of rushing into a compilation of hateful judgments concerning the author himself lacks justification and argument.

This paper discusses the limitations of the easy-made conclusions drawn in regards to Bukowski's gender representation, on the basis that there is little to no inclusion of studies devoted specifically to his poetry; a matter that is worth considering before generally sentencing the writer as a misogynist. Through a textual analysis of selected poems from Bukowski's poetry, the paper brings into light the extent to which misogyny and ambivalence take roles in Bukowski's politics of gender representation. To this end, I find Bukowski's collection *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) best suited for contrasting the positive and negative depiction of women. I choose the poems most relevant to this study in order to present an interpretation that gives sufficient considerations to other hidden areas that are often left unexamined about Bukowski's writings.

As far as structure is concerned, this paper is divided into three sections. The first section presents a review of the previous studies centered on Bukowski's politics of gender representation in his writings. Accordingly, the study draws attention to the main gaps in the conclusions drawn upon Bukowski's works, showing that most of the studies and criticism revolve mainly around his novels while excluding his works of poetry. The following section explains the theoretical concepts used in this paper; concepts related to the feminist literary theory are clarified in order to pave the way for a better understanding of the hidden structures underlying Bukowski's view of gender. The third section includes a close reading of the selected poems from *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) in order to lay out the contrast between the different representations of women in the poems.

2. Literature Review

Approaching Charles Bukowski's literary works has somehow brought confusion and a mix of opinions about him and his writings. When it comes to Bukowski's politics of gender representation, conclusions are based mainly on the study of his prose writing. There is little to no serious consideration of his poetry which might actually make room for different interpretations of Bukowski's tendency towards the issue of gender.

In *The Idea of Women: Representations of Power in the Work of Charles Bukowski*, Beaumont (2014) contrasts elements of emotional relationship in Bukowski's two novels, *Women* (1978) and *Hustler* (1985), in order to inspect the representation of women. Beaumont (2014) argues that there is a significant difference between the two novels. Whereas *Women* present a different type of females who exercise emotional power over male characters, *Hustler* shows the opposite. Beaumont (2014) makes it clear that Bukowski gives his female characters more space and power in *Women* than in *Hustler*, that is, by allowing them to inflict emotional damage on the male characters. In *Women*, we are introduced to an ambivalent portrayal of the act of kissing which shows a more vulnerable side of the male protagonist because it is often described with soft emotional tones; a depiction that presents women as human beings worthy of emotions and love. In total contrast, *Hustler* does only present the act of kissing as purely physical, violent, and always done in spite of the female's consent. This alludes to the negative depiction of women as mere objects, amenable to be manipulated by men and thereby respond to their suppressed desires. As Beaumont puts it: "[i]n *Women*, female characters are frequently the subject of kissing whereas in *Hustler* the female characters are always the object of it" (2014: 25). Secondly, we equally find insights of emotional pain in Bukowski's works. Some novels like *Women* represent women as creatures able of inflicting emotional damage on men; they are able to hurt a man in his feelings and are often willing to. In *Hustler*, there are no signs of emotional pain on the women's side. Although many plots hold sorry events of women being mistreated and harmed, the emotional pain that they might have gone through is nowhere to be mentioned. Here men are shown to be harmful and disrespectful only through physical actions without any mentioning of the emotional damage that they cause. Mainly, "there is no real depth to the women's emotions" (Beaumont, 2014: 27) and there is little or even the absence of any depiction of the ability of women to experience harm in works like *Hustler*. The paper sums it up in the following: "*Hustler* has no depictions of emotional pain from women, notably in the rape scenes. In *Women*, Henry Chinaski is at the whim of women and is often emotionally hurt by them" (Beaumont, 2014: 28). The latter suggests that the ability of women to cause harm to men is a strength given to them by the author in *Women* and taken from them in *Hustler*.

Beaumont presents "request for help" as the third element of the emotional relationship between men and women in Bukowski's works. Her paper shows that "Chinaski [in *Women*] turns to women for emotional help and they are capable of withholding it" while "[i]n *Hustler*, women ask for help and are denied it or ignored" (Beaumont, 2014: 28). The writer sees power in women ignoring Chinaski's request for help as "[f]emale characters assert their power in these situations, typically through ignoring or dismissing the request" (Beaumont, 2014: 28). Based on the latter, Beaumont (2014) argues that in *Women* Bukowski portrays women as strong and powerful beings just because they are able to deny and ignore men's requests. On the other hand, *Hustler* does only present women's requests—which are often cries against violence—as a subject of rejection and denial. Bukowski gives men the upper hand and allows them to say 'no' to the females asking for help. Consequently, women are treated as objects that the male protagonist cannot hear or interact with. The writer then moves to contrast between expressions of love in both novels, *Women*, and *Hustler*. In *Women*, the male character expresses his love to the women he loved; a point which, in Beaumont's view, gives the female characters a great deal of agency (2014: 31). However, in *Hustler* "expressions of love are either completely absent"

or “are seen as an inconvenience” (Beaumont, 2014: 32). Through her comparison between aspects of emotional relationship in *Women and Hustler*, Beaumont (2014) alludes to a sort of ambivalent approach that is embodied in Bukowski’s works.

In his *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, and Iconoclast*, Charlson (1995) presents Bukowski as the “author whose surface vulgarity masks a deeper purpose” since his works are challenging to the social and cultural status quo of Americans (Charlson, 1995: i). In his third chapter, Charlson (1995) contends that it is far too easy to throw labels at Bukowski, as being vulgar, misogynist, and sexist, because in that way we ignore “how Bukowski’s own masculinity was constructed, how he rendered such construction in his writing, and how his writing calls certain aspects of traditional masculinity into question” (1995: 87). Later on, Charlson (1995) uses Michael Kaufman’s “Triad of Men’s Violence” to justify the construction of men’s masculinity which leads to violence against oneself, against women, and against men. He states that the “three points of the triad, interrelated as they are, clarify what too often is involved in being a man, and all three obviously have their applications to Bukowski” (1995: 88).

Following the previous, Charlson (1995) explains that society constructs the meaning of masculinity for men and burdens them with “tension, insecurity, and anxiety”, creating an aggressive being, “which can lead to the interrelated triad of violence in men, whether against women, other men, or themselves” (1995: 90-1). Constructed masculinity often shows itself through violence against women for reasons such as availability, mystification, and difference in physical strength. The violence explained through the triad emerges from the lack of outlets for the emotional discharge of men in a society that pressures them to deny their emotional side, allowing that energy to transform into anger and aggressive behaviors. Consequently, men direct this transformed energy towards other men, the self, and, most commonly, towards women. Charlson (1995) examines Chinaski, as a male character known for his misogynistic behavior and insensitivity in Bukowski’s *Ham on Rey*, in order to show how pressure and exposure to hostility and violence from parents mold a child into a misogynistic abusive adult. He writes: “the pressure cooker that is Henry Chinaski becomes not only an aggressor against many males but also an offender of some females” (1995: 94). Moreover, Bukowski’s autobiographical works can serve as a sampling of dysfunctional childhood results; a demonstration of how individuals such as Chinaski have emerged into existence. We can deduce from Charlson’s (1995) study that the construction of masculinity and violence may justify the morbid image that Bukowski provides of women in his novels.

Another important aspect of Bukowski’s works is explored by Harrison (1994) in the seventh chapter of his book, *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*. He explains how women’s portrayal is the most harshly criticized aspect of Bukowski’s works; such as the response to Bukowski’s production:

Bukowski’s antics with women, his thoughts about them, are one vast and sniggering cliché. He has nothing to tell us about them because I’m convinced, he knows nothing about them (e.g., “the ladies will always be the same.”) and is determined at this point not to learn. They are a dirty joke to him, a dirty joke on him. Inside the web of his booze-bull-and-broad exploits lurks a demon sexual jingoist, erupting and irrupting in self-punishing concatenations; hostile, frustrated, pugilistic-fearful of the role into which (he thinks) one is cast by the fate of genitalia. (Harrison, 1994: 183)

Harrison (1994) asserts that this kind of criticism is no longer valid since it is proved that Bukowski has shown clear progress in his depiction of women throughout his career. Bukowski started off with harsh chauvinism in his early novels and improved his work to a more ambivalent approach where he represents women as respectful independent human beings. In an early stage of his career, Bukowski fills his works to the brim with savage imagery of women being meaningless objects serving the male characters’ pleasure only, the language he used for this is degrading and brutally cruel; his works were written from a stereotypical masculine perspective. As time goes by, Bukowski has adapted his works to a more progressive world and tends to write in a less chauvinistic manner. Through his analysis of Bukowski’s novels, Harrison (1994) exposes the noticeable change in the author’s tendency towards female portrayal all along with his career.

Following Harrison’s new horizon, Korhonen (2006) has opened room for a wider discussion about Bukowski’s works in her essay “The Portrayal of Women in the Novels of Charles Bukowski”. Korhonen (2006) discusses female hostility in Bukowski’s works, starting with an exposure of previous views and judgments. She states that the “aspect of misogyny is what Bukowski has been mostly criticized for in his writing” (2006: 8); Bukowski’s works have been and are still viewed from the same perspective, being the works that are degrading to women. In addition, Korhonen (2006) presents a new interpretation about Bukowski’s famous character, Chinaski, and suggests that the author portrays him as a delusional character that “often makes up ideas about women that contradict the real facts in order to reinforce his views” (2006: 9). Chinaski uses this to construct a false reality of the women he meets in his mind to sooth his ego since his assumptions of them often contradict the reality presented in the novels.

The essay opens the way for many possible interpretations of Bukowski’s hostile female representation, as his hostility is directed towards men too, and the author’s dysfunctional upbringing may justify his frequent misogynistic representation in his early works. To this end, Korhonen adds: “[t]he ethics that Bukowski had concerning sexuality were formed during the Depression and the War years, and as times changed these attitudes seemed even more old-fashioned, patriarchal and sexist” (2006: 10). More importantly, still, there is a huge contrast between Bukowski’s literary persona and his reality because Bukowski is, nonetheless, known for being

caring and protective of the women in his real life. The essay emphasizes the unfairness of most criticism which excludes many positive aspects of Bukowski's work; the latter writer is mostly criticized for writing about a toxically masculine world whereas many of his productions show female characters with careers and jobs. Korhonen (2006) suggests that the use of a protagonist who is disrespectful to women is a way of raising awareness towards these kinds of behaviors in society and to show what women have to deal with:

The idea with his characters is not that we should identify ourselves with them; it is rather a feeling of alienation that occurs towards the characters. Instead of thinking that Bukowski argues in favor of sexist attitudes against women, among other things in his novels, it is possible to argue that he is in fact questioning these attitudes and behaviors. (Korhonen, 2006: 11)

The researcher does admit through her analysis that the language used in Bukowski's early works bears traces of a sexist condescending tone. Most of the time, women are treated in a degrading and hostile way; everything related to them in the work is described in dirty vulgar language, seen as objects not worthy of respect. Ironically, Bukowski makes these women the preoccupying subject in the male character's mind and the biggest part of their life revolves around the world of women, despite the degrading misogynistic depiction. The fact that women take a huge part in Bukowski's works shows how important and crucial they are to the life of the characters or speakers.

Korhonen (2006) sheds light on the notable evolution in Bukowski's career since he started off with a more stereotypical approach towards gender and later has turned to more nuanced writing. She explains: "when you consider Bukowski's portrayal of women in his works [sic] it is important to know that Charles's boyhood, all of his adolescence and parts of his mature life took place in a time that had a poor view on women in general ... a time of strong opinions against female rights" (2006: 8). Bukowski portrays women in his early works as mere anonymous sexual objects that exist for one sole purpose: men's pleasure. However, this perspective has evolved towards a softer and more positive tone over time, showing some sort of maturity in his work. In conclusion, Korhonen's (2006) essay shows that there are different sides to Bukowski's works that should be analyzed before concluding that his works are radically sexist and degrading. The fact that women take a big part of his works, the many probable interpretations that his works can support as well as the presence—although to a small extent—of the positive and fair portrayal of women are all aspects of the author's work that should be verified before running to any judgment.

Almost all the studies mentioned above pay close attention to Bukowski's novels while excluding a big portion of possibilities concerning his politics of gender representation. When his poetry is in question, only negative opinions arise to criticize and accuse the poet directly of being a misogynist. Yet, some scholars do shed light on other possible interpretations that could be helpful in discussing Bukowski's creative productions. In other words, they attempt to uncover the equivocal dimension of his tendency towards gender representation in both his prose and poetry writing. With this, scholars have somehow defended Bukowski against the easy-made yet exclusive judgments made around his works. Indeed, what is lacking is a close reflection of Bukowski's poetry that could complete the picture of his view of gender. Through such a reflection, his poetry can show a far more settled side of the author and eventually allows the reader to see Bukowski from a broader scope.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Background

Since this paper focuses on investigating the ambivalent structures of gender representation in Charles Bukowski's poetry, poems from his collection *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) serve as case studies. This collection of poems is very accurate to this study as it is mainly centered on relevant thematic issues of love and human relationships; it contains the perfect specimen for this study, allowing the possibility to unravel the mixture of contrastive themes that would benefit my textual analysis. In this regard, the paper resorts to a close reading method of textual analysis, which employs both interpretation and comparison. In order to scrutinize the negative/positive representation of women in Bukowski's poetry, relevant poems from the collection chosen will be interpreted in light of appropriate concepts belonging to the feminist literary theory.

3.1 Gender as a Category of Analysis

The concept of gender "was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competencies, which are then assigned as either 'masculine' or 'feminine'" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 56). In other words, gender is a system that dictates one's place in every aspect of society while reducing human beings into two main categories: man and woman. The relationship between the two gender categories can come in either a form that puts women in a state of superiority or a form that favors men and renders women inferior, which is the most dominant form since the majority of societies in the world are patriarchal. In the equation of man vs woman, the male side is normally coded as the positive one; he then becomes the norm and the standard of judgment which results in a society privileging the masculine (Francis et al., 2003: 2). Although it is hard to tranche, gender is often distinguished from sex. Sex is the biological and "natural" distinction between male and female whereas gender is the socially constructed term for the biological difference which results in categorizing people into men and women. It is crucial to differentiate between what is biological and what is socially constructed:

The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to 'domestic' roles. (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 56)

Simone de Beauvoir (1953) explains this distinction between sex and gender in *The Second Sex*, claiming that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1953: 273). She clarifies that gender differences are set in hierarchy as "the masculine principle is always the favoured 'norm' and the feminine one becomes positioned as 'Other'" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 57). On this note, gender works in a system of hierarchy that favors men over women. With time, this hierarchy results in "prolonged oppression" and "raised many voices" that "collectively led to a concept of feminism which started the longest movement in history which still continues" (Srivastava et al., 2017: 111). Since the beginning of the 19th century, the term feminism has defined those who believe that women are brought under complete control because of their sex and that legal equality is required for them. Consequently, feminist writers and activists share the aspiration to a better world where women are able to realize their potential as individuals and female oppression is overcome.

In feminist analysis, gender is conceptualized as the "cultural or social construction of sex" (Francis et al., 2003: 3) because gender is not just the distinction of man/woman but a "set of meanings that sexes assume in particular societies" (Francis et al., 2003: 3). These sets of meaning are then organized as masculinity and femininity and are matched to male/female bodies. For feminists, gender is the most important category of analysis as it intersects with many social systems. This hierarchical system of gender seems to have infiltrated into literature as well as many works are written based on this system. Therefore, critics use the lens of gender to read works and analyze them. Feminists have always criticized works of literature that supported the constructed system of gender that normalizes the inferiority of women and justifies their mistreatment. Feminists shed light on how the markers of difference between genders work in literature to constitute and reinforce certain representations in the minds of the readers. Some works do emphasize the superiority of men over women and represent the latter as low creatures, as subordinates. Charles Bukowski is known for receiving harsh criticism for his seemingly biased work, which appears to support the gender construct.

3.2 The Conception of the Female Body

It is notable that "[w]ithin feminism and gender studies, the body has occupied a key position in a wide range of debates, including: men's control of women's bodies as a key means of subordination" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 6). It is no secret that bodies matter significantly in human relationships, but the conception of what a body is differs naturally and culturally. In gender studies, the body can be conceptualized as a natural entity that determines differences and inequalities between men and women; inequality in reproductive functions: a woman's body has the ability to conceive, carry, give birth, and breastfeeding. Hence, women become bound by their biological capacities; that is, their functions in society are determined and based on their biological difference from men. Some critics regard these biological differences of the body negatively since they are responsible for a culturally-based control over women. Yet, other critics view these differences positively as women's highly sexual and reproductive capacities make them superior to man. The women's body is of great value and it is rather a source of empowerment.

Additionally, the body can be seen in gender studies as a socially constructed concept. In sex role theory, for example, we learn the appropriate behavior/ social roles for our sex during childhood, in which "[b]oys and girls learn the social roles appropriate to their sex, as this is marked by their body, through social interaction with successfully socialized adults and immersion in sex-typed culture, and reinforcement through a system of rewards and punishments" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 7). As a woman grows, society imposes on her (consciously and unconsciously) a constructed conception in which she eventually sees her body as a fragmented object meant for admiration and judgment. In a way, "women live their bodies in such an objectified way, internalizing the gaze and producing their bodies as objects for others" (Lennon, 2019: para. 15). Here is the beginning of the way in which women live their bodies as objects for another's gaze. To this end, feminists draw attention to the way in which society prescribes norms in relation to which subjects regulate their own bodies and those of others. They aim to fight all objectified representation and treatment of women in society since the female body suffers in the majority of cultures from severe objectification and worrying patriarchal control.

3.3 The Issue of Misogyny

In the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, the definition of misogyny comes as the hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women or girls. Misogyny comes in multiple forms like male privilege, patriarchy, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, belittling of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification (Code, 2000: 346) Misogyny has existed within the human race for ages since ancient Greek mythology where Gods were privileged over Goddesses, sustaining that the creation of women is a punishment for mankind by Zeus. Pandora, the first woman, carried a box filled with misfortune and thus a woman was the source of everything bad in life. Such ideology still cohabits with humans till today, as acts of irrational hatred towards women are yet to be eradicated from the world. Accordingly, women suffer the outcomes of centuries of this misogyny that calls for their

suppression, subjugation, and neglect. It is no surprise that many great philosophers and thinkers such as Aristotle and Nietzsche, who "had a reputation of epitomizing misogyny in philosophy" (Helm, 2004: 64), have narrower vision when it comes to their perception of women; they support the misogynistic thinking due to the male-dominant world. The field of literature, in particular, seems to hide within its folds a misogynistic representation of women since many authors adopt a degrading tone to women in their works. On this note, the German poet Charles Bukowski is noted for his misogynistic style of writing which has been criticized on many occasions.

3.4 Gender Representation

Representing someone is describing and portraying them in a certain way and from a certain perspective which is often different from that of the represented. Since the second wave, representation is one of the crucial areas of feminist debate, as representations of women are often defined by how men see women (the 'male gaze') or by how society expects women to look and behave. As a result, women are understood from within a system of gender ideology that identifies them in relation to their reproductive and sexual traits and regards them as the other. That is to say, women's representation is derived from the way they perceive themselves as well as the way they are perceived through the lenses of the constructed and widely communicated image they are given in a certain society. These images are prevalent throughout history and are deeply rooted in the consciousness of every generation. Thus, these representations reinforce the preexistent dominant gender ideologies and the traits that define what femininity is and what is an ideal woman. One can find a number of representations of women in almost every part of our lives, yet the issue of accuracy always stays in doubt; a matter which leads to the question: To what extent can any representation of someone or a group of people be accurate, knowing that it is presented by a totally different person than the one(s) in question? More specifically, to what extent are the representations of women in different aspects of life accurate enough, knowing that it comes mainly from a male privileging perspective?

4. Analysis and Discussions

Charles Bukowski is well known for being criticized by feminists for his degrading representation of women. Almost all of his works contain instances of women presented as either sexual objects or being subject to constant mistreatment. Indeed, his collection of poems *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) involves some poems with a negative portrayal. Yet, it has less misogynistic representation in comparison to his prose works and to other poems. This section hereby attempts to contrast between different female portrayals in Bukowski's poems from the aforementioned collection in order to prove the presence of an ambivalent tendency towards his politics of gender representation.

4.1 Misogynistic Portrayal of Women: Objectification, Sexualization, and Mistreatment:

Bukowski's *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) presents on many occasions an objectified portrayal of women, in which the latter are portrayed as sexual objects and their image is fragmented to particular parts in their bodies that are stereotypically sexualized. In the first poem in the collection "Sandra", the speaker focuses the description of the woman on her body:

is the slim tall
ear-ringed
bedroom damsel
dressed in a long
gown (Lines 1-5)

It is evident in this case how the woman is reduced to her looks; she is only a body for sexual use. When the speaker tells us about her personality, he seems to only portray her as an old lady who loves to get involved with young boys, attributing to her a probable pedophilic behavior. The speaker says: "at 32 she likes / young neat/unscratched boys" (Lines 24-26). This Sandra that the speaker is telling us about is stripped of any respect as she is presented to us as a mere object existing with the speaker to probably fulfill her "bedroom damsel" (Line 3) duty. Moreover, the image one gets of this lady is fragmented to items of her body: her length, her ears, her dress, and her bedroom skills, a point which directs the readers' interest to these specific parts of her body as if these parts are the only thing that matter when it comes to Sandra.

Similarly, Bukowski's poem "One of the Hottest" suggests yet again a fragmented sexualized representation of this anonymous woman:

she wore a platinum blond wig
and her face was rouged and powdered
and she put the lipstick on
making a huge painted mouth
and her neck was wrinkled

but she still had the ass of a young girl
and the legs were good.
she wore blue panties and I got them off (Lines 1-8)

These lines highlight fragments of the woman's body and reduce her to a mere object for the man's pleasure. It seems that the speaker is interested in the sexual 'qualities' of this woman only; her identity and personality do not matter since he is informing us about her as if he is a dealer presenting his customer the specifications of his product. That is to say, the speaker is shifting the readers' attention to 'what matters more' to him, which is the sexualized body of this lady. The speaker's attitude towards this woman alludes to the idea that he is putting the woman in an inferior position by rendering her as a sexual object. Furthermore, he shows a sense of pride in being able to get his hands on the woman's underwear; and this adds to the combination of his degrading description and behavior towards this lady. He does not show any sense of respect to her.

Bukowski's poem "Girls Coming Home" introduces us to a speaker who is assessing the quality of three girls' legs while he is creepily lurking on them:

the girls are coming home in their cars
and I sit by the window and
watch.

.....
as the girl in the red dress
gets out of the white car
I look at her legs
as the girl in the blue dress
gets out of the blue car
I look at her legs
as the girl in the pink dress
gets out of the red car
I look at her legs.
the girl in the red dress
who got out of the white car
had the best legs
the girl in the pink dress
who got out of the red car
had average legs (Lines 1-3, 10-24)

The speaker emphasizes in a sense of pride his disrespectful act of voyeurism on stranger woman and sexualizes them while they are going about their day. This voyeuristic behavior shows absolutely no respect to the privacy and body of these women since the man here is at absolute ease in his mortifying behavior. It is clear how the speaker fragments the whole image of the girls and how he reduces it into their legs solely. Moreover, the speaker shows no shame towards his behavior as he repeats his words again and again and underlines that he did the same action for the three girls; it seems as if he is bragging about it while giving his assessment on the quality of the girls' legs. Bukowski presents the reader here with a misogynistic speaker who considers women as sexual objects that he uses for his entertainment, and towards whom he does not feel any sort of guilt; he regards the girls as inferior beings on whom he can easily relieve his repressions on.

Likewise, this act of voyeurism is repeated in another poem of the same collection entitled "The Girl on the Bus Stop Bench", where the speaker derives voyeuristic pleasure from creeping on a stranger lady:

as now and then a wind
would lift her skirt,
I was directly across from her
looking in,
and such perfect immaculate legs
I had never seen.
I am essentially bashful
but I stared and kept staring
.....
directly across from her
in my dark shades
I kept staring

like a schoolboy in his first
excitement.
.....
then I saw her again.
the wind flipped her skirt
high along her thighs (Lines 9-16, 24-28, 35-37)

It is apparent here that the speaker is unethically sneaking looks into a woman's body and he is speaking of her in a demeaning manner as if he is describing an object. Yet again, the woman is represented in a fragmented image; she is portrayed as a sexual object since she exists in this poem to serve the pleasure of the speaker only.

Interestingly, the women mentioned in these poems do not play any role in the speaker's life or add any value to him; they are spoken of because of their sexual 'qualities' or because they serve the speaker some sort of sexual gratification, which turns to be the only thing that seems to matter for the man. Accordingly, another lady exists in another poem, "Artist", only to serve as an object of exchange, sealing a deal between the speaker and a man who wants to buy his paintings:

stick-out hair wants 3 paintings
for which I ask \$70.
he doesn't have the money.
I keep the paintings but
he promises to send me a
girl called Judy
in garter belt and high heels.
.....
"I want that," I told him.
then we haggled over terms
.....
Judy will come by and
afterwards
I will hand her the
3 paintings (Lines 28-34, 39-40, 48-51)

The man here wants three of the speaker's paintings, but he does not have the money for it; he offers him the girl who is identified as just a "young blonde girl" (Line 22). The speaker, of course, is delighted by the barter opportunity and haggles with the man over the object of transaction: the sexual benefit from a silenced lady who does not seem to have any say in the situation. The woman is represented to the reader as a pure object of trade between men, in that one is passing her to the other to pay for his purchases; a painfully backwards image is being reproduced by the speaker of this poem.

This atrocious picture certainly explains why Bukowski has had it rough with the feminist community since he, by this kind of imagery, digs out past excruciating scars that women have fought along the ages of humanity. Bukowski's speakers in these poems support and feed the over-sexualized stereotypes about women, looking at them from an upper position while presenting them to readers in such a lowering manner, where the readers know only of their bodies and sexual properties. This suggests a hateful attitude towards the gender of women; a matter which has caused Bukowski a long-lasting harsh controversy.

4.2 Sites of Ambivalence:

4.2.1 Positive Representation of Women

Contrary to the above-discussed poems, Bukowski presents the readers with a rather different mood in his poem "The 6 Foot Goddess", as the speaker mentions a woman who left a positive mark on him:

but this 6-foot goddess
who deals in real estate
and art
and flies from Texas
to see me
and I fly to Texas
to see her—
.....

she's wild
 but kind
 my 6 foot goddess
 makes me laugh
 the laughter of the mutilated
 who still need
 love,
 and her blessed eyes
 run deep into her head
 like mountain springs
 far in
 and
 cool and good.
 she has saved me
 from everything that is
 not here (Lines 4-10, 41-56)

The speaker here portrays this woman as a goddess who seems to have a respectful job, which alludes to a level of intellect on her behalf. She is an independent woman who puts effort into meeting the speaker as he does the same as well. Bukowski provides us with a speaker who cherishes this lady and flies to where she lives to be with her; he is a man who respects women since he speaks of her in a rather romantic tone without any objectification. When telling us about this woman, the speaker focuses more on traits of her personality as being "kind" and "makes him laugh"; the description is done in a very poetic way as if he is sketching a work of art:

and her blessed eyes
 run deep into her head
 like mountain springs
 far in
 and
 cool and good. (Lines 48-53)

Moreover, the words used to describe the lady have a positive connotation: 'goddess', 'kind', 'laugh', 'love', 'blessed eyes', 'cool', 'good' and 'saved me'. These are all used in the poem to portray this woman as well as the delightful effect she has on the speaker who feels grateful since she saves him. Far from all objectification and misogynistic behavior, this poem represents women as independent goddesses who are worth loving and who leave a beautiful impact on others. The speaker is a man who is capable of showing kind emotion towards the woman he respects, giving the readers speculations of probable love.

Closely, "One for Old Snaggle-Tooth" is a poem dedicated to the speaker's ex-lover and mother of his only daughter:

I know a woman
 who keeps buying puzzles

 she works it out
 mathematically
 she solves all her
 puzzles
 lives down by the sea
 puts sugar out for the ants
 and believes
 ultimately
 in a better world.

 and she wears loose shapeless
 coveralls over a body most
 women would wish they had.
 for many years she irritated me
 with what I considered her
 eccentricities—

.....
but finally when I think of her life
and compare it to other lives
more dazzling, original
and beautiful
I realize that she has hurt fewer
people than anybody I know
.....
she has had some terrible times,
times when maybe I should have
helped her more
for she is the mother of my only
child
and we were once great lovers,
but she has come through
.....
she has created a better world.
she has won.
Frances, this poem is for
you. (Lines 1-2, 9-17, 21-26, 30-35, 37-43, 49-52)

The speaker praises the woman that once was his lover by showing off her intellectual and character qualities; she is more glorified in the eyes of the reader. She is represented as a smart woman who solves puzzles mathematically and has a beautiful personality as she loves nature, trusts in a better world and is living a great life. When the speaker tells us about her body, no traits of objectification or sexualization exist, but instead, he describes it in a positive way as a "body most women would wish they had". The poem revolves around the lady as it is gifted to her solely; and when the speaker mentions himself, it is in regret that he does so since he expresses guilt towards not being as supportive as he needed when his lover needed him. This man admits his mistakes and brags about having been in a relationship with this lady; she is a woman who impacted him in a positive way and left him great memories and, above all, a daughter.

Contrasting this type of representation with the aforementioned misogynistic one shows incoherence in Bukowski's tendency towards women representation; there is clearly an amalgamation of positive and negative portrayals of females in the collection under study. It goes without saying that this collection contains an ambivalent representation of women since it portrays them in different manners and thereby such ambivalence makes any kind of conclusions hard to be drawn about Bukowski's politics of gender representation.

4.2.2 Expressions of Disappointment in Women

On some other occasions, Bukowski's speakers express disappointment in some types of women, like in his poem "Sexpot" that portrays the struggle of the speaker with a toxic unfaithful woman:

"you know," she said, "you were at
the bar so you didn't see
but I danced with this guy.
we danced and we danced
close.
.....
"thanks a bunch," I
said.
she was always thinking of sex.
.....
she stared at every man available
in morning cafes
.....
"she's always running off
to some local disco to dance
with a baboon," a friend once told
me, "I'm amazed that you've

stood for it as long as you have."
 she'd vanish at racetracks
 then come back and say,
 "three men offered to buy me
 a drink."
 or I'd lose her in the parking
 lot and I'd look up and she'd
 be walking along with a strange man (Lines 1-5, 9-11, 17-18, 26-37)

The speaker is a victim of an unhealthy relationship with this woman who shows no respect to him and keeps betraying him in front of his eyes. She unethically leaves the speaker to be with other men and is always ready to jump into any man she desires without any regard to the speaker's feelings. She seems to care only for the sexual benefit of the relationship as well as she is not bothered by her unfaithfulness which hurts the speaker's emotions, leading him to express relief upon her disappearance: "I'm feeling much better / now." (Lines 56-57) We can clearly see that mistreatment can come from both parts of the relationship and that everybody is prone to be a toxic person and thereby causes harm to one another. Such aspect works perfectly against stereotyping Bukowski as a mere misogynist poet.

Accordingly, the speaker in Bukowski's poem "Quiet Clean Girls in Gingham Dresses" expresses a longing for a healthy relationship as he admits to having known only toxic women:

all I've ever known are whores, ex-prostitutes,
 madwomen. I see men with quiet,
 gentlewomen—I see them in the supermarkets,
 I see them walking down the streets together,
 I see them in their apartments: people at
 peace, living together. I know that their
 peace is only partial, but there is
 peace, often hours and days of peace.

all I've ever known are pill freaks, alcoholics,
 whores, ex-prostitutes, madwomen. (Lines 1-10)

These lines go against the constructed stereotype of men, being always unfaithful and hurting towards women. In this poem and the one mentioned before, the speaker is the victim of toxic females who probably have impacted him terribly. Adding to that, the speaker showcases his soft and vulnerable side by expressing his need for a good woman, a point which alludes to his belief that this good woman is able to heal him:

I need a good woman. I need a good woman
 more than I need this typewriter, more than
 I need my automobile, more than I need

Mozart; I need a good woman so badly that I (Lines 21-24)

This poem portrays a more realistic representation of women since it clarifies the duality of a human kind far from any stereotyping. It highlights the equivocal nature of Bukowski's work that shows both sides of the story.

All in all, Bukowski's Collection, *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977), provides a great sample of his less misogynist and more ambivalent representation of women, as it gathers poems of different perspectives and covers many sides of the female/human nature. It is a collection dedicated to human relationships and emotions, and the poems selected are the ones most representative of the duality of Bukowski's portrayal of women; they emphasize the contrast between negative and positive images of women.

5. Conclusion

Love is a Dog from Hell (1977) is but a case study among the many poems in which Bukowski showcases an ambivalent portrayal of women, yet it serves as a better argument against the previous judgment concerning his politics of gender representation. Indeed, Bukowski has a tendency towards portraying women as the secondary weak gender, but one should not turn a blind eye to the fact that this is more dominant in his early prose work and less present in his late works and poetry. Bukowski's poetry exposes a more nuanced and realistic approach to gender concepts. This becomes especially clear through the previous analysis which displays how heterogeneous his approach can be, presenting us with both sides of the coin. In this sense, it is unpleasant to accuse the author personally of misogyny without conducting a well-rounded study on his personal life as well as his literary writing. Thus Bukowski presents the reader with a somehow perfectly balanced ambivalent representation of women, which I find

to be a very realistic approach. This paper can be considered as a solid unbiased argument against these kinds of rushed conclusions; it can contribute in pointing to the dire necessity of considering the different perspectives and possible interpretations of an author's work before limiting it, or the author in person, to a set of stereotypical judgment. In all certainty, this paper is not without few limitations. I believe that a detailed study of Bukowski's whole works is required and in order to conduct a contextual study, it is most needed to surround the late Bukowski's life. Until a well-rounded study is conducted, it lacks argument and reason to rush into easy-made conclusions about Bukowski's politics of gender representation, while such ambivalence sites can be easily detected in his poetry.

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