

Mariana Rissi Azevedo

**Women from the Point of View of the Bukowskian Narrator: The representation of the feminine universe in *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness***

São José do Rio Preto  
2015

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Orientador: Prof. Dr. Peter James Harris

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**RESUMO**

Russell Harrison (1994) reconhece a presença do chauvinismo machista na obra de Charles Bukowski e afirma que a redação de seus romances tem de ser vista no contexto da ‘segunda onda do feminismo’, época na qual Bukowski se consolidou como escritor, e como consequência recebeu influência. Esse momento da liberação feminina é representado por livros tais como *Sexual Politics* de Kate Millett (1969) e *The Female Eunuch* de Germaine Greer (1970). Bukowski, conhecido por apresentar a mulher como objeto do desejo masculino, demonstra uma sensibilidade diante da objetificação do corpo feminino no conto ‘The Most Beautiful Woman in Town’, no qual o autor retrata a protagonista Cass como vulnerável e carente de assistência. A dissertação situa esse conto no contexto dos 64 contos de *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1972), para demonstrar a forma excepcional com que o autor mostra a sua sensibilidade em relação à figura feminina no contexto de uma coletânea caracterizada por sua misoginia.

Palavras-chave: Charles Bukowski, objetificação sexual, segunda onda do feminismo.

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**ABSTRACT**

Russell Harrison (1994) recognises the male chauvinism of Charles Bukowski's work and argues that his novels must be seen in the context of the 'second wave of the feminism', a time in which Bukowski established himself as a writer, and which certainly influenced him. This point in the struggle for women's liberation is represented by books such as *Sexual Politics*, by Kate Millett (1969), and *The Female Eunuch*, by Germaine Greer (1970). Bukowski, known for his presentation of women as the objects of male desire, demonstrates a sensitivity concerning the objectification of the female body in the story 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town', in which he depicts the protagonist, Cass, as vulnerable and in need of assistance. The dissertation situates this story in the context of the 64 stories of *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1972) in order to demonstrate how exceptional its sensitivity with regard to women is in a collection characterised by its misogyny.

Keywords: Charles Bukowski, sexual objectification, second wave of feminism.



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## INTRODUCTION

Love is one of the universal themes of literature, of interest to all readers, irrespective of their cultural background. I myself still remember the day when I came across a powerful story in which a man fell in love with a girl because she was ‘a fluid moving fire, a spirit stuck into a form that would not hold her’ in his own words. She was the most beautiful girl in town and very different from the stereotype of women only interested in men for their money; her life was wretched and she had been completely destroyed. I felt her pain instantly, picturing myself in her; we had lots of things in common. Suddenly I became her in the story and felt all the intensity of that love, so strong and unique. The man tried to save her and she loved him, but it was not enough. I imagined what it must have been like for him to live without her, to have lost someone who gave up living. I cried for her, cried for him.

After that I decided to read other stories by Charles Bukowski. I started to look for that same love in his other books. However, in many of his poems, novels and short stories, he refers to women extremely pejoratively. It occurred to me that he might be writing like this because he had really loved the character in his story and, after her death, he could never love another woman as much as her. Of course, this was just an intuition, but it seemed to make sense.

On reflection, after reading some critical writing on Bukowski, I realised that he was frequently accused of being misogynistic and sexist and this was undoubtedly true. But I was still bothered by the story I had fallen in love with, because, apparently, it showed a different attitude towards women. It showed his indignation about how society had treated Cass, and it showed a man who was touched by her pain, touched by love.

This was the starting point for the present research: an investigation of how women are depicted by Bukowski; the corpus could only be the book containing the short story, ‘The Most Beautiful Woman in Town’ – *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*, a collection of 64 short stories written in the late sixties and first published in a single volume in 1972.

Henry Charles Bukowski Junior (1920-1994) was born in Germany on 16 August 1920. He moved with his parents to the United States when he was just two years old. Bukowski had a difficult childhood, because he was constantly beaten by his father and had no support from his mother. When he became an adolescent he had a serious problem with acne which made him even more reclusive. Against his father’s wishes, Bukowski started writing when he was just a teenager, but his work was only noticed in 1955. He became

famous for his colloquial and obscene style focused on society's underworld. In 1967 he wrote a column called 'Notes of a Dirty Old Man' for the alternative newspaper *Open City*, as a result of which he became known as a dirty old man. His career took off after John Martin, founder of the publisher Black Sparrow, had published his works. Women are constantly mentioned in his work, most of them are objectified, and Bukowski has become known as sexist and misogynist. Some critics, such as Russell Harrison (1994), recognise that Bukowski's male chauvinism is present in his work, but, in his later writing, the irony used to depict the machismo of his protagonists reveals a satire of the male protagonist, and the characterisation of women moves from being stereotyped towards a more complex representation. Harrison affirms that the later novels are best analysed in the context of the Second Wave of Feminism, because they were written at the time of the Women's Liberation movement, which influenced Bukowski's writing.

*The Feminine Mystique* (1963), *Sexual Politics* (1969), and *The Female Eunuch* (1970), by the feminist critics Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer and Kate Millett, respectively, are key works in the Second Wave of Feminism, a useful overview of which is given by Thomas Bonnici in *Teoria e crítica literária feminista* (2007), a dictionary concerning biographical, literary, historical, conceptual, fictional, psychoanalytical and sociological aspects of sexual politics, as well as Feminist and Gender Studies. Bonnici's research gives an overview of terms used in feminist literary criticism. In the present research some of the terms defined by Bonnici are fundamental in the analysis of how women are depicted in Charles Bukowski's *Erections*, *Ejaculations*, *Exhibitions* and *General Tales of Ordinary Madness*.

According to Bonnici, the First Wave of Feminism comprehends the literary, cultural and political activism from the final decades of the eighteenth century to the fight for the feminine vote in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1792, there was the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft, in which the author demands education for women and attacks the educational restrictions and wrong ideas about feminine virtues, which kept women ignorant and dependent. At that time women could neither vote nor assume functions which were not related to housework. The end of the nineteenth century brought better opportunities for women in education and they initiated a fight for equality in England. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) had a strong impact on the feminist movement. The right to vote was conceded at different times around the world: Russia in

1917, Germany in 1918, the United States in 1919, the United Kingdom in 1928, Brazil in 1932, and France, Italy and Japan in 1945.

Bonnici dates the start of the Second Wave of Feminism to 1949, with the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, in which she analyses male and female stereotypes and investigates sexist attitudes; for de Beauvoir, the woman is 'the Other'. In the 1960s and early 70s, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, and Germaine Greer, amongst others, became famous for their political, cultural and literary activism in the Women's Liberation movement; their writing formed the basis of the theoretical position of feminist literary criticism. Bonnici states that Germaine Greer focuses upon women's right of sexual expression, while Millett analyses literary values and conventions that were shaped by men and written for men. He explains that the term 'sexual politics', used by Millett, refers to the way in which sexual roles perpetuate the relationship of domination and subordination between the sexes.

Among the terms defined by Bonnici, the most important for the present study of Bukowski's work are: 'Symbolic annihilation of woman' (men represented as dominant and women reduced to subordination); 'Cyborg' (the bionic human being; one of Bukowski's characters is a female 'fuck machine'); 'Stereotype' (concepts, opinions and conventional beliefs that typify an invariable model; in Bukowski's work most women are stereotyped); 'Marginality' (patriarchalism marginalises the feminine experience, a common procedure in most of Bukowski's writing); 'Misogyny' (in feminist criticism, misogyny is represented in the negative feminine stereotypes found in literary work written by men; Bukowski himself was accused many times of being misogynist); 'Objectification' (the manner in which a person or group of persons treat others as objects; usually in Bukowski's stories women are sex objects); 'Patriarchalism' (manifested in literary works in which feminine characters are stereotyped and seen as the marginalised other); 'Sexism' (degradation and repression of women; a resource frequently used by Bukowski to depict women characters); 'Violence' (violence against women goes from the act of insulting to murder; Bonnici cites Millett, who demonstrates male domination in the description of sexual violence in many canonic novels); 'Victimisation' (the condition of women when reduced to objects caused by patriarchalism). All these terms will be used in the analysis of Bukowski's female characters in *Erections*, *Ejaculations*, *Exhibitions* and *General Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1972).

The hypothesis that I wish to investigate in the present study is that Bukowski's portrayal of Cass in 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town' is markedly more sensitive towards her marginalised and objectified status than the misogynistic attitude that

characterises his depiction of almost all other female characters in the collection. The theoretical basis for my analysis is drawn from the work of the feminist literary critics of the Second Wave of Feminism who were Bukowski's contemporaries. In order to better describe the particular contribution of Friedan, Greer and Millett to feminist thinking it will be helpful to set them in the context of their forerunners.

### **1.1) The First Wave of Feminism and the beginning of the Second Wave**

Inspired by the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). It was a response to a pamphlet (a proposal for the New Constitution of France) written by the legislator M. Talleyrand, Late Bishop of Autun (1754-1838), in which he vindicated education for all men. Wollstonecraft extended the right to women, with the justification that, in order to be a good wife and a good mother, it was necessary to be educated.

Wollstonecraft argues that women had been made weak as a result of being educated to cultivate the 'elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners supposed to be the sexual characteristic of the weaker vessel' (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1996, p. iv). She ascribes this weakening of the female sex to inadequate education:

One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect (p. 6).

The author explains that women were taught since their infancy to be beautiful, obedient and docile in order to obtain the protection of men, when 'men and women must be educated by the opinions and manners of the society they live in' (p. 20). She criticises men's thought about women's delicacy and says that it serves only to soften women's slavish dependence. She wishes that elegance were inferior to virtue, because the human character is fundamental without any distinction of sex (p. 8). For Wollstonecraft, the perfect education was an exercise of the understanding calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart, an education which would enable the individual to be virtuous and independent, however society 'enslaved women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses' (p. 21).

The author expresses her dissatisfaction by saying that tyrants and sensualists kept women in the dark because they were interested in converting them into slaves and mistresses, and she affirms that women should not be made subservient to love or to lust:

Let us examine this question. Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries the arguments [...] and insinuates that [...] obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour. What nonsense! (p. 25)

Her belief was that man and woman were equal in mind, so knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature. She claims that women should be seen as rational creatures, 'ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half being' (p. 38). She asked her contemporaries to rise above the prejudice of women's inferiority; she demanded the right to strengthen women's minds by education and reflection, 'preparing their affection for a more exalted state!' (p. 94).

Wollstonecraft's vindication of women's rights would find an important representative more than a century later; in 1929 Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) wrote *A Room of One's Own*, in which she demonstrates the injustice to which women were subjected in England. She registers her own research into the status of women:

I went, therefore, to the shelf where the histories stand and took down one of the latest, Professor Trevelyan's HISTORY OF ENGLAND. Once more I looked up Women, found "position of" and turned to the pages indicated. "Wife-beating", I read, "was a recognized right of man, and was practiced without shame by high as well as low. . . ." "Similarly," the historian goes on, "the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion" (WOOLF, 1992, p. 54).

She records that the next reference to the position of women is about two hundred years later, after 1470 (soon after Chaucer's time), when 'It was still the exception for women of the upper and middle class to choose their own husbands, and when the husband had been assigned, he was lord and master, so far at least as law and custom could make him' (p. 54). Woolf points out that, although women were portrayed as if they were of the highest importance in Literature, dominating the lives of kings, in reality they were insignificant and



almost absent from History; they could hardly read and they were the property of their husbands.

Even in Virginia Woolf's own time in the early twentieth century, a woman was still not expected to be more than a housewife, and far from being encouraged to become an artist; 'on the contrary, she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted. Her mind must have been strained and her vitality lowered by the need of opposing this, of disproving that' (p. 71). Woolf asserts that the world, of which Keats and Flaubert were part, was hostile to women writing: 'There would always have been that assertion – you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that – to protest against, to overcome' (p. 70). She argues that this hostility is rooted in the male belief in his superiority over the woman. According to Virginia Woolf, although some women could make money by writing essays on Shakespeare and translating the classics, if a woman was to write fiction, she 'must have money and a room of her own' (p. 4). The problem was the lack of education to which women had been subjected throughout History. Woolf states that intellectual freedom depended upon material things and women have always been poor from the beginning of time: 'Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry' (p. 141). That is why she laid so much stress on having money and a room of one's own.

Twenty years after Virginia Woolf published her book, a Frenchwoman who had money and a room of her own was Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), who was able to become an intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist. Her book, *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, is the foundation stone in the Second Wave of Feminism.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir discusses the light in which women are viewed by biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. The author demonstrates 'how the concept of "truly feminine" has been fashioned – why woman has been defined as the Other – and what have been the consequences from man's point of view' (DE BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 28). In Book Two, she describes 'how woman undergoes her apprenticeship, how she experiences her position, in what kind of universe she is confined, what modes of escape are vouchsafed her' (p. 29).

According to H. M. Parshley, English translator of the book, de Beauvoir's perspective is existentialist:

She states in general how certain existentialist concepts – which, it may be remarked, in themselves command intellectual and ethical respect – apply to woman's situation (...). The central thesis of Mlle de Beauvoir's book is that since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men (Preface in DE BEAUVOIR, PARSHLEY, 1997, p. 8-9).

With regard to sexuality, de Beauvoir states that women are accused of thinking with their glands, but she points out that men also have glands. However, this is seen as an aspect of nature connected to the world, while a woman's body is just a prison of hormones. She demonstrates how men have historically seen a woman as a less than human being, by quoting Aristotle and St. Thomas, who claim that the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities and that the woman is an imperfect man, an incidental being. For de Beauvoir, a woman is 'defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' (p. 16).

Women were made 'the others' by those who established themselves as 'the ones', according to de Beauvoir. She questions how women came to accept such a title of inessential and object, principally sex objects. 'She is for man a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object – an Other through whom he seeks himself' (p. 85). She observes that some French writers such as Montherlant and Jean de Meung, were hostile towards women, which, de Beauvoir argues, stems from an inferiority complex. In other words, since they were anxious about their virility, they were aggressive to women:

If Montherlant had really deflated the myth of the eternal feminine, it would be in order to congratulate him on the achievement: it is by denying Woman that we can help women to assume the status of human beings. But, as we have seen, he does not smash the idol: he changes it into monster. He too, believes in that vague and basic essence, femininity; he holds with Aristotle and St. Thomas that woman is to be defined negatively; woman is woman through the lack of virility; that is the fate to which every female individual must submit without being able to modify it (p. 214).

De Beauvoir goes on to point out that, in her time, society expected women to make themselves erotic objects (it is still like this at the beginning of the twenty-first century; the media subjugate women to a stereotype of beauty that offers them up as a plaything of male sexual urges). Even in de Beauvoir's time, 'the purpose of the fashions to which she is

enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as a prey to male desire' (p. 506). She comments that 'the costume may disguise the body, deform it, or follow its curves; in any case it puts it on display' (p. 506).

Simone de Beauvoir fought for women's rights. She fought for women to be considered more than sex objects. She could not accept a destiny which turned women into submissive creatures, based on the justification that males were superior due to not bearing children, not having a womb. Her work was the beginning of something more; it was the beginning of the Second Wave of Feminism. People around the world were reading *The Second Sex* and it changed women's lives. It definitely changed Betty Friedan's mind, since her work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is considered to have been inspired by it.

## 1.2) The Second Wave of Feminism

On 26 August, 1970, more than 20,000 women went onto the streets in New York City and throughout the US, vindicating equal opportunities in the workforce, political rights for women, and social equality in relationships such as marriage. Despite the arguments of Wollstonecraft, Woolf, de Beauvoir and many others, women still did not have the same freedoms as men. Women earned less than men for the same work, even when they were equally educated and qualified. In many states women were also unable to obtain credit cards, make wills, or own properties without a husband.

Betty Friedan (1921-2006), leader of the National Organization for Women, had planned the protest and spoke about the strength and ability of women to rise above their oppression. The main objective of the demonstration was to publicise the feminist movement and ideas. Friedan had written about many of them in her work *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963, in which she exposes the injustices experienced by women.

The feminine mystique is the conviction that a woman can fulfil herself only by being a wife and mother, and this belief is so strong that, according to Friedan, 'women grow up no longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities the mystique forbids' (FRIEDAN, 2010, p. 61). She describes the impact of the feminine mystique as follows:

The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question "Who am I?" by saying "Tom's wife ... Mary's mother." But I don't think the mystique would have such power over American women if they did not fear to face this terrifying blank which makes them unable to see themselves after twenty-one. The truth is – and how long it has been true,

I'm not sure, but it was true in my generation and it is true of girls growing up today – an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be (p. 64).

For Friedan the mistake is to believe that fulfilment can only be found in sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love. The preservation of the feminine mystique turned women into a target of sexual marketing naming it femininity.

In Friedan's time it was well documented that novelists of suburbia, the mass media, ads, television, movies, and women's magazines, all exploited the voracious female appetite for sexual fantasy. Friedan explains that, having repressed their desire, sex was the only frontier open to women who had always lived within the confines of the feminine mystique, but she defines a woman who accepts being a sex object as a woman who lives in a world of objects, 'unable to touch in others the individual identity she lacks herself' (p. 255):

It is not an exaggeration to say that several generations of able American women have been successfully reduced to sex creatures, sex-seekers. But something has evidently gone wrong. Instead of fulfilling the promise of infinite orgasmic bliss, sex in the America of the feminine mystique is becoming a strangely joyless national compulsion, if not a contemptuous mockery (p. 250).

According to Friedan, this frustrated female sexual hunger has increased women's conflicts over their so-called femininity and turned their attention to the pursuit of sexual fulfilment. The stereotype of the ideal woman trapped the suburban housewife and chained her to mistaken ideas and unreal choices, which for Friedan were not easily shaken off, but 'these images would not have such power, if women were not suffering a crisis of identity' (p. 68). Friedan claims that the only way to change this situation would be for women to start to see through 'the delusions of the feminine mystique and realize that neither her husband nor her children, nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women, can give her a self' (p. 326).

Friedan's basic ideas of women being turned into sex objects and being imprisoned in the mythical perfect woman as a good mother and good wife were developed by Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*, first published in 1970. Greer argues that women's enemy is discrimination against their sex, but that they have been conditioned to accept male oppression. Germaine Greer states that:

women must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development

which have been successively locked off by conditioning (GREER, 2010, p. 17).

She asserts that the female is seen as a sex object by men, available for their use. Her sexuality is exposed as passive, her body is suppressed and the praised characteristics in her are the same as those of the castrate, which are timidity, plumpness, languor, delicacy and preciousity. For Greer, the female body is shown as weak, since women have a womb, which supposedly causes hysteria, menstrual depression and weakness. The stereotype is the dominant image of femininity in which the women are effectively castrated, reduced to 'the object of male fantasy':

The castration of women has been carried out in terms of a masculine-feminine polarity, in which men have commandeered all the energy and streamlined it into an aggressive conquistatorial power, reducing all heterosexual contact into a sadomasochistic pattern (p. 19).

Greer states that love has been perverted and sadism inspires hideous crimes on the bodies of women, but more frequently they are casually abused and insulted, which unconsciously makes them see men as their enemy. For Greer, 'sex must be rescued from the traffic between powerful and powerless, masterful and mastered, sexual and neutral' (p. 21).

Like Friedan, Greer argues that women must recognise that the role given to them by society is not fair. Instead of accepting it and using a mask, women need to understand that the purpose of their existence is not to be a wife and mother. They need to be independent and free. In society women have become objects to be ornamented; they need to follow fashion, to use jewels; the more they use, the more they become the showcase for wealth. While men do not need to wear accessories, women's beauty has become celebrated in terms of riches; the comparisons made to female beauty are connected with precious adornments: 'She was for consumption' (p. 65). Women are required to look expensive, they study the stereotype created by the media; they become sex objects, because the media tell them so. Fetishes vary according to male taste, but all of them welcome the stereotype, because there are commonly recognised areas of value. A woman's function is to be a sex object, she is a doll; 'her essential quality is castratedness' (p. 69). Her image appears smiling interminably.

According to Greer, women are conditioned to abandon their autonomy and follow society's guidance. They are made to believe their function is to take care of the house and the children from the earliest age. Their thoughts about marriage and child-bearing are very romantic, so when they finally get into the situation itself the result is disappointment and frustration. Psychology pushes the masochistic role as the proper one for women and

reinforces the belief that they are conditioned to from childhood on. From the time a girl is born she is forced to accept her duty as wife and mother.

Greer observes that women have been using a mask without being able to show it was a mask; they have been deprived of idealism and because of that they have had a closer contact with reality: 'They have been charged with deviousness and duplicity since the dawn of civilization' (p. 129). She goes on to argue that the restraints of paternalist society must be overthrown:

Womanpower means the self-determination of women, and that means that all the baggage of paternalist society will have to be thrown overboard. Woman must have room and scope to devise a morality which does not disqualify her from excellence, and a psychology which does not condemn her to the status of a spiritual cripple (p. 131).

Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch*, in 1970, the year after the US publication of Kate Millett's PhD dissertation, *Sexual Politics*, in which she criticises patriarchal society and literature and questions the origins of patriarchy, arguing that sex-based oppression is both political and cultural. Both authors, Greer and Millett, share the idea that, in human History, the female has been limited to an existence committed to menial labour and domestic service. Women have been forced to accept the condition of being sex objects, but have been forbidden from enjoying their own sexuality. Millett affirms that women are 'made to suffer for and be ashamed of their sexuality, while in general (they are) not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusive sexual existence' (MILLETT, 1977, p. 119). For her, women have been condemned to provide men with a sexual outlet and to exercise the animal functions of reproduction and care of the young.

The imposed characteristics of male and female are described by Millett to demonstrate women's subjugation and subordination, because each sex role elaborates a code of conduct and attitude for men and women. 'In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male' (p. 26). In other words, society ascribes a superior position to the male:

As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female. The first item, temperament, involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ("masculine" and "feminine"), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates:

aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, “virtue”, and ineffectuality in the female (p. 26).

Hostility towards women is expressed in a number of ways. ‘Misogynist literature, the primary vehicle of masculine hostility, is both an hortatory and comic genre’ (p. 45). For Millett, all artistic forms in a patriarchy reinforce both sexual factions in their status, and the image of women is an image created by men to suit their needs. This notion presupposes an established patriarchy that sets the male as the human norm and the female as the other.

Although they are not a minority, women tend to feel marginalised, because of the discrimination they face in relation to their behaviour, employment and education. The media present an unreal image of passivity, which must be followed as an example of conduct. Their sexuality is subjected to social forces and it is suffocated, because they exist to be ruled, but ‘the recent liberation of sexual desire in women, and particularly the new right of sexual initiative, place women in a position to rule’ (p. 273), however, when they take their opportunity they are oppressed and interpreted as immoral.

Kate Millett investigates how women are depicted in literature, and chooses the modern novelists D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, contrasted with the viewpoint of the homosexual author Jean Genet. Her intention is to demonstrate how sexist and misogynist these authors are, and how this behaviour influences society, propagating women’s suffering:

just “fuck” women and discard them, much as one might avail oneself of sanitary facilities, Kleenex or toilet paper, for example. Just “fucking”, the Miller hero is merely a huckster and a con man, unimpeded by pretension, with no priestly role to uphold. Lawrence did much to kill off the traditional attitudes of romantic love. At first glance, Miller seems to have started up blissfully ignorant of their existence altogether. Actually, his cold-blooded procedure is intended as sacrilege to the tenderness of romantic love, a tenderness Lawrence was never willing to forgo. In his brusque way, Miller demonstrates the “love fraud” (a species of power play disguised as eroticism) to be a process no more complex than a mugging. The formula is rather simple: you meet her, cheat her into letting you have “a piece of ass,” and then take off. Miller’s hunt is a primitive find, fuck, and forget (p. 296).

Millett asserts that ‘Miller simply converts woman to cunt-thing’ (p. 297), because his ideal woman is a whore; whereas, for Lawrence, prostitution is a profanation of the temple, for Miller it is ‘a gratifying convenience for the male (since it is easier to pay than persuade)’ (p. 301).

It is common to find in Charles Bukowski's writing examples of the sexist, misogynistic discourse identified by Kate Millett when she criticises Miller. Bukowski's voice and that of his narratorial alter ego, Henry Chinaski, are seen as one. In the next section I outline how this connection is made and how the image of dirty old man was constructed by Bukowski himself.

### 1.3) Charles Bukowski v Alter Ego Narrator

Best known as a poet, Bukowski published thirty-four collections of poetry between 1960 and his death in 1994. However, his initial attempts as a writer were with prose. His first publication, in 1944, was the short story entitled 'Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip'. Two years later he published another short story, '20 Tanks from Kasseldown'. Without any other success Bukowski became disenchanted with the publishing world and spent his next decade getting drunk. He only started writing poetry at the beginning of the 1950s and published his first collection of poems, *Flower, Fist, and Bestial Wail*, in 1960. Known for its colloquial and obscene style, his poetry was successful and, in the 1960s alone, Bukowski published a total of thirteen volumes of verse. In 1969 he gave the first of the readings, characterised by his drunkenness and his combative relationship with his public, which continued until 1980. In the mid Sixties Bukowski started writing prose again, beginning in 1967 with a column for the alternative newspaper *Open City*, which was published in the collection entitled *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* in 1969. It was also in 1967 that Bukowski returned to writing short stories, which were published in *Open City* and other small magazines such as *Nola Express*, *Knight*, *Adam Reader* and *Pix*, most of which were pornographic publications.

In 1972, sixty-four of these short stories were collected and published by City Lights Books<sup>1</sup> in the collection *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*. (In 1983, the stories in this book were republished, divided between the two volumes *Tales of Ordinary Madness* and *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*.)

Bukowski's success in the 1960s did not provide him with sufficient income to become a professional writer. Throughout the decade he worked in the Post Office, an experience that

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<sup>1</sup> City Lights is an independent bookstore-publisher combination in San Francisco, California that specialises in world literature, the arts, and progressive politics. It was founded in 1953 by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Peter D. Martin. Both the store and the publishers became widely known following the obscenity trial of Ferlinghetti for publishing Allen Ginsberg's influential collection *Howl and Other Poems* (City Lights, 1956).



he hated and which provided the raw material for his first novel, *Post Office* (1971), published two years after signing a contract with John Martin, founder of the Black Sparrow press, which finally enabled him to become a full-time writer. Until the year of his death Bukowski wrote five more novels: *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), *Hollywood* (1989) and *Pulp* (1994).

Whether in poetry or prose, some themes are recurrent in Bukowski's work: the quotidian of people on society's margins, drunkenness, the act of writing, the boredom of the fixed-wage worker and, above all, relationships with women. Much of Bukowski's prose is narrated in the first person by Henry Chinaski, the writer's alter ego:

Bukowski revealed the genesis of the name: "The 'Chin' part, if you must know, was thrown in because of my chin. I was one of those guys able to absorb a terrific punch. I was not a very good fighter but taking me out was a great problem. I won a few by simply out-enduring the stupid son of a bitch trying to do me in". And of course 'as' = 'ass' – thus 'Chinaski' is a thoroughly embodied name to give to his often wearily enfleshed anti-hero (CALONNE, 2013, p. 77-8).

In an interview for *Hustler* magazine in December 1976, 'Bukowski claimed the majority of what he wrote was literally what happened in his life. (...) He even went so far as to put a figure on it: ninety-three per cent of his work was autobiography, he said, and the remaining seven per cent was improved upon' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 7). So, generally speaking, it can be affirmed that the point of view, the attitudes and the speech of Henry Chinaski are, largely, those of Charles Bukowski himself.

David Charlson (2005) was the first to publish an academic dissertation on the poetry and prose of Charles Bukowski. His doctoral dissertation is, according to him, 'a historical document concerned with an amazing author who continues to matter to the world' (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 7). In his book, the author gives a useful insight into Bukowski's narratorial persona quoting Bukowski's own words:

I began writing poetry at the age of 35 after coming out of the death ward of the L.A. County General Hospital and not as a visitor. To get somebody to read your poems you have to be noticed, so I got my act up. I wrote vile (but interesting) stuff that made people hate me, that made them curious about this Bukowski. (...) Meanwhile, I wrote about most of this, it was my persona, it was me but it wasn't me. As time went on, trouble and action arrived by itself and I didn't have to force it and I wrote about *that* and this was closer to my real persona. Actually, I am not a tough person and sexually, most of the time, I am almost a prude, but I am often a nasty drunk and many strange things happen to me when I am drunk. ... What I am

trying to say is that the longer I write the closer I am getting to what I am ...  
(qtd. in CHARLSON, 2005, p. 44).

According to Oxford Dictionary definition, persona is the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others, or, a role or character adopted by an author or an actor. Charlson comments that, 'although the above responds to a question about the persona in Bukowski's poetry, it easily applies to his prose as well, maybe even more so' (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 44). According to Charlson, the 'Notes of a Dirty Old Man', which labelled the persona of Bukowski and some of which were republished by City Lights in the collection *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*, solidified the intended initial impression of vileness. Charlson believes that Bukowski, the real author, first created a persona from his own experiences to build a myth. With time and publicity, both author and persona came to use the myth to define themselves. The final stage in the process resulted in Bukowski the autobiographical novelist:

In this stage, Bukowski is allowed the time and space to tell the full story of Henry Chinaski, his alter ego, through five novels, while more poetry and various short stories attend them. The overall effect, however, does not seem all that complicated; the effect is that Bukowski the real author, no matter what name is attached to the persona, is just telling more of his history, refining the myth, making quite clear just who he was and is. (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 45)

Despite the vile and vulgar persona built by Bukowski himself, Charlson is convinced that he was 'also a sensitive and sensible man, with a strange and unique way of revealing himself to the world' (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 45). His affirmation is based on the later manifestations of the persona, as in *Women*, and in his life. In an interview from September 1987, published as 'Tough Guys Write Poetry: Charles Bukowski by Sean Penn' (1987), Bukowski told Sean Penn he was sure he makes women look bad sometimes, but he makes men look bad too and he makes himself look bad. 'Such awareness is why he often made the claim that he is neither misogynist nor misanthropist, despite any evidence quoted out of context' (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 74).

Charlson stresses the autobiographical element in Bukowski's writing: 'Considering, then, Bukowski's voluminous output of autobiographical poems, short stories, novels, and nonfiction, plus his comments on all that in interviews, one is hard pressed not to call him an autobiographer driven to tell all' (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 41). But he stresses that this does not necessarily mean that Bukowski is being truthful. He refers to Timothy Dow Adams' *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (1990) to demonstrate how 'Adams takes

the widely recognized fundamental terms of “design” and “truth” from Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) and adds a third – lying’ (p. 42).

The recognition of such a strategy allows Adams to offer the following expanded definition of the genre: “autobiography is the story of an attempt to reconcile one’s life with one’s self and is not, therefore, meant to be taken as historically accurate but as metaphorically authentic”. Authenticity is what the autobiographical author is after, and Adams’ approach allows him to study not only McCarthy and Hellman but also Gertrude Stein. (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 42)

Charlson argues that Adams’ comments on Sherwood Anderson can be extended to Bukowski as well. ‘In Anderson’s autobiographies, the “casual use of the facts of the author’s life results in an accurate portrait of the real Anderson” (qtd in CHARLSON, 2005, p. 42).

The famous Anderson legend – the author leaving the paint factory for art – is “personal myth” rather than “historical account”; however, even if the legendary incident did not happen, it does suggest who Anderson was or chose to portray himself to be. As Adams says, “We often discover that whether or not an autobiography rings true is as important as whether or not it is true”. (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 42)

Charlson claims that the strategic lying of Bukowski in the depiction of his male protagonists, especially Henry Chinaski, portrays characters who think almost the same as himself, and, with regard to women, Bukowski confesses that he lies too little. ‘The more one studies Chinaski and similar Bukowski personae, the closer one can get to seeing an accurate portrait of the real Bukowski’ (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 43).

Furthermore, it is not too much of a stretch to say that the compression, addition, and repetition of letters by Bukowski to make up his autobiographical persona’s name of Henry Chinaski symbolically represents what Bukowski did with his life experiences as well for nearly thirty years. What he did is not exactly lying; rather, it is strategic presentation of self. Any biographer can do little else. (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 46)

In *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*, published in 1994, Russell Harrison argues that Chinaski has been ‘problematized as the protagonists of Lawrence, Miller and Hemingway had not been’ (HARRISON, 1994, p. 210). Harrison maintains that Bukowski stopped following the chauvinist tradition and began ‘to deconstruct that tradition as we have come to associate it with Hemingway, Miller and Mailer’

(HARRISON, 1994, p. 203). Charlson states that ‘Chinaski often debunks traditional masculine ways almost as much as Bukowski’ (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 79), and Chinaski once said ‘there’s nothing worse than an old chauvinist pig’ in the novel *Women*, which shows that the character knows about his reputation, just as Bukowski knew about himself. ‘Furthermore, it is not too much of a stretch to say that the compression, addition, and repetition of letters by Bukowski to make up his autobiographical persona’s name of Henry Chinaski symbolically represents what Bukowski did with his life experiences as well for nearly thirty years’ (CHARLSON, 2005, p. 46).

In *Charles Bukowski: Sunlight Here I Am* (2004), David Stephen Calonne collects interviews and encounters with Bukowski between 1963 and 1993; in one of them, given to Douglas Howard in 1975 for the *Grapevine* (Fayetteville, Arkansas), Bukowski asserted that he was very gentle to women:

In my life, of all the women I’ve known, I have hit two of them. And that’s, that’s a pretty good record with all the women I’ve known. They got to me twice. Generally, I’m very gentle, very tolerant. I try to understand what’s bothering them (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004 p. 116-7).

However his affirmations are paradoxical; how can a man be gentle to women if he beats them, even if it was only a minority of his partners? Such a man must still be considered brutal. Bukowski’s discourse is ambiguous; although he defends himself from the accusation of being sexist and misogynistic, he also says: ‘I tell the women that the face is my experience and the hands are my soul – anything to get those panties down’ (qtd. in CALLONE, 2004, p. 147).

In 1976, Glenn Esterly interviewed Bukowski for *Rolling Stone* magazine and challenged him by recalling some of his contradictory statements about women, ‘Like, on one hand, “women are the world’s most marvellous inventions,” and, on the other, “I wouldn’t recommend getting involved with women to any man” (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 156). Bukowski responded that both affirmations were absolutely true and said there was no contradiction in that; he continued by saying that, before he met Linda Lee Beighle, he had spent four years without a woman and felt pretty good about it because women can be awfully time-consuming. ‘What can I tell ‘em? I wanna fuck ‘em, that’s all’ (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 156).

Bukowski believed that he was neither anti-woman nor pro-woman; for him, he just experienced them and wrote about it. When Douglas Howard asked him in 1975, what he thought about women’s liberation, he stated that it was a good thing, but also weakening:

Once you gather in a group and you start using group's ideas, you lose your own individual thinking processes. And in that way, it's weakening. So, you get some baddies in that group too, simply man haters. It's like any other group; it has its good points and its bad; it has its freaks; it helps some and destroys others. Overall, I'd say it's a good function (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 120).

Some years later, in 1981, Silvia Bizio interviewed Charles Bukowski for *High Times* and she wanted to know why people in Europe appreciated his writing more than readers in the United States. Bukowski replied that Europe was one hundred years ahead in poetry, painting and art, and in America the feminists hated him, which for him was not fair. He said the feminists just read parts of his work and, being infuriated, they refused to read the next page or story.

In 1990, he told Mary Ann Swissler in an interview for *Village View*, that there were good feminists and bad feminists – 'it depends upon the individual', according to him. In his view his misogynistic image had been constructed by people who had not read the totality of his work. 'In my life when I've met a woman who you could call a bad woman, a bitch, I've written her up as a bitch. Also when I was a bastard, I wrote myself up as a bastard. So I think I'm pretty fair' (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 263).

Bukowski even called women's sexual liberation 'bullshit' in his interview with Silvia Bizio (*High Times*); she asked him if he was concerned about how women feel making love with him and he asked her if she was talking about the sexual liberation 'bullshit'; he mentioned that he knew where the clitoris is and that he knew how to do all these things, but if women did not enjoy what he was doing, they just simply got another man. He believed he always had trouble with women when he got attached; he mentioned in an interview with Marc Chénétier for *Northwest Review* in 1975 that all his women said to him, 'Oh you write this hard stuff but you're soft, you're all marshmallow inside' (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 142), and in his opinion he was really like that. He stated that, 'If you want to write bad things about women, you have to live with them first. So I live with them in order to criticize them in my writings' (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 184-5)

When he was asked by Sean Penn to talk about women and sex in 1987 he said that women are just complaining machines:

Things are never right with a guy to them. And man, when you throw that hysteria in there ... forget it. I gotta get out, get in the car, and go. Anywhere. Get a cup of coffee somewhere. Anywhere. Anything but another woman. I guess they're just built different, right? (*He's on a roll*

now.) The hysteria starts ... they're gone. You got to leave, they don't understand. (*In a high woman's screech:*) "WHERE ARE YOU GOING?" "I'm getting the hell out of here, baby!" They think I'm a woman hater, but I'm not. A lot of it is word of mouth. They just hear "Bukowski's a male-chauvinist pig," but they don't check the source (qtd. in CALONNE, 2003, p. 213).

In the same interview he asserts that all a man has to do is to say a few words to women and 'grab 'em by the wrist, "Come on, baby." Lead 'em in the bedroom and fuck 'em' (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 214). In his judgement it is a big thing for women 'to have some guy pop 'em'. However, he demonstrates in some of his statements that he is not as confident as he would like to appear. When he was asked by Douglas Howard in an interview for *Grapevine* what the meaning of the male castration was in some of his stories, Bukowski said that he thought it was a symbolic gesture 'to escape the female and the power she has over us' (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 120). He added that his characters' feelings are frustration, panic, dominance and loss, but he did not know the meaning of it.

In a later book, *Charles Bukowski: Critical Lives* (2012), David Stephen Calonne asserts that, in Bukowski's writing, violence, sexuality and madness are balanced by absurd humour: 'Indeed, any pretensions of Chinaski to triumphant, phallic malehood are deflated since during his many beddings of women he is frequently unable to achieve an erection and he constantly exposes his fear, vulnerability and impotence: he is often too drunk to perform' (CALONNE, 2012, p. 129).

According to Calonne, Bukowski 'reveals how the artist takes the raw material of his life and through constantly reworking and re-examining it, tries to bring it closer to truth' (CALONNE, 2012, p. 162). In a letter to Nancy Flynn, written in 1975, Bukowski exposed his feelings about women:

I think the women might become truly liberated if they realize that some women can be shits, at times, just as some men can be. To simply defend women as women, no matter, that can only be self-defeating, and you know this.

I'm no woman-hater. They've given me more highs and magics than anything else, but I'm also a writer, sometimes. And there are variances in all things (qtd. in CALONNE, 2012, p. 123).

It is very difficult to label Bukowski as either pro- or anti-women, because his statements are almost always contradictory. It is necessary to analyse his work, where both attitudes will be seen, which shows the complexity of the subject. Being classified by feminists as a woman-hater was the initial critical response, but now it is essential to collect evidence which reveals

Bukowski's view of women in more detail. The work chosen as a corpus for analysis in this dissertation is the collection of short stories *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*, first published in 1972. The book was selected because of the story, 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town', in which, apparently, Bukowski reveals a more sensitive attitude towards women; he depicts Cass (the female protagonist) as a victim of male society, which turns her into a sex object. Calonne explains that the volume also contains several stories which cross into transgressive domains:

'The Fuck Machine' describes a device which provides ecstatic sexual experiences and explores the Baudrillardian concept of virtual versus 'real' reality which would inform many of Bukowski's stories: the men prefer the machine woman to a real one. 'The Fiend' portrays the middle-aged Martin Blanchard's rape of a small girl. The violation is graphically described, and at the close Blanchard turns himself in to the police. The story created a scandal: Bukowski defended himself saying that his job as a writer was to 'photograph' reality and that the role of writer and moralist were separate categories. 'The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California' involves necrophilia, again charting the liminal territory between fantasy/real relationships which would preoccupy Bukowski as he examined the complexities of sexual longing and frustration. (CALONNE, 2012, p. 111-2)


In order to conduct my analysis of Bukowski's attitude(s) to women in this collection of 64 stories I have divided them into groups according to the way in which the female characters are portrayed. In the overwhelming majority, women are depicted pejoratively – either as important characters or in passing. A very small minority portray women in a favourable light, and some other stories show a more ambivalent attitude on the part of the Bukowskian narrator. My method has been to summarise each of the stories succinctly and to draw attention specifically to the way in which each one portrays its female characters. In each group I have selected a number of representative stories for more detailed analysis. Finally, I analyse 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town' in order to determine to what extent that story may be seen as striking an entirely different note from the other stories in the collection.

#### **1.4) The organisation of the corpus**

There is no information available about the person responsible for compiling *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General tales of Ordinary Madness* in 1972. The volume does not have the name of an editor in addition to Bukowski's name as the author. It

is therefore impossible to know why these 64 stories were selected for inclusion, nor why they were printed in the particular order in which they are presented. There is no information about the date and place of the first publication of each of the stories – apart from a list of magazines and periodicals in which the stories in the collection were previously published, which does not specify which story appeared in which publication. For that reason, I have reorganised the stories in alphabetical order of their title, including the page number where each particular story is to be found. In the following chapters I present a summary and brief analysis of each of the stories in that particular group. The stories which I have selected for more detailed analysis are then presented, out of alphabetical order, at the end of the sequence.

The first group of stories is entitled ‘Stories that refer to women pejoratively’. The 29 stories in this group – almost half of the total – feature female characters, who are depicted in a negative, sexist light, often in a deeply offensive manner. In this group we will find the stories: ‘A .45 to Pay the Rent’, ‘3 Chickens’, ‘3 Women’, ‘All the Great Writers’, ‘All the Pussy We Want’, ‘The Beginner’, ‘The Birth, Life and Death of an Underground Newspaper’, ‘The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California’, ‘The Day We Talked About James Thurber’, ‘A Drinking Partner’, ‘An Evil Town’, ‘The Fiend’, ‘Flower Horse’, ‘The Fuck Machine’, ‘The Gut-Wringing Machine’, ‘Life in a Texas Whorehouse’, ‘A Lovely Love Affair’, ‘The Murder of Ramon Vasquez’, ‘My Big-Assed Mother’, ‘No Stockings’, ‘One for Walter Lowenfels’, ‘A Rain of Women’, ‘Rape! Rape!’, ‘Reunion’, ‘Six Inches’, ‘Trouble with a Battery’, ‘The White Beard’, ‘A White Pussy’ and ‘Would you Suggest Writing as a Career?’.

The second group is entitled ‘Stories that make pejorative references to women in passing’. The 28 stories in this group mention women pejoratively, even though the character is not a protagonist of the story. Some of these stories are not even stories as such, but accounts of Bukowski’s experiences at the horse races or other personal anecdotes. This group contains the stories: ‘’, ‘A Bad Trip’, ‘Another Horse Story’, ‘Beer and Poets and Talk’, ‘The Big Pot Game’, ‘The Blanket’, ‘Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home’, ‘Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1’, ‘Eyes Like the Sky’, ‘Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit’, ‘The Great Zen Wedding’, ‘I Shot a Man in Reno’, ‘Kid Stardust on the Porterhouse’, ‘Life and Death in the Charity Ward’, ‘Love it or Leave It’, ‘My Stay in the Poet’s Cottage’, ‘Night Streets of Madness’, ‘Non-Horseshit Horse Advice’, ‘Notes of a Potential Suicide’, ‘Notes on the Pest’, ‘Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood’, ‘Politics is like Trying to Screw a Cat in the



Ass', 'A Popular Man', 'Purple as an Iris', 'A Quiet Conversation Piece', 'Scenes from the Big Time', 'The Stupid Christs', and 'Twelve Flying Monkeys Who Won't Copulate Properly'.

Finally, the last group of stories contains those which show some positive aspects of women, even though, in most of them, these are mixed with negative aspects too. There are only 7 stories in this group: '25 Bums in Rags', 'Animal Crackers in My Soup', 'A Dollar and Twenty Cents', 'Goodbye Watson', 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town', 'Ten Jack-Offs', and 'Too Sensitive'. This group was entitled 'Stories which depict positive aspects of women, particularly 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town'. The story in the title is singled out for attention, because, apparently, it is an exception in Bukowski's representation of the feminine universe. Cass, the main female character, is marginalised and restricted by society's rules. Through the eyes of the narrator this feminine character reveals herself to be sensitive and unjustly treated by those around her; he analyses the impositions that are made upon her and suffers with her pain. She is different from other female characters depicted by the Bukowskian narrator because she is more complex, and his attitude towards her is kind and protective. For this reason, my analysis attempts to determine how exceptional this story is in relation to the other stories in the collection.

## CHAPTER ONE: STORIES THAT REFER TO FEMALE CHARACTERS PEJORATIVELY

In this chapter I shall examine the 29 stories in which women feature as important characters and are depicted in a pejorative light. Most of the stories objectify the female body and transform women into sex objects. The characters are often addressed or referred to as ‘cunt’ or described as if composed of no more than private parts. Some of the characters are only interested in money and others are portrayed as mad or superficial. Many of them are nymphomaniacs and yet are desperate to satisfy men as if their own satisfaction depended on that. The language used to depict the women is often offensive, and sex is often seen as an animal act. Bukowski often uses the verb ‘to mount’ or the violent word ‘to rape’. 22 of the stories in this group are in first-person narration, which demonstrates the contamination of the narrator’s opinion in the stories. Many of the stories uses the alter ego Henry Chinaski, and these stories are based on events in Bukowski’s own life. I shall present 25 of these stories in the form of a brief synopsis, followed by a short critical comment. The remaining four stories will be analysed at greater length.

### 2.1) ‘A .45<sup>2</sup> to Pay the Rent’ (p. 241)

This third-person narrative is a day in the life of Duke, an ex-con and small-time armed robber. We see him going to the supermarket with his four-year-old daughter, Lala, with whom he has a harmonious relationship based on the inversion of roles, allowing the child to treat him as her baby. However, when they return home, he treats his wife, Mag, abusively, saying the ‘only thing (she is) good for is fucking, for nothing, and laying around reading magazines and popping chocolates into (her) mouth’ (p. 245). He addresses her as ‘cunt’, and says she’s ‘nothing but a cunt on the whitehouse steps, wide open, and mentally siffed<sup>3</sup>...’ (p. 244). Nonetheless, despite the abuse, she still loves him and expresses anxiety as he takes his .45 to go out and hold up a liquor store because of the risk posed by the clarity

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘.45’ in the title is the Colt .45, a single-action revolver which has been manufactured by Colt’s Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company from 1873 to the present. Known as the ‘The Gun That Won the West’, it is perhaps the most iconic of sidearms.

<sup>3</sup> This is a word invented by Bukowski. One can conjecture that he may have meant to write ‘syphed’, or infected with syphilis.

of that night's full moon. Once at the liquor store he himself has second thoughts and drives on into the night. Although Duke nurses a chip on his shoulder because of the way society exploits and marginalises ex-prisoners, he himself perpetuates the cycle in his abusive relationship with his 'little wifey' (p. 244).

## **2.2) '3 Chickens' (p. 66)**

This is an account of the first-person narrator's disturbing relationship with Vicki,<sup>4</sup> which is characterised by drunkenness, verbal abuse, physical violence and sexual betrayal. Nonetheless, they do not separate, feeling compelled to feed the sick love they feel for each other. At the beginning of the story, the narrator breaks Vicki's arm by folding her away in a fold-down bed in their flat. On another occasion he breaks her false teeth by slapping her across the mouth. Instead of leaving him, Vicki goes to bars and chases other men, "'looking for a live one,'" as the girls would say' (p. 67), and sometimes only returns home after three days. On one of these occasions, the narrator catches her in her favourite bar and tells her that he had 'tried to make a woman out of' her, but that she was 'nothing, but a god damned whore' (p. 67). Then he hits her so hard that she falls off the barstool. Later, in response to her taunting, the narrator admits that he only hits her because she is a woman and that he would not have enough courage to hit a man. The three chickens appear in the story when the narrator picks up a prostitute called Margy; he buys three chickens to bake after they have had sex, but she drops them on the floor when he sticks his middle finger up her vagina. Before they can have sex Vicki arrives back at the flat with two policemen, who arrest Margy when she calls one of them homosexual. In order to prove that he is not he assaults her in the lift on the way out, and the story ends with Vicky and the narrator having sex. Closely autobiographical in its detail, this story reveals Bukowski's attitude to women in many occasions of his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Although Bukowski does not identify himself as such, this story is based on his relationship with Jane Cooney Baker – who is also referred to as Vicki in 'Life and Death in the Charity Ward'. According to Howard Sounes, 'Bukowski transformed Jane into a stock character of his fiction, second only to Henry Chinaski and his father' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 28). Sounes points out that, in interviews, Bukowski gave the 'entirely fictitious' information that Jane was a half-Irish/half-Indian orphan, and in this story Vicki is described as 'half Indian' (p. 70).

### 2.3) '3 Women' (p. 58)

This is a supposedly autobiographical account of a period when Bukowski was living with a woman called Linda in a room in an eight-storey hotel opposite McArthur Park in Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> They are both unemployed, and all they 'could do about' their 'worries was to fuck' (p. 58). After an unsuccessful attempt to find work the narrator named Bukowski returns to the hotel and finds Linda drinking with her friends Jeanie and Eve. The three women pass out from drunkenness and the narrator takes advantage of the situation. First he goes to the bedroom where Jeanie is sleeping and 'mounts' her, not finding too much resistance, and has 'one of the best fucks of (his) life' (p. 61). The second one is Eve who 'didn't protest at all' (p. 62). Finally, having had two orgasms, he lies down beside his partner Linda. She says she is hot for him but, since he is unable to perform, she gives him oral sex until he comes once again, conveniently forgetting about her own desires in the process. The narrator is much more concerned to chronicle his own sexual prowess than to portray the three women as individuals. (Indeed, having described his three orgasms, he even exaggerates the total, claiming there were 'four times that night' (p. 63).) Jeanie is simply described as 'a large woman, and naked' (p. 61), whom he 'mounts' as if she was a bitch in heat. Eve 'was a little female pig, farting and grunting and sniffing, wiggling' (p. 62), and Linda is appreciated for her skill in sucking his cock. Afterwards, the three women go out drinking by themselves and the narrator is thrown out of the hotel for his inappropriate behaviour in a 'respectable' establishment. He summarises the story by saying, 'let's just say that one night I fucked or got fucked by 3 women. and let that be story enough' (p. 65).

### 2.4) 'All the Great Writers' (p. 148)

This story narrates the first few hours one morning in the life of Henry Mason, the boss of a publishing house which has Bukowski on its list of authors. He receives visits from 'great writers', who are actually bad writers who believe they are good. The first one is James

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<sup>5</sup> From 1970 to 1972 Bukowski did indeed have a turbulent relationship with the sculptress Linda King – 'after Jane Cooney Baker, probably the greatest love of Bukowski's life' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 111). However, in this case, it would appear that Linda is the pseudonym of Jane herself. The account in the story's opening paragraph of Bukowski seeing a man falling past the window and spattering onto the ground below and calling Linda to see the mess, is included in Howard Sounes' biography as an event that occurred while Bukowski and Jane were living in 'a room overlooking MacArthur Park'. (SOUNES, 2010, p. 30)

Burkett who is furious over the rejection of his manuscript. He is followed by Ainsworth Hockley, a pornographic writer on the publisher's list. He outlines an idea for a science fiction sex fantasy set on a spaceship, for which Mason gives him an advance of \$75. After this, even though it is only 10:30, he invites his receptionist, Francine, out to lunch, aroused by the extremely short dress she's wearing. He kisses her and paws her buttocks in the lift before they have even left the building, to which she only 'offered a token resistance' (p. 154). In the restaurant she understands the sexual symbolism when Mason says he is 'thinking of clams' and says she will let him have sex with her because he's 'a very nice man' (p. 154). Francine is the personification of the male fantasy, seducing her boss and offering herself as a sex object ready to satisfy him.

## **2.5) 'All the Pussy We Want' (p. 195)**

The two protagonists of this story, Harry and Duke, are ex-convicts living in a 'cheap hotel in downtown L.A.' (p. 195). Harry invites Duke to be his partner on a fantastic mission to pick up gold supposedly lying on the ground on an army firing range. Despite the danger, they believe it is worth the risk because they see the chance to become rich, which will enable them to have 'all the pussy (they) want' (p. 196). They go out to buy whisky and beer, and on the way back they are accosted by Ginny, 'a young woman (...) about 30 with a good figure' (p. 198). Back in their hotel room Ginny says she 'wanna fuck' Duke first (p. 198) and boasts that she has 'the tightest pussy in the state of California' (p. 199), to which Duke replies that his penis is so big that he'll 'probably rip (her) wide open' (p. 199). Harry watches the two of them having sex, and the story ends as he contemplates shooting Duke out on the firing range in order not only to keep the gold for himself but also to have sole access to Ginny's 'tight box' (p. 201). Throughout the story the two protagonists speak of women metonymically as 'pussy' and, by the end of the story, they are referring to Ginny's vagina as a mere 'box', nothing more than a receptacle for an erect penis.

## 2.6) 'The Beginner' (p. 202)

Like 'Reunion', this story is a sequel to 'Life and Death on the Charity Ward'. Both stories are narrated by Bukowski's alter-ego, Harry, feature his partner, Madge,<sup>6</sup> and recount events immediately after Harry had been discharged from hospital and obliged to stop drinking. Madge suggests that, instead of drinking, he can bet on horses. They drive to Hollywood Park.<sup>7</sup> When they arrive he tells her to pull her 'skirt down (because) everybody's looking at (her) ass' (p. 203). He bets on a couple of winners, and has the impression he can make easy money betting on horses. They go to the racetrack bar to celebrate, and he tells her to 'pull (her) stockings up' because she looks 'like a washerwoman' (p. 206). As she is doing so he looks at her and thinks that, with his putative future winnings, he would soon 'be able to afford something just a little bit better than that' (p. 206). The discourse, in particular the reference to his partner as a thing, is that of a man about to trade his car in for a newer model, which reveals that, for him, she is a mere object.

## 2.7) 'The Birth, Life and Death of an Underground Newspaper'<sup>8</sup> (p. 109)

At twenty-one pages this is the longest story in the collection, possibly an indication of the significance of the subject material for Bukowski. In it, the narrator named Bukowski tells the story of the rise and fall of *Open Pussy*, the underground newspaper in which he has a controversial column, 'Notes of a Dirty Old Man'. The editor, Joe Hyans,<sup>9</sup> and his wife, Cherry, work intensively together with a group of volunteers to publish pacifist ideas. Women are certainly an important subject in the story. At the beginning, Bukowski records Cherry's accusation that he had been harassing her, telling her that he 'was going to fuck her up against

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<sup>6</sup> Madge (Mad + Age) is a pseudonym for Bukowski's first girlfriend, Jane Cooney Baker. After being discharged from the LA County Charity Hospital, where he had been treated for a bleeding ulcer in 1955, Bukowski 'went back to Jane afterwards and told her the doctors said if he ever drank again it would kill him' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 34). She then suggested that he start betting on horses instead, and took him to the Hollywood Park race track for the first time in his life.

<sup>7</sup> 'Hollywood Park was the track, a huge arena in Inglewood near Los Angeles airport' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 34).

<sup>8</sup> 'Bukowski wrote a satirical short story, *The Birth, Life and Death of an Underground Newspaper*, about a paper he called *Open Pussy*, and the pretensions of its editor. There were particularly crude comments about the editor's wife. The story had obvious parallels with *Open City*' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 93), the underground newspaper in which Bukowski had his weekly column, 'Notes of a Dirty Old Man'.

<sup>9</sup> The editor of *Open City* was John Bryan.

the bookcase' (p. 122); he even insinuates that she has good reason to worry about him being close to her five-year-old daughter. Referring to the female nineteen-year-old volunteer workers, he admits that he 'kept searching out the women for ass', and expresses his disappointment that, 'whenever I'd lay my drunken hands on them they were always quite cool' (p. 110). When he is invited for the commemoration of the paper's first anniversary, he expects to find that 'the wine and the pussy and the life and the love would be flowing' (p. 120), but, instead of 'fucking on the floor and love galore', he finds the 'little love-creatures' hard at work, reminding him of 'little old ladies' who were as 'neurotic as all hell' (p. 120). At the Post Office, where he works, he sees his female co-workers as prostitutes at his disposal, thinking about 'how each of the girls who walked by would go on a bed, legs high, or taking it in the mouth' (p. 112). When Hyans tells him that Cherry has cheated on him, Bukowski urges him not to make 'this a personal property thing' (p. 123), but expresses no comment at Hyans' hypocrisy when he reveals that he himself has a lover.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.8) 'The Day We Talked About James Thurber'<sup>11</sup> (p. 140)

In 'The Day We Talked About James Thurber', the first person narrator Bukowski tells the bisexual adventure he had while living in the house of a 'great French poet' called Andre.<sup>12</sup> In addition to being a successful writer Andre has a very large penis ('twelve inches *limp*'), and he receives a stream of visitors who are at least as interested in his penis as they are in his poetry.<sup>13</sup> On one occasion, Andre travels to another city for a reading, leaving Bukowski alone at his home. A young boy and a girl called Wendy pay a call and refuse to

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<sup>10</sup> Graham Sounes reveals that this story was published in *Evergreen* magazine and that it was because of the publication of the 'comments about the editor's wife' that the friendship between Bukowski and John Bryan came to an end. It was at this time that Bryan came up with 'a new nickname for his former friend: Bullshitski' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 93).

<sup>11</sup> James Grover Thurber (1894–1961) was an American cartoonist, author, journalist, playwright, and celebrated wit. Thurber was best known for his cartoons and short stories, published mainly in *The New Yorker* magazine and collected in his numerous books. One of the most popular humourists of his time, Thurber celebrated the comic frustrations and eccentricities of ordinary people.

<sup>12</sup> Andre could possibly be a fictional representation of Harold Norse (1916–2009), an American poet who had lived in Paris in the 1960s with William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso (authors mentioned by Bukowski in the short story). He returned to America in 1968, and moved to Venice Beach, California. Bukowski situates the story in the first months of 1970, just a few months before his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Norse, who was homosexual, 'claims that when Bukowski was drunk he sometimes got his cock out and asked to see Norse's cock. This did not appear to be meant as a joke. "He was fascinated to see other men's cocks. It's a sexual thing," says Norse.' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 95)

believe Bukowski when he tells them that he is not Andre. The boy gives Bukowski oral sex. After Bukowski has ejaculated, the three of them talk about literature for a while, mentioning a stream of authors including Thurber. Bukowski then has sex with Wendy while the boy watches them and masturbates. He stresses his own brutality and his disregard for the girl herself, saying he ‘rammed rammed her, rammed her, had her head bobbing like some crazy puppet, and her ass’ (p. 146). After he has reached his orgasm he writes ‘I just tossed her off somewhere. Threw her away. (...) I just let go of Wendy. I don’t know where the hell she fell, nor did I care’ (p. 146-7). She is disposable, serving no useful purpose after he has obtained his pleasure, and he is as indifferent to her as he would be to any other spent container being discarded in the rubbish.

## **2.9) ‘A Drinking Partner’ (p. 224)**

The first person narrator Bukowski was ‘coming off a bad run with a woman who had almost finished’ him (p. 224). Disenchanted with women he seeks solace in gambling, masturbating and drinking. His drinking partner is Jeff, a colleague at the auto parts warehouse where he works, who had also ‘been burned by the ladies’, who is prone to attacks of psychopathic violence when he gets drunk. Bukowski describes two different occasions when even he was shocked by Jeff’s violence. In the first episode, Jeff holds a bulldog while a friend slashes its stomach open with a knife, and in the second one he punches a pregnant woman on the chin and pushes her down a flight of stairs before giving her husband similar treatment. Although Bukowski attempts to knock Jeff out after this he nonetheless holds a certain admiration for him – ‘a real son of a bitch like him is needed now and then’ (p. 230). In this story, Bukowski shares Jeff’s negative view of women. He drinks every day in order to forget little Flo, who had just dumped him, and harbours a grudge against women in general. He carries a chip on his shoulder because he believes his poverty renders him less attractive to young women: ‘The girls don’t search out the common laborers, the girls search out the doctors, the scientists, the lawyers, the businessmen so forth’ (p. 227). He laments that he can only get ‘the girls when they are through with the girls, and they are no longer girls (...) the used, the deformed, the diseased, the mad (...) seconds and thirds and fourths’ (p. 227). As so often, his language reduces women to the level of consumer goods; since he can’t get top quality he prefers to be ‘womanless’ (p. 224).



### 2.10) 'An Evil Town' (p. 351)

The protagonist of this story, Frank Evans, is a guest in a hotel in an unidentified town. He is tormented by the desk clerk, who gives him a piece of cheese wrapped in cellophane, saying that it is a piece of his mind. Frank goes out to a pornographic cinema in which the members of the exclusively male audience are masturbating and having sex with each other. The plot of the silent movie on the screen is about a girl who is raped when she is drunk and, as a result, becomes a prostitute. Evans rejects an attempt by a man to solicit him and, in the toilet, urinates in the eye of another man spying on him through a hole in the stall. Back at the hotel he drafts a letter to his mother, couched in evangelical terms, complaining about the behaviour of the people in this 'evil town'. He is interrupted by a visit from the hotel clerk, who declares his love for him and attempts to kiss him. His response is to stab the clerk in the stomach with a flick-knife, after which he unzips the man's fly, cuts off his penis and flushes it down the toilet. The story ends as Frank finishes the letter to his mother, telling her that he is leaving the town, and starts to pack. In this thoroughly disagreeable story, the violent reaction of the Bukowski's protagonist to the various homosexual overtures he receives reveals his own latent homosexuality. A Freudian analyst would have a field day with this text, not only with its account of male denial of latent homosexuality, but also with the violent treatment of the female protagonist in the silent film.

### 2.11) 'The Fiend' (p. 207)

This is without doubt the most disturbing and controversial story in a collection replete with graphic images of explicit sexuality and gratuitous violence. It is a detailed account of the rape of a pre-pubescent girl by a 45-year-old man which leaves nothing whatsoever to the imagination. The central character is Martin Blanchard, twice-divorced, unemployed, a loner with nothing to occupy his time. One 'hot and lazy' summer morning he looks out of the window of his fourth-floor apartment and sees three young children playing on the lawn below – two boys and a girl aged 'somewhere between six and nine'. Aroused by the sight of the girl's 'very *short* red skirt' and her 'most interesting *panties*' (p. 208), Blanchard masturbates over the kitchen floor as he gazes down at her. He goes out to buy more port wine and cigars and notices that the three children are now playing inside a garage. He goes into the garage with them and closes the door behind him. What follows is a graphic description of the rape as he kisses the girl greedily and sits on a chair forcing the girl's tiny

vagina down over his engorged penis. Blanchard is only too aware of the discrepancy in their sizes – ‘It’s in her body now, Martin thought. Jesus, my cock must be half the length of her body!’ (p. 211). The two boys, understanding little of what is happening, look on, giving a running commentary. Leaving the girl’s ripped and unconscious (possibly dead) body on the floor he returns home, where he is soon arrested and savagely beaten by the police. What makes this story especially disturbing are the similarities between the paedophile and Bukowski himself: both men are in their mid-40s, drink port wine, listen to Mahler, care little about personal hygiene, prefer their own company and masturbate frequently. Above all, they share the same misogyny: Martin’s accumulated experience of women ‘had made him feel that the sex act was not worth what the female demanded in return’ (p. 207).<sup>14</sup>

## 2.12) ‘Flower Horse’ (p. 462)

‘Flower Horse’ is a narrative set in Los Angeles. The first-person narrator goes to the Hollywood Park<sup>15</sup> horse racetrack after an all-night drinking session with his friend John the Beard, in the course of which they had discussed the poet Robert Creeley,<sup>16</sup> whom the narrator says he was ‘against’. The narrator starts betting on horses and refers to an under-performing jockey called Charley Short.<sup>17</sup> His male acquaintances become interested in a young prostitute, pejoratively described by the narrator as ‘something in a very short miniskirt’ (p. 463). He talks to her himself and finds out that she charges \$100 for a ‘night in bed’, but, in his opinion, ‘Miniskirt’s pussy was worth about 8 dollars, she was only charging

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<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, interviewers attempted to discover why Bukowski should have written such a story. In 1975 he stated that, ‘I wrote a story once about a little girl getting raped on roller skates. In fact, it appeared in the *Free Press*, and the editor put a long prelude in front of it before he published it: “Bukowski has a daughter; he loves his daughter; if you see Bukowski with his daughter, you’ll understand that he is a good man.” He had to say all of these things before he published the story. He was frightened of it. What I try to do is to get into the mind of a man who would do such a thing, and try to figure his viewpoint. I write stories about murderers, rapists, all these types. It doesn’t mean that I’m for murder or rape or anything, but I like to explore what this man might be thinking and that a murderer can enjoy a cup of hot cocoa or enjoy a comic strip. This is rather fascinating to me, you know, to explore these things’ (In CALONNE, 2004d, p. 116). In an interview in 1981 he protested that, although certain readers might find the story arousing, he himself ‘didn’t get a hard-on’ while he was writing it (In CALONNE, 2004d, p. 181).

<sup>15</sup> The Hollywood Park racetrack is located in Inglewood, L.A.; it was inaugurated in 1938 and closed in 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Creeley (1926–2005) was an American poet and author of more than sixty books. At the time of the story he was a member of the Black Mountain poets.

<sup>17</sup> Charley Short was actually Charles E. Kurtsinger (1906–1946), an American Hall of Fame jockey who had won the Triple Crown in 1937.

about 13 times the worth' (p. 463). However, when he wins \$236, on a horse that he describes as 'flower horse' (presumably a reference to the 'flower power' of the late 1960s), he notices that she is looking at him and he rushes away from the racetrack. Even though the woman is a prostitute, the narrator's reference to her as a thing, as well as his metonymic reduction of her identity to the skirt that she is wearing, reveal the same objectification of women that we find in so many of the other stories.

### **2.13) 'The Gut-Wringing Machine' (p. 47)**

In 'The Gut-Wringing Machine', Bukowski returns to one of his recurrent themes, the dehumanising and emasculating demands of the world of work. The story is a fantastic social satire, narrated in the third person. It is set in the 'Satisfactory Help Agency', where the proprietors, Danforth and Bagley, pass reluctant candidates for employment through a body wringer to squeeze the rebelliousness out of them and render them suitable for submissive acquiescence to the demands of American consumer society. The story is located in the contemporary world, with references to the Paris Peace Conference, President Nixon, Biafra and ageing celebrities like Mae West and Marlene Dietrich,<sup>18</sup> amongst a host of others. Although the protagonists and characters in the story are male, the place of women in society is clearly delimited to that of housewives and sex objects. In fact, at the end of the story, Danforth puts his partner through the wringer specifically in order to emasculate him sufficiently so that he will be able to enjoy the spectacle of his own wife being 'bung-holed' by Danforth later in the day, a graphic euphemism for anal sex. As they drive to Bagley's house Bagley demonstrates the success of the gut-wringing machine by practising fellatio on Danforth as he drives Bagley's brand-new '69 Caddy' – he has been transformed into a woman providing sexual services for men.

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<sup>18</sup> The Paris Peace Talks ran from 1968 until the final agreement to end the Vietnam War was reached on 27 January 1973; President Nixon replaced President Johnson during the process, being sworn in on 20 January 1969; the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, started in July 1967 and was brought to an end in January 1970. In the story, Mae West (1893-1980) and Marlene Dietrich (1901-92) are derided for being geriatric sex symbols, only capable of arousing desire in a man who had been passed through the wringer; in 1969, Mae West was 76 and Dietrich was 68.

## 2.14) 'Life in a Texas Whorehouse' (p. 15)

'Life in a Texas Whorehouse' is set early in the Second World War, just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.<sup>19</sup> The narrator named Charles Bukowski gives an account of his visit to a town in Texas in search of Gloria Westhaven, whom he had met on a bus journey and who had cried when he got off the bus. His only clue as to her whereabouts is that her mother owns a photographic studio there. He takes accommodation in a brothel, where a prostitute offers herself to him. He refuses since he is too tired, which results in her being beaten by her pimp. He pities her, but does nothing to help. Next day he has his sheets changed by a black maid with whom he has sex, describing it as 'the best fuck' he ever had. The story of his quest for Gloria is published in the gossip column of the town's leading newspaper, as a result of which he meets her at her mother's house, referring to her as 'just another one of those healthy Texas redheads' (p. 21). She challenges him as to why he has not enlisted, unlike her fiancé, and reveals that the reason she had cried when he had left her on the bus was because of his 'tragic face'. Exasperated, he returns to the brothel, where he calls the editor of the newspaper and invents a story about having had an hour-long orgasm with Gloria. This vindictive attempt to destroy the engaged woman's reputation because of the unsatisfactory nature of their encounter shows the male character in a particularly unfavourable light.

## 2.15) 'A Lovely Love Affair' (p. 185)

This is a first-person account by the narrator, Charley Serkin, of the brief 'relationship' he had with a woman called Marie Glaviano in her house in the French Quarter, New Orleans. Charley is a broke writer, who is introduced to Marie by Joe Blanchard, editor of an underground paper called *Overthrow*.<sup>20</sup> He describes Marie as an 'old fat girl (who weighed) between 250 and 300 pounds'<sup>21</sup> (p. 185), the owner of 'a very small cafe'. Marie

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<sup>19</sup> The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on 6 December 1941 was the event that brought about the involvement of the USA in the Second World War, to which it had remained indifferent for the previous two years.

<sup>20</sup> The story contains clearly autobiographical elements. Bukowski was invited to New Orleans in March 1965 by Jon Webb and his wife Gypsy Lou, owners of the Loujon Press, which had published a book of his poetry in 1963. They had also set up an underground journal called *The Outsider*. However, instead of writing the poems for his next book, Bukowski 'spent evenings flirting with Minnie Segate, a friend of the Webbs who was putting him up during his two-week stay.' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 70)

<sup>21</sup> 113 to 136 kilos.

allows Charley to stay in her spare bedroom because his ‘ugly’ and ‘beat up’ face reminds her of a man she had known previously. He tells her ‘I could probably fuck you until I made you cry’ (p. 187), but she replies that, if he carries on talking like that, she won’t allow him to stay. The following day, when she goes out to work, he steals ten dollars from her and spends it on beer. That night he gets into her bed and has ‘one of the best fucks of (his) life’ (p. 193). In the morning he decides to leave her house and writes her a note saying that he loves her, that she’s really good to him, but he must leave without knowing exactly why, but supposes he must be crazy. Even though the narrator claims to love the woman, his behaviour shows that he is clearly only interested in her for what she can offer him – free accommodation, food, drink and, even though ‘she *was* so god damned fat’ (p. 191), sex. The story’s title would appear to be ironic.

## **2.16) ‘The Murder of Ramon Vasquez’ (p. 213)**

‘The Murder of Ramon Vasquez’ is a story notable for its grotesque violence and extreme prejudice. Bukowski was evidently aware of its polemical nature for it is the only one of the sixty-four stories to which he found it necessary to attach a disclaimer.<sup>22</sup> Two brothers, Lincoln, 23, and Andrew, 17, read in magazine articles<sup>23</sup> that a retired Hollywood star, Ramon Vasquez, now in his sixties, always keeps \$5,000 in cash at his home up in the California hills. Lured by the money, the brothers knock at his door and are well received, mostly for their youth and beauty. When he was a young star, Ramon Vasquez had been known as ‘The Great Lover’ of the silent screen, although his swooning female fans had been unaware that he was actually homosexual. ‘Just for laughs’ he is humiliated by the brothers who force him to practice fellatio on each of them. While Lincoln is beating Vasquez savagely with a cane in order to get him to reveal the whereabouts of the nonexistent money, Andrew calls his

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<sup>22</sup> In his vehement disclaimer Bukowski insists that the story is ‘fiction’, ‘invention’ and ‘not narrowed down to any specific case’. However, one feels that he ‘doth protest too much’, as Hamlet’s mother would have said. He refers specifically to the fact that he has lived ‘one year short of half a century with the human race’, which places the writing of the story after his 49<sup>th</sup> birthday on 16 August 1969. Just a week before his birthday the world had been shocked by the invasion by the Charles Manson ‘Family’ of Roman Polanski’s mansion in Benedict Canyon outside L.A. and the frenzied murders of the movie star, Sharon Tate, eight and a half months pregnant with Polanski’s child, along with three guests. After the killings, one of the gang wrote the word ‘PIG’ on the front door in Sharon Tate’s blood. If Bukowski’s story was pure invention as he claimed, then his powers of imagination were not overstretched in this story of the gratuitous murder of a movie star in his remote mansion, after which the killers write ‘FUCK PIGS! DEATH TO PIGS!’ on the walls in the victim’s blood.

<sup>23</sup> Lincoln refers to a fictitious magazine called *Screen*, citing the September 1968 and January 1969 issues.

girlfriend, who has gone to New York City in search of work as an actress. She complains that, in New York, ‘everybody tries to get into your panties’, and tells him that she may get a part in a play ‘written by a nigger’ (p. 219), although they agree that ‘those niggers’ cannot be trusted. After Andrew hangs up he goes to the bedroom and finds Ramon Vasquez almost dead. Lincoln describes his victim as a ‘homo-kike-nigger bastard’<sup>24</sup> and beats him to death. The violence is depicted with gratuitous vividness. After daubing the walls with Vasquez’s blood the brothers leave and pick up two female hitchhikers, described with sexist metonymy as ‘two young mini’s (*sic*)’ (p. 222). In the course of the short drive to the beach, where the brothers intend to have sex with them, Andrew already has his finger in the vagina of the girl beside him in the back seat.

### 2.17) ‘No Stockings’ (p. 367)

This is an account of an occasion when the first person narrator Bukowski was arrested for attempted rape. The narrative opens with a brief account of a threesome he has one afternoon with his friend Barney and an unidentified woman. Afterwards he goes home to sleep, but is woken by Dan, ‘a commie intellectual who ran a poetry workshop’ (p. 367), who asks him for some poems for a reading. In exchange Bukowski asks him if he knows any ‘pussy (...) women laying around panting for 4 or 5 inches only’ (p. 368). Dan takes him to the ‘fairly expensive apartment’ of Vera. However, when Bukowski tells her that ‘I could rape you for 3 hours’ (p. 369), and says that ‘what’s wrong with (Vera and) alla you women’ is that ‘you piss outa your pussy’ (p. 370), she calls the police. They arrest him without giving him time to put on his socks, and he is then thrown into a cell where ‘there must have been 150 (... men) and 149 wore stockings’ (p. 372); since most of the other men are hobos he thus establishes a new parameter for poverty. The women in the story are deeply humiliated: the first one has Barney’s ‘toe in her ass’ (p. 367) while she is practicing fellatio on Bukowski, and he asks her: ‘how ya like that?’ (p. 367); while Vera is verbally abused by Bukowski, who treats her as a representative sample of everything he hates about women, even though he had gone to her house intending to have sex with her.

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Kike’ is a pejorative reference to a Jew.

### 2.18) 'One for Walter Lowenfels'<sup>25</sup> (p. 421)

This third-person narrative is an account of a visit the unnamed 48-year-old narrator receives in Los Angeles from his separated partner, referred to as 'the woman', who has brought their daughter Tina back from the commune where they are living in New Mexico to celebrate the girl's fourth birthday.<sup>26</sup> The narrator's comments about the woman are scathing, condemning her appearance, her politics, her sexuality, her morals and her aspirations as a poetess: she 'seldom combed her hair, wore black in protest of the war, (...) collected various checks from a mother and x-husbands, lived with various men (...) children were her weapons' (p. 421). She is so unattractive that it is only because he had been exceedingly drunk that he had been able to have sex and impregnate her. Nonetheless he loves his daughter very much. He buys a birthday cake for her, and when he lights the four candles and they sing 'Happy Birthday', 'her face, Tina's, was like 10,000 films of happiness' (p. 426). The title refers to the woman's delight that Walter Lowenfels had singled out one of her poems in a magazine produced by her poetry group, although the narrator describes such groups as 'people who couldn't write worth a cat's ass reading to each other and telling each other that they were good' (p. 422). The narrator makes his misogynism only too evident: 'he couldn't stand the woman, and it wasn't entirely the woman; there were few women he could bear' (p. 423). At the end of the story however, after the narrator has left the woman at another poetry reading, he asks 'Tina to get in the front seat with him' (p. 427) and he drives feeling that her company 'was plenty' (p. 427).

### 2.19) 'A Rain of Women' (p. 394)

'A Rain of Women' is a first-person monologue written in a style which combines linear narrative with elements of stream of consciousness. The narrator<sup>27</sup> recounts his experiences of the previous evening, a dark and rainy Friday in Los Angeles, when he had

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Lowenfels (1897-1976) was an American poet, journalist, and member of the Communist Party USA. He also edited the communist newspaper the *Daily Worker*.

<sup>26</sup> The characters are representations of Bukowski himself and FrancEyE, the woman who gave Bukowski his only child, Marina, who in this short story is called Tina. Bukowski 'described FrancEyE as a grey-haired old woman (she was forty-one when they met) who loved him, but whom he did not love' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 61). In the poems about FrancEyE and Marina in *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills* (1969), Bukowski always refers to his partner as 'the woman'.

<sup>27</sup> Although unidentified, the narrator reveals details of his life which coincide with those of Bukowski himself, particularly his childhood reminiscence of 'my old man beating hell out of me every day' (p. 394).

taken his car for rotation, realignment and balancing, had a key cut, and purchased meat at a butcher's. He had been anxious to get everything done so that he could get to the race track in time for the first race because he was dependent on his putative winnings to pay the month's rent, child support and car instalment. Whilst driving in his car and also at each of the commercial establishments he visits he encounters women drivers and customers – the 'rain of women' of the title. His attention is focused exclusively on their sexuality, or lack of it. Thus they are described in terms of the shortness of their skirt,<sup>28</sup> the length of their stockings, the curve of their 'ass', the probable size of their 'pussy'. He evinces his preference for stupid women – 'the stupid ones are the best lays because you hate them – they have the gift of flesh and the brains of a fly' (p. 396). Unfortunately, however, the narrator is affected by the same impotence which he sees as contaminating society around him and he lacks the confidence to chat up any of the women. The story ends as he puts the meat he has purchased into his car, intending to masturbate into it later on, and envisages himself as a worldly wise Bogart<sup>29</sup> character observing the 'film noir' world on this dark, rainy night.

## 2.20) 'Rape! Rape!' (p. 345)

As in other stories, like 'No Stockings', for example, this is a first-person account of a Bukowskian narrator being punished for his rampant sexual desire by being arrested and imprisoned. In this case, he sees a sexy woman in a bright yellow dress sitting at a bus stop. 'In a trance' he follows her on the bus to her building. It seems to him that she senses he is 'following her (...) yet she doesn't seem uncomfortable' (p. 346). He enters the wrong flat and is kissed by 'a woman of about 48, quite wrinkled and fat' (p. 346), but leaves to look for his 'red-yellow' hair woman. He finds that the door to her flat is ajar and he goes in, closing it

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<sup>28</sup> The miniskirt had been invented by the British fashion designer, Mary Quant, in 1964, when Bukowski was already 44, having spent his whole life seeing women wearing skirts which were never less than knee-length. His resultant obsession with the shortness of women's skirts in the 'Swinging Sixties' is a recurrent feature of the stories in the collection and, in several of them, women are simply referred to metonymically as 'Miniskirt'. In fact, the use of 'skirt' as a synonym for a woman dates back to 1560, according to the OED, and referring to a woman as 'a bit of skirt' was by no means restricted to sexist men. In Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1925), for example, Mrs Madigan tells Charlie Bentham that he was 'goin' to get as nice a bit o' skirt' in Mary Boyle as he had ever seen in his life (O'CASEY, Sean, *Juno and the Paycock*. In *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey*, ed. Ronad Ayling. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985. p. 75)

<sup>29</sup> Humphrey Bogart (1899-1957) was one of the greatest icons of Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s. Known for his portrayal of laconic, cynical characters who observe the world wearily, his master work was *Casablanca* (1942). In 'Animal Crackers in My Soup' the narrator is described by the female protagonist as a mixture of Humphrey Bogart and Randolph Scott (1898-1987), the rugged star of innumerable westerns in the same period.



behind him. He grabs her ‘by the hair and ass’, (p. 347), kisses her, slaps her hard and rips off her dress and bra. Although she fights against him, her resistance quickly diminishes. He has sex with her standing up and throws ‘her back against the couch’ (p. 347). She says she likes being raped and then gives him oral sex. After he has had a bath he is still wearing nothing but a towel when the police come and arrest him for rape. The following morning ‘the lady’ dismisses the charges and he is released. He returns to the woman’s building and, in a surprising twist, goes to the flat of the fat 48-year-old to have sex with her, rather than the sexy woman. Any interpretation of this story must hinge on whether the narrator named Bukowski rapes the woman in the yellow dress or not, a question that not even he can answer. Since what happens appears to be consensual, can it be defined as rape? Given that the word rape is so often used as a synonym for sexual intercourse it appears that the distinction was far from clear in his own mind.

## **2.21) ‘Reunion’ (p. 298)**

This story appears to be a sequel to ‘Life and Death in the Charity Ward’, giving an account of the character Bukowski’s return home upon his release from the LA County General Hospital.<sup>30</sup> Although his partner in the former story is called Vicky, whereas here she is referred to as Madge, in both cases they seem to be portraits of Jane Cooney Baker. When the first-person narrator, addressed as Harry, arrives from the hospital he finds Madge drinking port and they fight over the fifteen dollars that is left. He slaps her face, and she complains that he can hit her, but he would not be able to do it with a man, exactly the same scene as in ‘3 Chickens’, where the words are spoken by Vicki. Harry goes out to the garage to check on his car, which Madge had crashed in his absence, and he also finds out that he is in debt at the liquor store because of Madge’s tab. Returning home he calls her a whore, and she cries, begging him not to call her that. They end up making love, which shows how complex their disturbing relationship is. Even the language he uses to refer to her vagina, which he describes as a ‘box’ (p. 303), reveals that he sees her body as little more than a receptacle for his erect penis, while he refers to their love-making as ‘riding’ – as though she were a horse.

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<sup>30</sup> The first paragraph describes with great precision the geographical location and layout of the apartment court at 268 S. Coronado Street, where Bukowski lived with Jane Cooney Baker in the 1950s. A photograph taken by Howard Sounes himself shows the exact features described by Bukowski in the story (SOUNES, 2010, p. 74-5).

## 2.22) 'Trouble with a Battery' (p. 164)

The first-person narrator, who is forty-eight, is having his car battery charged and, while he is waiting for it to be done, he decides to go across the street to a brothel. He has sex with a prostitute at the doorway of her bedroom, and then again in her bed, whilst her younger brother is in another bed beside them. She claims to be the sister of Jaime Bravo,<sup>31</sup> a famous bullfighter. After they have had sex the second time, they sit naked across from each other drinking some wine, which reminds him of 'an old Leslie Howard movie.'<sup>32</sup> They are interrupted by her pimp/husband, described by the narrator as a 'big red brutal banal bastard' (p. 166), who asks her why she is taking so long with her client. Unable to have sex a third time, he asks the prostitute to give him oral sex. He then picks up his car and drives home, where he finds 'the woman' asleep and 'the little girl' asks him to read a story called *Baby Susan's Chicken*.<sup>33</sup> The coolly objective use of the definite article with which the narrator identifies his partner and child, after the relative affection with which he had treated the prostitute the same night, reflects the narrator's own lack of attachment to his partner and to his own daughter.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.23) 'The White Beard' (p. 231)

The first-person narrator of this story and his two companions, Herb and Talbot, are underpaid American migrants working as fruit-pickers on a farm in a war zone somewhere in

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<sup>31</sup> Jaime Bravo (1932-1970) was indeed a famous bullfighter and Hollywood star.

<sup>32</sup> The movie the narrator mentions is the 1934 adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, starring Leslie Howard (1893-1943) and Bette Davis. The scene Bukowski is referring to occurs at the end of the film when the female protagonist, Mildred, has become a prostitute and is dying of TB and is visited by her former lover, the clubfooted Philip.

<sup>33</sup> *Baby Susan's Chicken* was written by Jean Horton Berg, illustrated by Alison Cummings and published for the first time by Wonder Books in 1951.

<sup>34</sup> In the poetry Bukowski was writing at the same time as these stories, he refers to his partner and his child with the same cold objectivity (Charles Bukowski, *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*, New York: ECCO, 1969.). In 'birth' (p. 144-6), he refers to his partner as 'the woman' and his baby daughter as 'the girl'; in 'these mad windows that taste life and cut me if I go through them' (p. 139-43), he writes of them as 'the woman', 'the child,' 'the baby', and says that he got 'some woman' pregnant, although he does also describe his daughter as 'a beautiful skunk of a child with pale blue eyes / who made me swallow my heart like a cherry in a chilled drink'; in 'family, family' (p. 174-5), his daughter is 'the kid'; and in 'on a grant' (p. 186-7), they are 'the woman' and 'the kid'.

the Middle East. Most of the workers there are running ‘away from something – women, bills, babies, the inability to cope’ (p. 231) in a place ‘thousands of miles from home in a foreign country’ (p. 231). Nonetheless, there is no solidarity between them. Herb is a giant of a man who oppresses the weakling Talbot by masturbating into a watermelon and then forcing him to eat the fruit along with his sperm. The three of them go to a dismal bar and meet a ‘young girl of 13 or 14, origin unknown’ (p. 232), who is a prostitute. Impressed by her enormous breasts the narrator and Herb have sex with her. The narrator sucks her breasts like a baby and then ‘mounts’ her like an animal. After Herb has finished he rejoins his companions, bragging that he ‘rammed it between her breasts. Then a *sea* of come under her chin. When she stood up it hung there like a white beard’ (p. 235), and mocking Talbot for his reluctance to have sex with the underage prostitute as well. Talbot meanwhile dreams of murdering Herb in his sleep by, it is suggested, cutting off his penis with his own knife. In this story, sex and violence are seen to be almost synonymous. Herb’s penis and that of the narrator are depicted as weapons of oppression, while sperm, the ‘white beard’ of the title, is the symbol of macho domination. The fusion of sex and violence is complete at the end of the story, when a schoolbus is shelled, scattering ‘pieces of children everywhere’ (p. 236). Herb reflects that the children will ‘never get laid’, while the narrator thinks that perhaps they had been, implying that their violent death was a kind of orgasm.

#### **2.24) ‘A White Pussy’ (p. 237)**

In this story, the first-person narrator gives an account of two conversations he has in the course of a night’s drinking. He begins at a bar where ‘there aren’t any women’ to bother him (p. 237) and a Mexican asks him for a loan of \$ 3,000. He decides to leave and goes to a ‘big barn Mexican bar with the all-brass rail’ (p. 239), where he talks to the barmaid. He asks her for his keys, which she takes from her apron and gives to him, leading him to fantasise about having sex with a woman wearing nothing but an apron. The barmaid says that she wants to have sex with him again because he does ‘good tricks for an old man’ (p. 240), and he claims that he had been aroused by the white wig she had been wearing. Trying to arouse him again the barmaid tells him that she has a scene where she dyes her ‘pussy white’ (p. 240). Too drunk to perform he goes home, thinking of her ‘white pussy’ and consoling himself with the thought that ‘she had wanted to fuck’ him (p. 240). This story differs from almost all the others in the collection in that, even though it is implied that the female character is a prostitute, she is represented as being an agent, who wishes ‘to fuck’ the male

narrator, rather than ‘being fucked’ by him. Indeed, the distinction is reinforced by the fact that the narrator is rendered impotent (‘paralyzed’ and ‘frozen’) by the amount of alcohol he has drunk.

## 2.25) ‘Would you Suggest Writing as a Career?’ (p. 272)

Henry Chinaski,<sup>35</sup> alter ego of Charles Bukowski, has to give two poetry readings at ‘The American University’ in Seattle.<sup>36</sup> In one of them he is asked if he ‘would suggest writing as a career’ (p. 277) and replies that ‘writing chooses you, you don’t choose it’ (p. 277). The reading makes him really uncomfortable, and he makes it clear that he is only doing it for the money. In order to reach Seattle from LA Chinaski has to take his first flight. The journey gives him the opportunity to observe waitresses at the airport bar, who ‘looked stupid and thought they were hot shit.’ (p. 272), a fellow passenger, ‘an old grandma (who) ran a string of whore-houses’ (p. 273), and stewardesses, one of whom he envisages raping. Once in Seattle he is invited to a Literature professor’s party, where he picks out ‘the finest looking woman in the house’ and decides ‘to make her hate’ him (p. 278). By coincidence the woman is actually married to his host, which does not prevent her from responding to his kissing and fondling. On his way to the second reading he notes that ‘there were women everywhere and over ½ of them looked good enough to fuck (...) just so many poppies in a field. Which one did you pick?’ (p. 280) For Chinaski, it seems automatic to see women as objects available for his gratification. Even the female head of the Literature department hosting the second reading evokes the response. ‘All sex, she was. I thought, I’ll rape her’ (p. 281). On the return flight he finds it comical that a stewardess warns him that drinking alcohol could result in him

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<sup>35</sup> In an interview, Bukowski revealed the genesis of the name: The “Chin” part, if you must know, was thrown in because of my chin. I was one of those guys able to absorb a terrific punch. I was not a very good fighter but taking me out was a great problem. I won a few by simply out-enduring the stupid son of a bitch trying to do me in’. And of course ‘as’ = ‘ass’ – thus ‘Chinaski’ is a thoroughly embodied name to give to his often wearily enfleshed anti-hero (CALONNE, 2013, p. 77-8).

<sup>36</sup> In May 1970, Bukowski gave his fourth public reading at the Bellevue Community College, in Seattle, Washington, which involved him taking his first air flight (SOUNES, 2010, 107-8). Bukowski, at the outset of his professional writing career, undertook these engagements out of financial necessity. Interestingly, it was precisely at this time that he began writing the ‘dirty stories’ for pornographic magazines that form the corpus of the present study. Responding to a letter from the editor of *Fling* magazine, ‘saying he would welcome submissions with a lot of kinky sex. Bukowski began churning out short stories that, while being set in his regular low-life milieu, contained scenes of bizarre and often violent sex including sado-masochism, rape, even bestiality’ (SOUNES, 2010, p. 109).

being ‘put off’ the flight, even though the captain had just announced that the plane was ‘at 50,000 feet’, evidence of her female stupidity, in his opinion.

## 2.26) ‘The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California’ (p. 156)

This story opens with the two protagonists, Tony and Bill, coming back from a bar one night and deciding finally to put into action their plan of robbing a corpse from outside the hospital across the road from their rooming house. They take the dead body up to Tony’s room and, only after some time, take a look at it. They discover it is the body of a beautiful young woman with long blonde hair. Tony starts to kiss the breasts and mouth of the corpse and then has sex with it. Bill watches and then follows Tony’s example. After they finish using her, they resolve to get rid of the ‘double-fucked’ body by throwing it into the ocean. They take the corpse down the stairs, bumping it everywhere, and drive out to Venice Beach, Bill sitting in the back seat beside the ‘dead cunt’. At the beach, Tony swims the woman’s body out to deeper water. As he does so, the floating body with its long hair reminds him of a mermaid, and he conjectures that she might actually be one. Although he had said ‘I love you, dead bitch’ (p. 161) before swimming the body out to sea, by the time Tony returns to the sand, he describes her as no more than ‘shark meat’ (p. 162). Although ‘copulating’ in the story’s title suggests that the woman might be considered an active sexual participant, the necrophilia practiced by the two men is effectively rape:

Tony walked over to the pussy, touched it. Then he lifted a breast, kissed the damned dead thing. “It’s so sad, everything is so sad – that we live our lives like idiots and finally die.”  
 “You shouldn’t touch the body,” said Bill.  
 “She’s beautiful,” said Tony, “even dead, she’s beautiful.”  
 “Yeah, but if she were alive she wouldn’t even look at a bum like you twice. You know that, don’t you?”  
 “Sure! And that’s just the point! Now she can’t say, ‘NO!’ ” (p. 159)

For the male protagonists, the female body is merely the sum of its private parts: ‘look at those *breasts*! Those *thighs*! That *pussy*! That pussy: it still looks alive!’ (p. 159). Their interest in the woman’s body as a sex object means that they only detect signs of life in the vagina. What the Bukowskian narrator does here is no different from what Kate Millett (1977) observed in Henry Miller’s work, ‘Miller simply converts woman to “cunt” – thing, commodity, matter’ (p. 297). According to Millet, ‘the great mass of women throughout history have been confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with a

sexual outlet and exercising the animal functions of reproduction' (p. 119). The third-person narrator uses the verb 'mount' to stress the animalistic physicality of the sex:

Then he walked over the bed, began kissing the breasts, running his hands through her long hair, and then finally *kissing* that dead mouth in a kiss from the living to the dead. And then he mounted. (p. 160)

Before Bill overcomes his initial shock he criticises Tony for having had sex with a dead woman, but Tony argues that Bill has 'been fucking dead women all (his) life – dead women with dead souls and dead pussies' (p. 160). For Tony, whether women are alive or dead, they are all merely inanimate objects to be used, the only important thing being that they should be 'a beautiful fuck'. Germaine Greer (2012) explains that sex has become a deplorable business, which stresses human isolation and stimulates violence. Society has neutralised sexual drives by containing them, and the result is a quest for any kind of sex which escapes the dead hands of the institution.

Saying that she is a 'beautiful fuck' turns the dead woman into a sex machine, who had no option besides having sex. The young dead girl could not say no and she was raped by the two guys. During their conversation Tony claims that he is in love with her and Bill says that 'only a damn fool falls in love with a living woman;' (p. 160), suggesting that women are unworthy of any kind of trust. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) explains that women are depicted by patriarchal society as prudent and petty with no sense of fact or accuracy, lacking morality, false, theatrical and self-seeking. In her opinion, there is an element of truth in all this; however, she affirms that this feminine behaviour is 'shaped as in a mould by her situation' according to 'her economic, social, and historical conditioning' (p. 566).

Tony sees in the floating body of the dead woman the image of a mermaid, a sensual creature capable of seducing and destroying men. According to *OED* mermaid is a fictitious or mythical half-human sea creature with the head and trunk of a woman and the tail of a fish, conventionally depicted as beautiful and with long flowing golden hair.

There is a difference of attitude between the two male protagonists in relation to the 'mermaid'. Even though Tony claims to have fallen in love with her, he is the crueller of the two characters, because he is the first to rape her, he is the one who has the more misogynistic view of women, and he is the one who gives her to the sharks, which implies a second death for her. On the other hand, Bill is convinced by his friend to rob a corpse and, when they see her naked body, he is the one who advises Tony that he should not touch it. Nonetheless, he has sex with the body too, but he does not feel any kind of attachment to it.

The unidentified narrator is also misogynistic as can be seen in his depiction of the female character, easily detected in his comments about the woman: 'Tony walked over to the pussy, touched it. Then he lifted a breast, kissed the damned dead thing' (p. 159). For the narrator, the woman is an object, as Beauvoir (1997) asserts, 'she is for man a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object – an Other through whom he seeks himself' (p. 85). The narrator refers to her as 'it' and as 'dead body', amongst other names such as 'dead cunt' and 'dead bitch'. The term 'mount' to describe intercourse is used by the narrator and not by the male characters themselves:

Tony walked to the bathroom to take a piss.  
When he got back, Bill had mounted the body. Bill was going good.  
Moaning and groaning a bit. Then he reached over, kissed that dead mouth,  
and came. (p. 160)

The woman's body is depicted by the narrator as no more than the sum of her parts, and her vagina, previously considered to be alive, is now seen as dead, as if she was no more than a dead vagina. This same discourse is found in Henry Miller's writing; Kate Millett (1977) observes that, for him, 'the perfect female is a floating metonymy, pure cunt, completely unsullied by human mentality' (p. 300):

Tony grabbed the feet and waited. Bill grabbed the head. As they rushed out of Tony's room the doorway was still open. Tony kicked it shut with his left foot as they moved toward the top of the stairway, the sheet no longer wound about the body but, more or less, flopped over it. Like a wet dishrag over a kitchen faucet. And again, there was much bumping of her head and her thighs and her big ass against the stairway walls and stairway railings. (...) Bill sat waiting with the dead cunt in the back seat. (p. 161)

The second death of the female character is staged to hide the crime of rape; the two men discard her body fearing that they might be caught, and demonstrate their confidence in securing their impunity:

"So, she's gone," said Bill.  
"Yeh. Shark meat."  
"Do you think we'll ever be caught?"  
"No. Give me a drink." (p. 162)

The woman's muteness impedes her from defending herself. Her first death symbolises the inability of woman to fight against sexual objectification and rape, and her second death demonstrates how hideous crimes against women go unpunished, for men have the right to

use the female body for their own sexual satisfaction, in a society that expects women to be passive and ready to be used as ‘fuck machines’.

### 2.27) ‘The Fuck Machine’ (p. 35)

Set in the immediate aftermath of the planting of the American flag on the Moon by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on 20 July 1969, this story blends technology and misogynistic pornography. The first-person narrator recalls the night when Tony, the owner of the bar, where he was drinking with his friend, Indian Mike, told them that, for twenty dollars each, they could have sex with a Fuck Machine upstairs. He explains that it is the invention of a crazy German scientist called Von Brashlitz, who had introduced it to him as a mechanical woman ‘who could give a man a better fuck than any woman created throughout the centuries! plus no kotex,<sup>37</sup> no shit, no arguments!’ (p. 38). The two men go up to Room # 69, where Von Brashlitz introduces them to his 24-year-old daughter, Tanya, a very sexy ‘woman’, who is actually the machine. She sits on the narrator’s lap and they have sex; however, she refuses to do it with Indian Mike, because she claims to love the narrator. Her creator gets angry and adjusts the electronics in order to fix her, but, instead of having sex with Indian Mike, she rips off his 14-inch-long penis and his testicles and throws them away. While he bleeds to death the narrator and Tanya have oral sex just before the police arrive (accompanied by firemen, officials and reporters). The scientist tries to prove Tanya is just a machine, and the men gang-rape her – ‘ganged her, and ripped and raped and tore’ (p. 44). Some months later, the narrator buys an inflatable sex doll manufactured by the scientist, but he cuts it to pieces after he has had sex with it, stating that all women are fuck machines merely pretending to be human. Although he claims to have loved Tanya he reduces her to metonymical parts: ‘nylon knees, nylon thighs (...) she was *all* ass and breast, nylon legs,’ (p. 39). All the male characters, including her own father, treat her as the sex object she was created to be, but their violence reveals their profound hatred of women. As her father and creator says, ‘every woman is a fucking machine, can’t you see that? they play for the highest bidder! THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS LOVE! THAT IS A FAIRY-TALE MIRAGE LIKE CHRISTMAS!’ (p. 43).

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<sup>37</sup> Kotex is a well-known brand of feminine hygiene products, here representing the inconvenience of menstruation from a male point of view. Earlier in the story, the bar-owner complains about the heat, saying, ‘I wish I were deader than yesterday’s Kotex.’ (p. 35)



When the scientist starts shouting saying Tanya has no feelings and that she is just a machine, people do not believe him, so he rips her arm off and they see wires and tubes. Tanya asks the narrator to try not to be sad, and the people destroy her. Some months later, Von Brashlitz is dismissed by the government, but he creates a different kind of fuck machine, an inflatable doll, which is bought by the narrator, but he considers it boring and cuts it into pieces.

Even though he is sad about the way the officials destroy his 'love', the narrator/protagonist does nothing to save her and, when he buys the inflatable doll, a woman made of plastic with 'giant rubber tits' and a 'rubber mouth', he has the same attitude that he condemned previously. He takes a 'razor blade and cut the thing all to shit. dumped<sup>38</sup> it out with the beercans' (p. 45).

Even though the narrator claims that he falls in love with Tanya he treats her in just the same way as the others and wants of her only his own satisfaction:

I was busy at it, ripping her blouse from her breasts, working at her panties, hotter than I had been in years, and then we were tangled; we somehow got to standing – and I took her standing up, my hands ripping at her long blond hair, bending her head back, then reaching down, spreading her asshole as I pumped, she came – I could feel the throbbing, and I joined. (p. 41)

Kate Millett (1977) states that this behaviour is of one who 'associated sexuality with power, with his solitary pleasure, and with the pain and humiliation of his partner, who is nothing but an object to him in the most literal sense' (p. 20).

When Tanya tries to obtain her wish of having sex only with the narrator, her creator forces her to do her job as a prostitute with Indian Mike as well, and she protests, showing how badly she is treated by the one who gave her life only to turn her into a sexual slave:

“ah,” said Tanya, “you rotten old fuck! You and your schnapps, and then nibbling at my tits all night, so I can’t even sleep! While you can’t even raise a decent hard! You’re disgusting!” (p. 42)

For a moment she has a voice and says what she thinks, but she is severely punished by Von Brashlitz, who, later, tears her arm off in order to prove to the other people that she is nothing but a machine.

For the narrator, it is not only Tanya, but all women who are objects of male sexual desire. They are victims who must obey men and be punished if they disagree with their

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<sup>38</sup> Bukowski does not follow grammatical rules and constantly fails to use a capital letter after a full stop.

masters. He demonstrates his view, generalising that all women are ‘fuck machines’, who pretend to be human. The controversy starts when Tony, the owner of the bar, assumes that ‘there’s something very insane going on’ (p. 37), implying that the creation of a ‘fuck machine’ is an insane thing. The narrator says he has ‘been looking for a woman like that all’ his life (p. 38), to which Tony replies that ‘every man has’ (p. 38). It is clear from their conversation that all men look for the sexual pleasure women can provide, as if it was no more than their obligation. They suggest that the ideal woman will satisfy a man without demanding something in exchange, not even the same pleasure they provided. According to Millett (1977),

There is also a sense in which the prostitute’s role is an exaggeration of patriarchal economic conditions where the majority of females are driven to live through some exchange of sexuality for support. The degradation in which the prostitute is held and holds herself, the punitive attitude society adopts toward her, are but reflections of a culture whose general attitudes toward sexuality are negative and which attaches great penalties to a promiscuity in women it does not think to punish in men. (p. 123)

Even when the narrator and Indian Mike see Tanya for the first time, not knowing she is a machine, they refer to her as a ‘thing’: ‘he appeared to be having a visitor, a young thing, almost too young, looking flimsy and strong at the same time’ (p. 39). She is no more than her sexual parts, because the first depiction of her by the narrator shows only her ‘nylon thighs, and just that tiny part there where the long stockings ended and that touch of flesh began’ (p. 39). When her pimp/creator tells her to sit on the narrator’s lap she must obey him, and the narrator starts to touch her and have sex with her.

According to Von Brashlitz, she is ‘man’s greatest invention’ and the narrator agrees with him. For any man who looks for nothing more from a woman than personal sexual satisfaction she is the perfect woman because she has no other function besides ‘fucking’. However she starts to give signs that she wants more than this; she wants love, and because of this she is punished with death. Once again, Kate Millett (1977) reminds us that, for Henry Miller, the prostitute was the perfect woman:

Miller’s ideal woman is a whore. Lawrence regarded prostitution as a profanation of the temple, but with Miller the commercialization of sexuality is not only a gratifying convenience for the male (since it is easier to pay than persuade) but the perfection of feminine existence, efficiently confining it to the function of absolute cunt. (p. 301-2)

The narrator is surprised that Tanya falls in love with him, because he has never been a ‘very good lover’ (p. 41), and, as soon as she declares her love for him, she asks if he

loves her too and he replies affirmatively. She declares that she is not supposed to be alive, which indicates that she feels alive after falling in love with the narrator. Tanya feels happy with the narrator, but her creator tries to destroy her moment by 'fixing' her:

“god damn it!” screamed the old man, “this FUCKING MACHINE!” he walked over to this varnished box with the word TANYA printed on the side. there were these little wires sprouting out of it; there were dials, and needles that quivered, and many colors, lights that blinked on and off, things that ticked... Von B. was the craziest pimp I had ever met. he kept playing with the dials. (p. 41)

The narrator watches the scene and does nothing, which makes the reader question his love for Tanya. The only conclusion the narrator draws is that the German is the craziest pimp he has ever met, but he does nothing to take his 'love' out of his hands.

The next attack of fury of the German scientist occurs when he affirms that he took 25 years to build the machine, but Tanya corrects him saying she is 24, to which he replies: 'you see? you see? just like a common bitch!' (p. 41). The scientist resents what he sees as Tanya's argumentative personality – women are not expected to have opinions of their own!

While Tanya's mechanical body is savaged by her creator, the only thing that the narrator observes is that she changed the colour of her lipstick, and he tells her he will forgive her for anything she does, suggesting she could have sex with Indian Mike. Even so, she refuses, and when she has no other option besides having sex with him, she kills Indian Mike.

The narrator and the scientist are shocked when 'she ripped the whole cock right out of and off of' Indian Mike's body (p. 43), but it is not shocking for them when the woman is obliged to have sex with a man against her wishes. What is really shocking in that situation is that, after all that has happened, the only thing the narrator can think of doing is to have sex with her once more before she is destroyed. She obeys her love and they have oral sex. The punishment for her defending herself against the prostitution she did not wish is gang rape, the perfect end for a prostitute who did not want to do her job.

No less absurd is that Tanya's creator extends her condition of 'fuck machine' to all women in the world, affirming 'there is no such thing as love' (p. 43), which leads us to understand that all women must be treated like Tanya and be punished equally when they refuse to play their sexual role.

The narrator cries as he watches Tanya being destroyed, but only because he has lost his own fuck machine. His next action is to look for another one, which is when he buys the

inflatable doll. However, when he has intercourse with the doll he feels bored and starts imagining things:

Then I flipped her over and put it back in. humped and humped. frankly, it was rather boring. I imagined a pussy as large as an octopus, crawling toward me, wet and stinking and aching for an orgasm. I remembered all the panties, knees, legs, tits, pussies I had ever seen. the rubber was sweating; I was sweating. (p. 45)

The most degrading image created by the narrator is that of the giant vagina, which hunts him down, as if women were no more than that, as if to have an orgasm was something only allowed to men, and any woman who wanted satisfaction was no more than a stinking monster. Millett (1977) affirms that

One also observes the paradoxical situation that while patriarchy tends to convert woman to a sexual object, she has not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is agreed to be her fate. Instead, she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence. (p. 119)

All the other women he had had any kind of relationship are reduced to the parts designed to give him pleasure, and, thinking about all that, he ‘forced’ himself ‘to come into that lousy hunk of rubber’ (p. 45), but lamented she was not Tanya, the perfect woman, whose ‘belly had been a hog’s belly. veins the veins of a dog. She rarely shatted or pissed, she had just fucked’ (p. 45).

The story ends with him feeling sorry for Tanya, who,

had only eaten a little – mostly cheap cheese and raisins. she had had no desire for money or property or large new cars or overexpensive homes. she had never read the evening paper. Had no desire for colored television, new hats, rain boots, backfence conversations with idiot wives; nor had the desire of a husband who was a doctor, a stockbroker, a congressman or a cop. (p. 46)

For the narrator, women are only interested in property and status. He reduces women to mindless gold-diggers. His ideal woman was Tanya only because she was no more than a sex machine.

## **2.28) ‘My Big-Assed Mother’ (p. 180)**

In this story, the male first-person narrator recalls with nostalgia a time when he was living in a *ménage à trois* in an apartment on the top floor of a four-storey building in LA. He

was living with two prostitutes, Tito and Baby, who ‘looked near 60 but were (...) closer to 40’ (p.180). He describes one of their threesomes, which was interrupted by the arrival of two policemen from the Los Angeles Police Department, determined to arrest the three of them for disorder, having been there four times in the past week. The narrator recalls his banter while ‘the two whores’ sat ‘crouched and shivering, holding, hugging their aging wrinkled and wino and insane bodies’ (p. 181). He tells the policemen he is just ‘playing chess with (his) mother and sister’ (p. 181), but, since the policemen can see the naked prostitutes through the crack of the chained door, they ask which one is supposed to be his mother. He replies that she is ‘the one with the biggest ass’ (p. 181). The police officers desist when the narrator tells them his lawyer would have their badges if they entered without a warrant. After the police leave, Tito gives the narrator oral sex while he reads the newspaper and looks at Baby’s legs as she French-kisses him. The narrator concludes by saying that he does not know what became of Tito and Baby, or even if they are still alive, but delights in the memory of ‘pinching those high-heeled legs, kissing nylon knees, all that colour of dresses and panties’ (p. 184). After all, for a time, he had not one but two women whose sole function was to give him sexual pleasure and who were completely satisfied in giving him pleasure, even if they received none in return!

The story is about people at the lowest level of society; all three characters seem to be older than they are due to drinking and worrying too much. The two women are dependent on the narrator, since they live with him; their fun consists of having sex and drinking, while listening to the radio and watching themselves in the mirror while they have intercourse.

The first description of sex in ‘My Big-Assed Mother’ gives a snapshot of a threesome in progress:

“Tito, it’s in your ass. feel it?”  
 “oh yes, oh my yes – SHOVE! hey! where ya GOING?”  
 “now, Baby, you got it in front there, umm? feel it? big purple head, like a snake singing arias! *feel* me love?”  
 “oooh, dahling, I think I’m gonna c..... HEY! where ya GOING?”  
 “Tito, I am back in your rumble seat. I am parting you in two. You don’t have a chance!”  
 “oooh god ooooh, HEY where ya GOING? get back in there!” (p. 180)

However, it is interrupted by LA police officers who want to invade the narrator’s flat without a search warrant in order to arrest him for disorder. The two women are terrified and the narrator describes them as ridiculous and ‘stupidly lovely’. ‘The two whores shivering and clutching their wrinkled bodies by the corner lampshade’ (p.181).

The officers can see the two women through the crack of the door and, since the narrator answers that his mother is the one with the ‘biggest ass’, one of the policemen answers that his ‘mother sure has a big ass’ (p. 182), and the narrator says ‘too bad you can’t have it, eh?’ (p. 182). Both narrator and policeman treat the girls as if they were no more than a piece of ‘ass’, and they neither respect them nor care about the fact that they are scared. Germaine Greer (2010) asserts that the female is seen as a sex object of men, available for their use. Her sexuality is exposed as passive and her body is suppressed. The narrator’s attitude in relation to the two women is similar to that which Millett (1977) detects in Henry Miller’s work, ‘just “fuck” women and discard them, much as one might avail oneself of sanitary facilities – Kleenex or toilet paper’ (p. 296); it is not important how they feel.

As soon as the police leave, the two women lament that the narrator has lost his erection. This detail reveals the focus of the male narrator and his failure to fully comprehend the terror to which the two female characters have just been subjected. As though nothing whatsoever had happened, Tito then starts giving the narrator oral sex:

Tito came on over, dropped down to the rug. I felt her working. she had a mouth like one of those toilet plungers that unstopped toilets. I drank my wine and puffed at my cigarette. they’d suck your brains out if you let them. I think they did it to each other when I wasn’t around. (p. 183)

It is not necessary to say that it is highly offensive to a woman to have her mouth compared to a toilet plunger, not to mention the fact that he depicts the two of them as sexually degenerate nymphomaniacs. Once again, the male narrator suggests that the two women are desperate to give him pleasure, as if they could achieve orgasm just by touching him. According to Millett (1977), ‘the image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs’ (p. 47), which explains how the narrator can imagine that the women might be satisfied just by touching him.

In the next passage, the narrator is reading a racing report from a newspaper while Tito is practicing fellatio on him. The sound of the oral sex is represented with a series of onomatopoeias, reminiscent of a vacuum cleaner:

*vurp virp sloooooom*  
*vissaaa ooop*  
*vop bop vop bop vop*  
 “- it’s a mile and a quarter, he’s trying to sprint away from these routers, he’s got 6 lengths turning the last curve and backing up, the horse is dying, he wants to be back in the stable-“  
*slllllurrrp*

*slurrrrrr vip vop vop*  
*vip vop vop*

Even if the two women obtain pleasure through his, he ignores them and seems to be bored by them both wanting to have sex with him. Tito gets angry with him and ‘lifted her head and screamed, knocked the newspaper out of (his) hand’ (p.183). Baby comes right after and kisses him. He feels trapped, not excited, by the situation, and when he reaches orgasm they separate, ‘each waiting the bathroom’s turn to wipe the snot from (their) sexual noses’ (p. 184), as if all of them had achieved orgasm together.

The story ends with the narrator stating that he does not even know where the girls are now, nor ‘if they are dead or what’ (p. 184), which demonstrates that he does not have any kind of feelings for them nor care if they are alive. The only thing he misses is ‘pinching those high-heeled legs, kissing nylon knees, all that color of dresses and panties’ (p. 184); in other words he just misses having two sexual slaves, ready for him at all times.

## 2.29) ‘Six Inches’<sup>39</sup> (p. 24)

In this sexual fantasy, Bukowski makes a clear reference to some of Lemuel Gulliver’s more disagreeable experiences as a homunculus in the Brobdingnag section of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Bukowski’s story is narrated in the first person by Henry Markson Jones II, who tells how he first met his wife, Sarah, at work. He says ‘everything about her spelled S-E-X’ (p. 24), and is surprised that his colleagues keep their distance from her, but one of them warns him that Sarah is a witch, who had been responsible for the disappearance of two other men. Nonetheless, he marries her a month later. After three months she starts to become aggressive; complaining that he is fat, and making him go on a strict diet, although he continues drinking beer just to show her ‘who was wearing the pants in our family’ (p. 26). He not only loses weight, but also diminishes in size, until he is precisely six inches tall, at which point she starts to use him as a dildo. Disgusted by the ‘stench (...) of that terrible tunnel’ (p. 31), he takes his revenge by sticking a hat pin into her heart and killing her. He makes his escape and hides inside a supermarket, where he regains height little by

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<sup>39</sup> The average length of the erect human penis is generally accepted as being about six inches. This was confirmed in a recent study of almost 2,000 US men, which found that the average erect penile length was 5.6 inches (14.2 centimetres). Herbenick D., Reece M., Schick V., Sanders S. A., ‘Erect penile length and circumference dimensions of 1,661 sexually active men in the United States’. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 2014, volume 11, number 1, p. 93-101 (DOI: 10.1111/jsm.12244).

little, until he is able to check into the Sunset Motel as a three-foot midget. Although Sarah is active and dominant for most of the time, being presented as a sexy, clever woman by the narrator, she is also shown to be bossy and authoritative. Her attempt to dominate the male protagonist by reducing him to a homunculus and using him as a dildo is punished by death at the hands of her husband, thus proving the inevitable superiority of the male sex.

Although the female protagonist is presented as sexy and clever by the narrator; from the beginning of the story he has the impression that she is not trustworthy:

I had really gotten to know her at a Christmas party for the employees at the warehouse. Sarah was a secretary there. I noticed none of the fellows got near her at the party and I couldn't understand it. I had never seen a sexier woman and she didn't act the fool either. I got close to her and we drank and talked. She was beautiful. There was something odd about her eyes, though. They just kept looking into you and the eyelids didn't seem to blink. (p. 24)

The other male characters are afraid of her; they see her as a witch. Harry (Henry's friend) advises him to stay away from her, because two co-workers (Manny, a salesman and Lincoln, a clerk) have disappeared slowly in front of people's eyes. Nonetheless, Sarah seduces Henry and they go to his apartment, where he comes to the conclusion that 'she was the woman of all women' (p. 25). Simone de Beauvoir (1997) explains that Montherlant expresses the content of the praying mantis myth in his work, because 'to love is, for a woman, to devour; pretending to give, she takes' (p. 213), which is exactly what happens with Sarah:

The womb, that warm, peaceful, and safe retreat, becomes a pulp of humours, a carnivorous plant, a dark, contractile gulf, where dwells a serpent that insatiably swallows up the strength of the male. The same dialect makes the erotic object into a wielder of black magic, the servant into a traitress, Cinderella into an ogress, and changes all women into enemies: it is the payment man makes for having in bad faith set himself up as the sole essential.

This hostile visage, however, is the definitive face of woman no more than the others. (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 206)

Very quickly Sarah reveals her true personality. She gives orders to her husband and forces him to obey, being very bossy and authoritative:

"Take off your damned clothes!"

"What, my darling?"

"You heard me, bastard! Strip!"

Sarah was a little different then than I had ever seen her. I took off my clothes and underwear and threw them on the couch. She stared at me.

"Awful," she said, "what a lot of shit!" (p. 25)



The narrator tries to show her he is in command when he refuses to give up his beer, but she says that they ‘will make it work anyway’ (p. 26). His attempt to control things fades away when he realises that there is something going on, which he does not understand.

Her control over him becomes evident when he realises that he is diminishing; he complains, but she is the one who is going to decide what size he will be. She transforms him into a toy, forces him to entertain her and reduces him to precisely six inches, because she intends to use him as a dildo:

I finished my beer and then the disgusting thing happened, a most disgusting thing. Sarah picked me up and placed me down between her legs, which she spread open just a bit. Then I was facing a forest of hair. I hardened my back and neck muscles, sensing what was to come. I was jammed into darkness and stench. I heard Sarah moan. Then Sarah began to move me slowly back and forth. (p. 31)

The use of the word ‘stench’ is extremely strong and highly pejorative, and reveals the depth of the Bukowskian narrator misogyny better than almost any offensive word in the whole collection, because, in the semantic field of nouns related to smell, ‘perfume’ and ‘fragrance’ are the most pleasant ones, followed by the neutral words ‘odour’ and ‘smell’. At the negative end of the scale is the word ‘stink’, but the narrator goes yet further with ‘stench’, which is defined by the *OED* as a smell which is ‘foul, disgusting, noisome, disagreeable, offensive’ – not, apparently, the opinion of a man who loves women. Germaine Greer devotes a whole chapter of *The Female Eunuch* (2010) to a discussion of the ways in which patriarchal society leads women to believe that their own vaginas are disgusting and smelly. Even though they practise fellatio on their male partners, they are commonly induced to believe that cunnilingus may be something too revolting to seek in return.

Sarah’s punishment for subjecting Henry to this ignominious fate is death at the hands of her husband, who takes his revenge on her for having reduced him to a homunculus and used him as a dildo. He drives a hat pin into her heart and listens while she agonises:

Sarah rolled and convulsed. I held to the hat pin. She almost threw me to the floor .... I hung on. Her lips formed an odd sound. Then she seemed to quiver all over like a woman freezing. (p. 32)

After killing her he starts to grow again, and the story finishes with him very rich, after robbing a supermarket, in a motel. His success is related to her loss. He is dominant, not her.

According to Greer (2010), for ‘boys broaching manhood the dominant fantasy of adventure simply expands to include woman as exploit and women seem to fall into two patterns, the Great Bitch and the Poison Maiden’ (p. 213). Greer asserts that aggression is

used against the Great Bitch in the sense that ‘the penis-weapon’ is going to hurt her, as we can see in the symbolic image of Sarah dying with the phallic object being craved into her heart.

Sarah is the strongest female character in this group of stories; she is an independent, clever, seductive woman, who takes for herself what she wants. In a sense, she is the one who takes revenge for all the previous feminine characters, because she turns the male protagonist into a sex object. In the first three months of her marriage she allows her husband to think that he controls their relationship. She cooks for him and he eats well, but after this period she starts to make remarks about his weight and she puts him on a diet, saying he is ‘beginning to look like a turkey they’re plumping up for Thanksgiving’ (p. 24).

The irony is that the narrator is the one who objectified Sarah when he first met her at the Christmas party at work; he thought she was sexy, and he wanted to have sex with her so much that he ignored his friend’s advice to stay away from her; he believes his friend was jealous because he had a beautiful woman. The first thing Sarah does is to satisfy her victim; she goes with him to his apartment and makes the best of herself in order to seduce him, and she succeeds. Because of that he marries her only a month after meeting her, which means her plan worked. When she finally achieves her goal, she starts to be herself; she takes control and changes the situation. It is now he who must serve her and not the contrary. In a society which pays so much attention to women’s appearance, especially their weight, she is the one who wants to make him lose weight.

Television, magazines and other media work very hard to convince women they are worthless if they do not conform to a pattern of beauty, which is almost impossible to achieve if one is not wealthy. One of the most insistent messages is that women must be slim. Although Sarah is aggressive in her demands for her husband to lose weight, society does that all the time with women, and we think it is completely normal; it is actually women’s duty to look beautiful and slim.

According to Greer (2010), a woman became an object to be ornamented, she needs to follow fashion, to use jewels; the more she uses, the more she becomes a showcase for wealth. While men do not need to wear accessories, women’s beauty has become celebrated in terms of riches, the comparisons made to her beauty are connected to precious adornments. ‘She was for consumption’ (p. 65). Women are required to look expensive, they study the stereotype created by the media, they become sex objects, because the media tells them so:

The stereotype is the Eternal Feminine. She is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she has herself no sex at all. Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. (p. 67)

Fetishes vary according to male tastes, but all of them welcome the stereotype, because there are commonly recognised areas of value. The woman's function is to be a sex object, she is a doll, 'her essential quality is castratedness' (GREER, 2010, p. 69).

Sarah starts counting her husband's calories and makes him punch himself on his sides in order to break the cells of fat, which is very much part of the routine in a woman's life nowadays, who submits to painful beauty treatments in specialised clinics. To demonstrate that he is the boss of the house he says he will not give up his beer, but that makes no difference to Sarah, since she is the one in control. She finds a way to make her plan work and finally he is reduced to the size of a penis so that she can use him as a dildo. He just obeys and entertains her, since his life is in her hands.

Throughout History, women have been in men's hands. Before women conquered their right to education, their right to vote, they were totally dependent on men; they needed to be obedient, to please their husbands, and they starved to death if for some reason they were abandoned. They were small, not in size, but in importance. In her account of her research into the History of women, in *A Room of One's Own* (1985), Virginia Woolf explains that she found only injustice – women could be beaten as a recognised right of man, and a daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice could be locked up.

However, this story shows an apparent reversal of this *status quo*, and the first thing that comes to the reader's mind is that Sarah is mean. In fact she is, because it is cruel to turn someone into a sex object, it is cruel to make someone feel it is his/her obligation to entertain his/her partner in order to survive. We tend to dislike Sarah and we applaud when she dies. However, when it is the contrary, when a man does what Sarah does, it does not shock the reader so much, because in our History it has been permitted to beat a woman, to disinherit a woman, to turn her into a prostitute, and, even now in the 21st century, with all the rights women have conquered, we still see injustice. Women are still punished for their sexual desire; they are seen as immoral if they have sex with many partners; they are still obliged to adorn themselves in order to be a beautiful sex object.

Media and society still make many women frustrated about their condition. What liberty has the contraceptive pill brought to women if they still have their hands tied by false morality and 'good manners'. Sarah dies because she turns her partner into a sex object, not because she is a witch; it is the punishment women are accustomed to, a social suicide, if they

allow their sexuality to be free. Women must be mute sex objects; it was like this in Bukowski's time and it is still like this nowadays, because of the media that propagate the cult of the perfect body instead of an intelligent mind, because of women who accept this condition, and because of a society that punishes any kind of behaviour that is different from that which is considered right in the patriarchal world.

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In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate how women are portrayed pejoratively in Bukowski's work. The stories which were chosen for more detailed analysis give the reader the idea of a misogynistic narrator who depicts women as mere sex objects. In 'The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California', it is clear that the young girl is mute because she is dead and can not avoid being raped by two men. In 'The Fuck Machine', Tanya tries to rebel by choosing only one sexual partner, which does not free her from being a sex object, but at least demonstrates that she has wishes, she has feelings. The result is her death at the hands of figures in authority, who rip, rape and tear her apart. In 'My Big Assed Mother', women are desperate to satisfy the male protagonist, as if they could obtain an orgasm only by giving him pleasure. In 'Six Inches', the protagonist, Sarah, is even stronger than Tanya; she is dominant and clever, but all the time the narrator shows how untrustworthy she is, and punishes her with death. Of all the women characters, Sarah is the strongest, but she is depicted as a witch, a person to be feared and not trusted. In the next chapter, women are not protagonists in the stories; nonetheless, even as minor characters, they reveal how women are depicted by the Bukowskian narrator.

## CHAPTER TWO: STORIES THAT MAKE PEJORATIVE REFERENCES TO WOMEN IN PASSING

Whereas the stories covered in the previous chapter all featured women as important characters, the 28 stories examined in the present chapter only make passing references to women. The protagonists are male. Nonetheless, where women do appear, it is always in a negative light, depicted in language that is derogatory, pejorative and sexist, revealing the extent of Bukowskian narrator misogyny. However, some of the stories reveal a male protagonist who, sensing his own impotence, is too scared to approach women, even though he may believe they are easy prey who want nothing more than to be raped.

### 3.1) 'H',<sup>40</sup> (p. 169)

This is a fantastic science fiction story, which conjectures that Adolph Hitler did not commit suicide at the end of the Second World War, but 'waited a long time on History and Science' (p. 171) until he was in his 80s, when he could be put into the body of the President of United States. The President is kidnapped and taken to a place where he is met by Hitler, who suggests the President has similarities with his own political philosophy.<sup>41</sup> For that reason he 'had to speed-up History' (p. 172) and assassinate President Kennedy and his brother who, according to him, would have won the presidential election. Hitler and the President undergo surgery in which they exchange bodies. All the characters in the story are male, and the only mention of a woman occurs when Hitler stands up after the operation and wonders how the president's wife will enjoy his love-making, an ironic touch since Hitler reputedly had little interest in sex<sup>42</sup> and would, presumably, have been even less interested had he lived into his 80s.

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<sup>40</sup> According to Howard Sounes, when Bukowski was at college in the early days of the Second World War, he 'upset his fellow students by speaking up for Hitler and Nazism. He wrote to newspapers expressing his extreme views, making his parents fear for their safety because he was still living at home, and he attended meetings of a neo-Nazi group. He later excused his behaviour, saying he simply enjoyed being controversial' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 19).

<sup>41</sup> The president mentioned is L(yndon) B(aines) Johnson, who was responsible for massive bombing campaigns targeting North Vietnamese cities during the Vietnam War.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.strangehistory.net/2013/02/03/hitlers-bizarre-sex-life/> .

### 3.2) 'Another Horse Story' (p. 104)

In this story, the narrator named Bukowski makes a series of observations about people who bet on horses. After the first couple of weeks of the racing season he has only managed to break even, so his standpoint is one of disappointment. For him, 'anything is a waste of time unless you are fucking well or creating well' (p. 104). He describes his fellow punters as people with 'bad teeth, ulcers, bad jobs, men without women, women without men. nothing but shit' (p. 104). Bukowski is rude to a woman who asks him a question just because she is fat, describing her as a 'ponderous whale of healthy stinking blubber' (p. 105). At the end of the story he returns home and runs himself a bath, claiming that 'it's too hot to fuck' (p. 108), and saying that, despite its shortcomings, betting on a winning horse offers more satisfaction than sex: 'give me a horse's ass – that gets there first' (p. 108).

### 3.3) 'A Bad Trip' (p. 440)

In this 'story', the narrator directs a diatribe against the 'ordinary madness' in society, which seeks to prohibit drugs like LSD, while condoning all those things that 'can drive men mad because society is built on false stilts' (p. 440). In the narrator's opinion, man is 'already insane and only borne along on social tides by the outward bars and dull hammers that render him insensible to any individualistic thinking' (p. 441). He argues that it is hypocritical of society to outlaw LSD because of the occasional 'bad trip', when 'this whole country, this whole world is on a bad trip' (p. 443). By way of examples of those aspects of society that drive people mad, including 'marriage, the war, bus service, slaughterhouses, beekeeping, surgery, anything you can name' (p. 440), the narrator also mentions such mundane things as tootsie rolls<sup>43</sup> and 'Toots and Casper',<sup>44</sup> and expresses his anger because people are arrested only 'for swallowing a tablet.'

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<sup>43</sup> Tootsie is a chocolate bar that has been manufactured in the United States since 1896. According to his biographer, Bukowski once said that, during a critical period in his life, when he refused to work in order to have more time to write, his only meal every day was a candy bar (SOUNES, 2010, p. 21).

<sup>44</sup> 'Toots and Casper' was a long-running family comic strip by Jimmy Murphy, distributed to newspapers for thirty-seven years by King Features Syndicate.

### 3.4) 'The Big Pot Game' (p. 467)

Like 'A Bad Trip', 'The Big Pot Game' is a diatribe against the hippy culture of 1967.<sup>45</sup> The target of the former 'story' is LSD<sup>46</sup> and other hallucinogenic drugs, whereas this one focuses on marijuana (pot) and, above all, those who use it. In 'A Bad Trip', The Bukowskian narrator is more sympathetic to the users of LSD than to the conservative society seeking to ban it, but his contempt for the 'so-called hip-boys' who smoke marijuana is unmitigated. He compares them unfavourably with such celebrated literary figures as Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) and Théophile Gautier (1811-72), as well as the 'Negro jazzband boys' of his own adolescence. Although there are no female protagonists in this text, the passing references to women reveal the narrator's ever-present misogyny. For example, he says that, if he were to be arrested for the use and/or possession of marijuana, it 'would be like being charged with rape for smelling a pair of panties on somebody's clothesline' (p. 469). He sees no inconsistency, while he himself is fulminating against the use of marijuana, to characterise the 'old women' who say the same thing as, 'no eyes, no teeth, no brain, no soul, no ass, no mouth, no color, no flux, no humor, nothing, just a stick' (p. 469). Unashamedly self-opinionated, The narrator happily dismisses such 'social commentators' for their 'low-level brain-power', which he sees as being in direct contrast to his own 'high-level snarl' (p. 469).

### 3.5) 'The Blanket' (p. 471)

'The Blanket' is the last story in the collection, and apparently the anonymous organisers of the volume selected it precisely for its focus on the final element in the book's title: 'Tales of Ordinary Madness'. Indeed, the story, and thus the collection itself, closes with the sentence, 'I must truly be mad' (p. 478). Hank is the first-person narrator telling an account of his persecution by the blue blanket on his bed and its attempts to strangle him. Although the story is to be fantastic, the narrator is concerned to convince himself and the reader of the reality of the situation, so he takes the blanket down to the first-floor apartment

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<sup>45</sup> The cultural references – to the Doors, the Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, Bob Dylan and Timothy Leary, amongst others – situate the story clearly in 1967.

<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, he makes the same joke in each 'story', when he lists the various illicit drugs and follows LSD with STP, a proprietary brand of fuel additive.

of his neighbour, Mick, and his wife, seeking their corroboration. Mick, an alcoholic suffering from withdrawal symptoms, is so convinced of the blanket's malevolence that he shoots it. The narrator then takes the blanket back up to his own rooms, cuts it into pieces and burns it, becoming convinced that the blanket is a living being when he sees blood on the knife, even though he has not cut himself. Hank recalls other hallucinations of whose reality he had been entirely convinced. Amongst others, he remembers an episode when he was living with a 'lady of the streets' (p. 472),<sup>47</sup> which appears to be drawn straight from Gulliver's voyage to Lilliput, in which he awakes to find thirty or forty tiny little men attempting to tie his partner and himself down in bed with wires in order to electrocute them. At the end of the story, even his own tears coursing down his cheeks seem to be 'crawling like heavy senseless things without legs' (p. 478), which convinces him that he is mad.

### 3.6) 'Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home' (p. 304)

In this story, the third-person protagonist, Jack Hendley, seems to be Bukowski's alter-ego beneath the flimsiest of disguises. Like Bukowski, Hendley is a hard-drinking compulsive gambler on the horses. Just as in stories like 'Notes on the Pest' and 'A Popular Man', Hendley is forever complaining about people (whom he refers to as 'snippets' and 'dead dogs') who invade his privacy while he is studying the form. One such 'snippet' had taken up two hours of Hendley's time on the afternoon of the story, sitting on his couch pontificating about 'LIFE' and 'talking about Mahler and 'Kant'<sup>48</sup> and cunt and revolution, not really knowing anything about any of them' (p. 306). The implication is that Hendley is an expert in these matters! The 'Kant and cunt' leitmotif is repeated five times in the remaining four pages of the story. The association with 'a happy home' occurs when Hendley disengages himself from a prostitute for whose '50 dollar piece of ass' (p. 308) he is not prepared to pay. The story's title already conveys the impression that women will be reduced to sex objects. Although the focus is on Hendley's unsuccessful night at the races, his only

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<sup>47</sup> This appears to be a reference to Bukowski's one-time partner, Jane, who was notoriously promiscuous. Curiously, the prospect of having sex with her when she returned home after having had sex with '2 or 3 or more men' did not appear to constitute an emotional problem for Bukowski, who prided himself on his own promiscuity, but rather one of physical disgust.

<sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) was a German philosopher who argued that fundamental concepts structure human experience, and that reason is the source of morality. Kant's major work, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781), seeks to explain the relationship between reason and human experience.



comments about women are metonymic references to ‘cunt’, ‘legs’, ‘ass’ and ‘skirt’. The old ladies who win on the favourite in one race are referred to as ‘insane hat-pin ladies’, recalling the female protagonist in ‘Six Inches’. As he drives away from the race-track he sees ‘something good ... short dress ... good legs’ (p. 310) hitch-hiking; since it is too difficult to stop and pick her up he leaves her to be ‘raped’ by somebody else.

### **3.7) ‘Doing Time with Public Enemy N° 1’ (p. 248)**

This is an account of an arrest and imprisonment of the first person narrator named Bukowski in Moyamensing Prison, Philadelphia, in 1942 for draft dodging.<sup>49</sup> Upon his arrival, his cell-mate introduced himself as ‘public enemy n° 1’, and told him that the other prisoners considered ‘draft dodgers and indecent exposure cases’ to be the worst of all the inmates. Whilst in jail Bukowski became a champion at throwing dice, which made him ‘jail-rich’ and enabled him to buy extra meals from the cook, who had murdered two men and raped a fellow-prisoner so brutally that the man could not walk for a week. Nonetheless, the narrator prefers the cook to an ‘indecent exposure case’, whom he imagines to be ‘dreaming of showing his cock to 3 year old girls’ (p. 251). He claims that the only thing that prevented him from ‘belting’ the man was the prospect of being punished with solitary confinement. There’s only one passage in the story in which women are mentioned: at the beginning, when Bukowski is arrested, he hears the voice of a neighbour, ‘the eternal woman’s voice’ (p. 248), saying, ‘oh, there goes that horrible man! they’ve got him!’ (p. 248). His comment that ‘I just don’t make it with the ladies’ can perhaps be read as an ironic response to attacks from feminist critics.

### **3.8) ‘Eyes Like the Sky’ (p. 415)**

In this rambling sequence of two personal reminiscences and two comments on contemporary culture the first person unnamed narrator laments (as he does in ‘Beer and Poets and Talk’) the dearth of talent amongst living poets – ‘the giants are gone and there have not come up any giants to replace them’ (p. 419). Over a beer the narrator recalls the

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<sup>49</sup> In the story Bukowski gives an account of the psychiatric exam which led to his release from prison and exemption from military service in the Second World War. According to his biographer, he was ‘classified 4-F or, as he put it, “psycho”’. Bukowski later recalled that the psychiatrist had written on his draft card that he was unsuitable for service partly because of his “extreme sensitivity”” (SOUNES, 2010, p. 22).

time that Dorothy Healey<sup>50</sup> came to see him, but he only remembers the blue dress she was wearing and the fact that ‘her eyes were this beautiful glowing blue’ (p. 415). In answer to his drinking companion’s question, he says that he did not have sex with her, since, like Jackie Kennedy,<sup>51</sup> she had ‘to be very careful who she goes to bed with’ (p. 415). An alternative explanation is given later in the text when he calls her a ‘dirty communist’ (p. 419). The narrator goes on to refer appreciatively to the way that comic strips like Mary Worth<sup>52</sup> were satirising the ‘Hippie-Beatnik scene’ (p. 416). In the next section he recalls a visit from a professor from a local university who asked him about which poets were writing ‘the ACTUAL new poetry’. Not wishing to be responsible for creating a new Black Mountain group,<sup>53</sup> the narrator gives no answer. Finally, he rejects the idea that Lowell and Ginsberg might represent ‘the fix’. Just as in ‘Beer and Poets and Talk’, the Bukowskian narrator sexism is manifest in the fact that, in his various lists of good and bad poets, he does not mention a single female writer.

### 3.9) ‘Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit’ (p. 317)

Just as in ‘Notes on the Pest’ and ‘A Popular Man’, the narrator named Bukowski here expresses his irritation at being assailed by fans at inconvenient times. In this case, he is pushing his trolley around the supermarket when a displayman from the store latches on to him and reminds him that he had once gone to visit Bukowski and shown him one of his own poems. The fan asks him if he is still at the post office, and says he ‘ought to get out of there’ (p. 319), because he is a great poet. Bukowski replies that ‘great poets die in steaming pots of shit’ (p. 319), by which he means that poetry does not pay the bills, and says that, since he does not want to read his poems at universities like Ginsberg, Creeley and others, because in his opinion that would be prostitution, he has to work in the post office. Once he has escaped

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<sup>50</sup> Dorothy Ray Healey (1914–2006) was an activist in the US Communist Party from the late 1920s to the 1970s.

<sup>51</sup> Jacqueline Lee (Bouvier) Kennedy Onassis, commonly known as ‘Jackie’ (1929–94) was the wife of the 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, and First Lady of the United States during his presidency from 1961 until his assassination in 1963.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Worth is a newspaper comic strip, which has had a seven-decade run since it began in 1938 under the title *Mary Worth's Family*.

<sup>53</sup> The Black Mountain poets, were a group of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century American postmodern poets centred on Black Mountain College, a school founded in 1933 in Black Mountain, North Carolina in which the study of art was seen to be central to a liberal arts education.

the clutches of his fan and thrown his groceries into his car he sees a woman getting out of the car next to his. He stares as her skirt falls back revealing ‘flashes of white leg above the stockings’ (p. 321). After he has leered at the woman’s legs he imagines the conversation later that night between his fan and his wife of 27 years’ standing, in the course of which the man would say that Bukowski ‘doesn’t like women’, just as in the opening paragraph of ‘I Shot a Man in Reno’, in which he quotes the criticism that ‘Bukowski is scared of women’ (p. 385).

### 3.10) ‘I Shot a Man in Reno’ (p. 385)

This text is almost a condensed autobiography of Bukowski, in which the narrator named Bukowski gives an account of his writing in and around 1968, when he was 48 years old, referring to his column in the alternative newspaper, *Open City*, and the beginning of his all-important collaboration with John Martin. In the opening paragraph, he lists negative criticism of his work and himself, including the accusation that ‘Bukowski is scared of women’ (p. 385).<sup>54</sup> The title of the story is part of a line from Johnny Cash’s song ‘Folsom Prison Blues’, originally recorded in 1955 but which Cash had recently sung at a concert in the prison itself, and which was released on the album *At Folsom Prison* in May 1968. Bukowski criticises Johnny Cash, saying ‘the only man who can sing in jail, really is a man who is in jail’ (p. 386). He goes on to reproduce a phone conversation with his friend Marty,<sup>55</sup> who expresses an interest in publishing his columns and asks him about his forthcoming Penguin publication. Finally, he goes to a bar, where he meets a prostitute, who initially draws a flick-knife on him. Nonetheless, she asks him to give her a ride home. On the way, he stops his car and has sex with her, justifying his decision by saying that, even though she is a ‘second’, this is better than no sex at all if no ‘firsts’ are available: ‘I hate seconds but when firsts haven’t been for a time and you are supposed to be a great Artist and an understander of Life, seconds just HAVE to do, and like the boys say, some seconds are better’ (p. 392). In other words, Bukowski justifies his pejorative classification of women into first- and second-quality, and, indeed his own promiscuity, by saying that this is what great writers do!

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<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, one of the criticisms that Bukowski quotes is that he cried when Shirley Temple sang ‘I Got Animal Crackers in my Soup’ – which provides an intriguing context for the writing of the zoophilous story ‘Animal Crackers in My Soup’.

<sup>55</sup> John Martin (born 1930) was the founder of Black Sparrow Press. He was a publisher and editor for 36 years, retiring in 2002. He is most noted for helping to launch the literary career of Charles Bukowski.

### 3.11) 'Kid Stardust on the Porterhouse' (p. 8)

In this story, the narrator, who identifies himself as Henry Charles Bukowski Jr., gives an account of his menial job in a meat packing plant. His work is too heavy for a man of his age, which is close to 50 years old, as the hiring supervisor observes. He is terrified of his co-workers, who are all big black men, whom he describes as Black Muslims. He only manages to work for about two hours and then gives up and goes to a Mexican bar for a beer before taking the bus home. His two hours of work involve carrying heavy beef carcasses for the 'gossiping cranky well-rested stupid housewives of the world', who feel 'almost nothing' (p. 11). With the weight of each dead steer on his shoulders he remembers operas by Wagner, and thinks of cold beer and 'sexy cunt', as he describes women. He imagines a woman, 'her legs crossed high', with a 'blank mind' (p. 11), a passive sex object whose function is to satisfy him.

### 3.12) 'Life and Death in the Charity Ward' (p. 130)

The first person narrator Bukowski gives an account of his personal experience of the LA public health system.<sup>56</sup> Suffering from internal bleeding due to his heavy drinking he is taken in an overloaded ambulance to the county hospital, where he is given a bed in the charity ward, which 'appeared to be a dark cellar' (p. 131). Although he is dying he only gets a blood transfusion after four days, when it is discovered that his father has donated blood in a blood programme. Both of the women who appear in the story are portrayed negatively. The nurse who is taking care of him is angry with him for taking down the side of his bed, and he responds by telling her that her 'pussy stinks', that she belongs 'in a Tijuana whore house' (p.135), addressing her ironically as Florence Nightingale,<sup>57</sup> and asking her to suck his cock. Later in the story, his father brings Bukowsky's partner, Vicky,<sup>58</sup> in to visit him, who was 'so

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<sup>56</sup> In the spring of 1955 Bukowski was admitted to the charity ward of LA County hospital for a bleeding ulcer caused by his heavy drinking (SOUNES, 2010, p. 33).

<sup>57</sup> Florence Nightingale (1820 - 1910) was a celebrated English social reformer and statistician, and the founder of modern nursing. She came to prominence while serving as a nurse during the Crimean War, where she tended to wounded soldiers.

<sup>58</sup> At that time Bukowski was living with Jane Cooney Baker, whom he had met in 1948, 'his first serious girlfriend, only the second woman he had slept with' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 29).

drunk, she could hardly stand up' (p. 138). He accuses his father of getting her drunk in order to demonstrate she was a bad woman. The first thing Bukowski does after being discharged from the hospital is to go to a bar, where he starts to drink again since he sees no women there.

### **3.13) 'Love It or Leave It' (p. 357)**

In this fragment, the narrator named Bukowski gives an account of his experiences working on a railroad gang, focusing on the humiliations he suffers at the hands of his workmates, his supervisor and complete strangers. The carriage in which the railway workers travel is filthy and, although they are given canned food, no can openers are provided so nobody can eat. The other workers gossip about him and torment him. He finally gives up the job when he arrives in Los Angeles, his home city, and decides to sleep inside a car in a junkyard. The 15-year-old son of the scrapyard owner finds him, and, encouraged by his father, beats him savagely with a baseball bat.<sup>59</sup> The story ends with him rolling over on his back and looking up into the morning sky of Los Angeles. Although women do not feature in the story, the railway official who employs him recommends the job on the basis of the availability of 'wetback' Mexican prostitutes on Saturday nights, whose 'blowjobs suck the misery right out of a man's head' (p. 358). Once again, not only for the misogynist Bukowskian narrator but also for those with whom he associates, women serve only to give sexual gratification to men.

### **3.14) 'Night Streets of Madness' (p. 400)**

'Night Streets of Madness' is narrated in the first person by the narrator Bukowski and has the character of an anecdote from the life of the writer as a poet of some renown living in rented accommodation on De Longpre Avenue, Los Angeles, in 1969.<sup>60</sup> The events described take place after a 'drunken party' of fellow poets, 'rotten writers', according to the narrator.

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<sup>59</sup> This scene is included in Marco Ferreri's movie, *Tales of Ordinary Madness*.

<sup>60</sup> In the story, Bukowski refers, with no false modesty, to the imminent publication of the Penguin collection in Britain in which his poetry was to be showcased along with that of Philip Lamantia and Harold Norse: "Bukowski-Norse-Lamantia. Penguin books. It's a damn good thing for those other two guys that I am in there" (p. 404). The volume was published in London at the end of 1969 (*Penguin Modern Poets 13 – Charles Bukowski/Philip Lamantia/Harold Norse*. London: Penguin, 1969.).

The only remaining guest is a young poet for whose second volume of poetry the narrator has written the foreword. The silence of the night is disturbed by the insistent noise of a car horn and, when the young poet and the narrator go out to investigate, they discover that it is an irate woman whose access to her own driveway has been blocked by a parked car. Even when the young woman who owns the parked car removes it the irate woman is still unable to park her car. Meanwhile a young man attacks an old man in an apparently unrelated incident. After the young poet leaves the following morning, the narrator is left alone to reflect on the madness of the night. The two women characters – the owners of the two cars – are described with undisguised misogyny. Even though she has never seen him before, the narrator assumes that the young owner of the parked car wants to have sex with him, that her ‘pussy (is) dying for my poetic soul’ and that she wants to see his (very small) ‘3 and one quarter inches of bobbling throbbing cock’ (p. 403). The other woman, equally unknown to him, is described as neurotic, with no legs, breast or brain, and, just like the women motorists in ‘A Rain of Women’, is seen to be necessarily an incompetent driver by dint of being a woman.

### **3.15) ‘Non-Horseshit Horse Advice’ (p. 99)**

‘Non-Horseshit Horse Advice’ cannot really be described as a story at all. It is more a pseudo-philosophical reflection on the attractions of betting on horse races, followed by the ‘Advice’ of the title, a list of six precepts designed to enable the prospective punter to save some money. Bukowski’s familiarity with the horse-racing scene is evident through his use of technical jargon which renders the story almost incomprehensible for the lay reader. In the context of the present dissertation, what is of most interest in the story is the Bukowskian narrator’s equation of horse-racing with sexual excitement. He refers to ‘one of Freud’s main pupils’, who wrote that ‘gambling is a substitute for masturbation’ (p. 99), and he describes female gamblers whose sexual arousal is proportionate to their winnings:

before the first race they sit with their skirts down as much as possible, and as each race proceeds the skirts climb higher and higher, until just before the 9<sup>th</sup> race it takes all one’s facilities not to commit rape on one of the darlings. whether it is a sense of masturbation that causes this or whether the dear little things need rent and bean money, I don’t know. probably a combo. (p. 99)

As in so many other stories, the Bukowskian narrator has no qualms about raping women (although the use of the verb ‘commit’ appears to indicate that he at least recognises that it is a criminal act), while ‘dear little things’ reveals his patronising misogyny.

### 3.16) 'Notes of a Potential Suicide' (p. 428)

In 'Notes of a Potential Suicide', the narrator writes six apparently independent texts, separated from each other by a line of three asterisks. The linking element between the fragments is the narrator's expression of his dislike for aspects of contemporary society, which are presumably sufficient for him to contemplate suicide. Two of the 'notes' are referred to as Hank by his companions. In the first text, the narrator is sitting by his window, listening to the garbage men emptying the garbage cans, and appreciating their comments on how heavily he drinks. In the second one he says how dull and humourless he had found Norman Mailer's *Christians and Cannibals*.<sup>61</sup> The third one is an anecdote about himself, a Jew and a German going to visit an LA observatory. The German complains that he has been rejected by some 'bitch' and the narrator attempts to console him by saying that she probably had 'shitstains in her panties' (p. 429). In the next note he lists the popular classics played by an East-coast symphony orchestra, and expresses his contempt for those who enjoy such 'Beginner's Melodies' (p. 430). He goes on to list his likes and dislikes in literature and contemporary culture, prefacing his comments with the analogy that 'one man's pussy is another man's handjob' (p. 431). Finally, the narrator reminisces about a childhood visit to an Air Show which was curtailed by the death of a parachutist; but what he remembers most vividly is that, from beneath the stands, it was possible to look up women's dresses and, in one case, stare at a woman's vagina. The sequence of texts perhaps serves to illustrate the disappointments of adult life in comparison with the fantasies of the adolescent but, more importantly, demonstrates that the Bukowskian narrator attitude to women never developed beyond that of the sex-starved teenager.

### 3.17) 'Notes on the Pest' (p. 434)

'Notes on the Pest' is prefaced with a dictionary definition of 'pest', which gives three meanings for the word, the last of which is 'a mischievous or destructive person'. The narrator then launches an invective against human pests, whom he describes ironically as superior beings because they can always find and bother you when you do not wish to have

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<sup>61</sup> The correct title is *Cannibals/Christians*. Published in 1966, it is a collection of essays, an interview, poems and stories produced by Norman Mailer (1923-2007) during the first half of the 1960s.

any contact with other people. Although he characterises pests as being exclusively male, one understands that he is talking about people in general. He gives these bothersome individuals the generic name of McClintocks. He concludes by inviting his reader to make him laugh with his or her own ‘stories about the McClintock-pest’ (p. 439), before reflecting, in a moment of rare humility, that he might have been writing about himself, that he might actually be ‘a pest pestered by pests’.

### **3.18) ‘Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood’ (p. 258)**

This is an anecdotal account of the first person narrator addressed by ‘characters’ in the story as Hank, who describes the visit he received one afternoon from Mad Jimmy, the ‘nut’ of the title in the ‘poor man’s area’ of Hollywood. The narrative is interspersed with medical jargon referring to Jimmy’s physical health, but the real concern is his unstable mental condition, which Hank says is ‘really fucked-up’. Although Jimmy thinks he is ‘hot shit’ in his new Panama hat, Hank warns him that he is wanted in Court for beating up his girlfriend Mary and breaking her rib. He offers to take Jimmy to a mental hospital but he refuses to be shock-treated again. Hank calls Jimmy’s best friend, Izzy Steiner, who tells Jimmy to leave. Despite the fact that Hank revels in details of his own decadent life-style – picking broken glass out of his feet, throwing packages of his faeces into the grounds of an old folk’s home, unsuccessfully attempting to suck his own penis – he redeems himself by taking sides with Mary against Mad Jimmy, describing her as ‘a very fine person’ (p. 263). It appears that, while Hank sees no problem in using women as sex objects, physical violence against them is beyond the pale.

### **3.19) ‘Politics is like Trying to Screw a Cat in the Ass’<sup>62</sup> (p. 176)**

This ‘story’ opens with a letter from a reader asking Bukowski why he never writes about politics and world affairs. His text provides an extended answer, in which he explains that he does not write about these subjects because ‘there are only bad governments and worse governments’ (p. 179), so he prefers to write about ‘the whores and the horses and the booze,

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<sup>62</sup> In an interview with Silvia Bizio, *High Times*, 1981, Bukowski declared that he considered himself to be apolitical. ‘I don’t have any politics. Why should I? It’s like having gallstones: it costs money to have them removed, so why have them?’ (CALONNE, 2004, p. 175)



while there's time' (p. 179). He outlines his concern about recent accidents with B-52 bombers carrying H-bombs which crashed into the Atlantic off Iceland and Palomares in Spain, in which the bombs were lost and 'split open and were spreading radioactive shit everywhere' (p. 176), citing newspaper headlines from January 1968. He is highly ironic, stating that the US State Department claims to be just protecting his life when he 'hadn't even asked for protection' (p. 176). At the end of the story, he lists the names of four prostitutes, and closes with the playground dipping rhyme, 'eeney, meeney, miney, mo ...' referring to the random process of selecting his sex object for the night.

### 3.20) 'A Popular Man' (p. 457)

In this story the narrator is referred to as 'Hank' and 'Buk', and quotes something his German mother used to say to him<sup>63</sup> referring to his 'German soul' (p. 457). The narration fluctuates from first- to third-person and, at one point is both – 'he, I,' (p. 460). Although the narrator is suffering from the flu he is so popular that he is constantly bothered by visitors, who do not respect his need for rest. The only mention of women in the story occurs when one of his visitors, an actor, proudly tells him that, while he was working in Spain, he had 'fucked all the whores' (p. 458). However, upon his return to the US, he had discovered that his wife had been cheating on him with the local mayor and also his best friend. His anger at her betrayal and his threat to murder her for having done what he himself had done reveal the double standards prevailing in male thinking at that time. At the end of the story, the narrator finally encounters eternal rest from his unwelcome visitors, when the plaster ceiling falls on him in bed and he chokes to death.

### 3.21) 'Purple as an Iris' (p. 408)

This is a sex fantasy set in a mental hospital in which the narrator Bukowski is an inmate, committed for his suicidal tendencies and his reluctance to get out of bed and face the world. Writing in the first person he describes the hospital as a place in which there are constant orgies: while the patients 'fucked in the closets, out in the garden, behind the barn,

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<sup>63</sup> He recalls his mother's fatalistic saying which, translated into English, meant 'Always something' (*immer etwas*). However, it is interesting to note that, having probably never seen the phrase written down, Bukowski spells it erroneously as 'emmer etvas'. In any case, correct spelling was of little importance to Bukowski. In this story, he spells flu as 'flue' on various occasions.

everywhere (...) the staff was so busy – doctors screwing nurses and orderlies screwing each other’ (p. 408). Many of the female patients have been committed because of their promiscuity, having pretended to be mad in order to justify their actions. However he states that he had ‘seen more crazy people outside’ than he ‘ever saw in there’ (p. 408). The narrator has sex with the girls, especially one called Mary, who is, according to him, ‘one of the best ones’ (p. 410). On one occasion he is having sex with her on the straw in the barn, just like in ‘the old-time novels’, when he is interrupted by ‘a bunch of male orderlies (...) most of them homosexual’ (p. 413). One of them is impressed by the colour and size and of his erect penis – ‘PURPLE AS AN IRIS AND HALF THE LENGTH OF A MAN’S ARM! PULSATING, GIGANTIC, UGLY!’ – and they consider the idea of having sex themselves with this 40-centimetre phenomenon, but are prevented from doing so by the arrival of a doctor. As usual, the role of women in the story is simply that of sex objects; The Bukowskian narrator underlines this when he says that ‘except for a quickie piece of ass it wouldn’t matter to me if all the people in the world died’ (p. 411).

### **3.22) ‘A Quiet Conversation Piece’ (p. 374)**

Harry narrates a conversation between his Jewish friend ‘Maxie’ and himself, in which they discuss various subjects, including politics, literature and religion. He makes his dislike of the hippie movement evident and satirises so-called revolutionaries, saying they were ‘very sick fellows bothered with acne, deserted from (*sic*) by their wives and wearing these bloody little Peace Symbols from strings around their necks’ (p. 376-7). He mentions his daughter, Marina Louise Bukowski, who at the time was three and a half years old. The story was written in July 1968, when Marina was in Arizona with her ‘revolutionary mother’ (p. 379), as he describes her ironically, making his lack of respect for his partner’s views abundantly clear.

### **3.23) ‘Scenes from the Big Time’ (p. 254)**

‘Scenes from the Big Time’ consists of six reminiscences or scenes, which the first-person narrator recalls from his time served in prison. The six episodes are linked by the brutal violence of prisoners and warders alike. The first scene is an account of the narrator and his fellow prisoner, Blaine, sweeping up pigeon droppings while the birds defecate on their heads; Blaine takes his revenge by slicing the feet off one of the birds with a razor. In the

second one, Blaine escapes from being raped by ‘a cell full of blacks’ because of his ‘ugly asshole’. The third anecdote is about Sears, a white prisoner who fights the biggest man in ‘a cell with a pack of blacks’ in order to be respected. In the fourth scene, Sears slashes a young white prisoner to death in the shower, while the fifth one tells of a prisoner being left by the warders to die in solitary confinement in ‘the hole’. The last scene is the only one that mentions women. The narrator recalls that, when he was in prison, he used to think that, when he was released, he would go back to see the prison from the outside, but he never went back again. According to him, returning would have been ‘just like a bad woman. There’s no use going back. You don’t even want to look at her. But you can talk about her. That’s easy’ (p. 257). The misogynism of the narrator in equating these tales of brutality with ‘a bad woman’ finds echoes in many of the other stories in the collection.

### **3.24) ‘Twelve Flying Monkeys Who Won’t Copulate Properly’ (p. 83)**

In this story, narrated in the first person, Hank is at home trying to write a fantastic story about twelve flying monkeys. He believes that, in order to sell the story, the monkeys will have to copulate – ‘To get rid of a story you gotta have fucking, lots of it, if possible’ (p. 84). The twelve monkeys are comprised of six couples, described by Hank as ‘six male and six of the other kind’ (p. 84), making his marginalisation of the female sex only too clear.<sup>64</sup> Five of the couples are shot down because they urinate and defecate on the White House. The surviving couple is having sex in a park when they are interrupted by a ‘cop’, who shoots the head off the male monkey. The female monkey attempts to fly away and the policeman shoots and wounds her. He then tries to have sex with the wounded female, but when he finds that there is only room in her vagina for the tip of his penis, he kills her as well. While Hank is writing the story he is disturbed by three unwanted visitors who come to drink at his place, followed by a phone call and, the following morning, two more visitors, who take him out on a boat trip. After he returns home he gives up on his story, declaring 1970 to be ‘the year of the monkey-orgy that never happened’ (p. 88). Although the females in this story are simians, both Hanks’s own discourse and the behaviour of the policeman reduce them to a status

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<sup>64</sup> Simone de Beauvoir argues that women ‘are defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other’ (BEAUVOIR, 1953, p. 16).

inferior to that of the male; in the case of the latter the female monkey is treated as a disposable sex object, merely a hole that is too small for his erect penis to fit into.

### 3.25) 'Beer and Poets and Talk' (p. 381)

Like 'Night Streets of Madness', 'Beer and Poets and Talk' appears to be an autobiographical account of an evening Bukowski spent drinking with fellow poets in his rented accommodation in LA, shortly after the death of Carl Sandburg.<sup>65</sup> They talk about who, if anybody, is writing worthwhile poetry since 'almost all the great names have died recently' (p. 382). While his three visitors go out to buy more beer the narrator sits on the toilet and reflects on some of the women he had 'buried, outdrunk, outfucked but not outargued' (p. 383). He overhears an argument between the couple who live next door which culminates in the man hitting the woman. The story ends with the aphoristic wisdom that 'bad writing's like bad women: there's just not much you can do about it' (p. 384). Apart from the recognition of the fact that it is impossible for a man to outargue a woman except by hitting her, women are conspicuous by their absence from the story – there were apparently no women writing good poetry in 1967.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf came to the conclusion that the reason that there were so few women writers was that they did not have money and a room of their own in which to write. Their mothers left them nothing, they had no access to education and had to be locked inside their 'homes', being no more than their husbands' possessions. Woolf (1985) questions why the point of view of women should always be portrayed by men and explains that,

it is fairly evident that even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist. On the contrary, she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted. Her mind must have been strained and her vitality lowered by the need of opposing this, of disproving that. For here again we come within range of that very interesting and obscure masculine complex which has had so much influence upon the woman's movement; that deep-seated desire, not so much that SHE shall be inferior as that HE shall be superior, which plants him wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to politics too. (p. 71)

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<sup>65</sup> Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) died on 22 July. Bukowski quotes himself as saying to his friends that Sandburg died "a couple of nights ago" (p. 382).

In spite of the fight for women's rights happening in the seventies, which is why he does not mention a single woman as a good writer, not even as a bad one he simply erases their existence as writers. The first reference to women concerns the miniskirt, a feature of the time:

it has been a very strange and quick and festering and new age. look at those skirts now, almost up around the ass. we are moving very quickly and I like it, it is not bad. (p. 382)

According to the narrator, the women's revolution at this time was to show their 'asses', the more things developed, theoretically, more flesh would be seen. Of course he enjoyed the view, since he wanted no more than to contemplate their sexual parts. Women were nothing but sex objects, unless they could also support their husbands, in which case they would be classified as 'some wonderful kind of wife' (p. 383). Germaine Greer (2012) questioned how a woman could support her husband if the female work force was unvalued; even where women did exactly the same work as men, their salary was up to five per cent lower:

The TUC Conference was panting for legislation but its naïve confidence was not echoed by more detached analysts of the situation. They could see that equal pay might mean that where women did not have the advantage of being cheaper they might not be employed at all, and women's work might become more and more segregated in the semi-skilled and unskilled categories. (p.134)

Conventions 110 and 111 of the International Labour Organization Convention demanded equal payment, but this equal payment should only be given for identical work, which meant that women's work could still be paid less in jobs that were not considered to be male.

In the course of this story, the narrator recalls some of 'the alcoholic madwomen who had brought love to (him) especially and in their own way' (p. 383). Bukowski himself said his work is autobiographical and there is evidence that his first love, Jane Cooney Baker, who was alcoholic, is the madwoman he is talking about, especially because she was the one who he buried. Her existence echoes in many of his works and he dedicated the entire collection *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over The Hills* (1969) to her after her death, in which one of the poems is entitled 'for Jane':

225 days under the grass  
And you know more than I.

they have long taken your blood,  
you are a dry stick in a basket.

is this how it works?

in this room  
the hours of love still make shadows.

when you left  
you took almost  
everything.

I kneel in the nights  
before tigers  
that will not let me be.

what you were  
will not happen again.

the tigers have found me  
and I do not care. (BUKOWSKI, 1969, p. 42)

It was in her own way that Jane brought love to Bukowski; she was the first woman who demonstrated affection for him and she marked him forever. One can conjecture that it was her loss that made him so resentful of women. The fact is that the story depicts a woman who desperately wants her partner, Johnny, to talk to her, but she receives nothing but scorn:

“listen, Johnny, you ain’t even kissed me in a week. what’s wrong, Johnny?  
listen, talk to me, I want you to talk to me.”  
“god damn you, get away from me. I don’t want to talk to you. LEAVE ME  
ALONE, WILL YOU? GOD DAMN YOU, LEAVE ME ALONE!”  
“listen, Johnny, I just want you to talk to me, I can’t stand it. You don’t  
have to touch me, just talk to me, jesus christ Johnny I can’t stand it, I  
CAN’T STAND IT, JESUS!” (p. 383)

It is heartbreaking to feel her pain, she is desperate, lost and tired of being ignored, she misses his kisses, but begs only his attention for a conversation, she wants to hear a word from him, something, little, but meaningful for her. What happens, however, is that she receives his attention in the form of a huge slap, so she is punished for asking his love:

“GOD DAMN IT, I TOLD YOU TO LEAVE ME ALONE! LEAVE ME  
ALONE, GOD DAMN YOU, LEAVE ME ALONE, LEAVE ME ALONE,  
LEAVE ME ALONE, WILL YOU?”  
“Johnny...”  
he hit her a good one. open hand. a real good one. I almost fell off the stool.  
I heard her choking off the crap and walking off. (p. 383)

The narrator is listening to their fight, but does nothing to help or save the woman. Instead, he listens with satisfaction as if she deserves to be beaten. The argument is narrated as if the woman was bothering the man, and as if he had the right to silence her. The narrator and Johnny are both, heartless, cruel people who do not care for what the girl is feeling. Then the

narrator goes back to his business, which is to ‘crap’, a symbolic manner of demonstrating how he feels when the girl is beaten; he could not care less to what is happening to her.

The story ends with the arrival of the narrator’s friends with beer, and his comment that ‘lovely young ladies were making the fat millionaires happy (p. 384). Women are portrayed as prostitutes who were only interested in millionaires, because they were the ones who could pay the price for having their youth and beautiful bodies. The most important thing is that the millionaires were made happy, but there is no mention if the ‘lovely young ladies’ were happy too.

### **3.26) ‘The Great Zen Wedding’ (p. 284)**

‘The Great Zen Wedding’ is not so much a story but an anecdote. The first-person narrator, who identifies himself as Charles Bukowski, is best man at the wedding of his friends Roy and Hollis. The wedding, which is held in the mansion of Hollis’s wealthy parents, is conducted by a Zen Buddhist priest, whose translucent ears are a source of fascination to the drunken Bukowski. At one point Bukowski describes himself as a clown, and his behaviour is certainly that of the all-licensed fool. He proposes marriage to Hollis’s eleven-year-old brother, attacks the priest in an attempt to take his ears, pulls up the skirt of the bride’s mother and starts kissing her thighs and tells her that he is going to fuck her until the shit falls out of her arse, and fails to amuse anybody by giving the newly married couple the gift of a miniature coffin. Roy and Hollis drive him back to his own home, where he falls on the pavement thirty yards from his own front door. He screams at two passing women that he is going to suck their vaginas dry, and, not surprisingly, they file a complaint of attempted rape with the police. At the end of the story Bukowski is arrested and spends the night in the cells. The story is notable for Bukowski’s complete lack of any self-critical faculty and his unquestioning belief that any woman he sees is no more than a sex object to serve his pleasure. There is no doubt that Bukowski presents himself in the worst possible light, but what is disturbing is his apparent lack of awareness that there might be anything unacceptable about his behaviour.

For Millett (1977), ‘hostility is expressed in a number of ways. One is laughter. Misogynist literature, the primary vehicle of masculine hostility, is both an hortatory and comic genre’ (p. 45). She explains that it is the most frankly propagandist of all artistic forms in patriarchy and suggests that in this kind of literature,

what the reader is vicariously experiencing at this juncture is a nearly supernatural sense of power – should the reader be a male. For the passage is not only a vivacious and imaginative use of circumstance, detail, and context to evoke the excitations of sexual intercourse, it is also a male assertion of dominance over a weak, compliant, and rather unintelligent female. It is a case of sexual politics at the fundamental level of copulation.

When Bukowski treats women so disrespectfully he demonstrates that he believes in the form of sexual politics in which sexuality is associated with power, ‘with his solitary pleasure, and with the pain and humiliation of his partner, who is nothing but an object to him in the most literal sense’ (MILLETT, 1977, p. 20). Millett states that ‘intercourse is an assertion of mastery, one that announces (men’s) own higher caste and proves it upon a victim who is expected to surrender, serve, and be satisfied’ (p. 20).

Bukowski’s first observation in the couple’s house is about ‘a work of art’ that calls his attention, precisely for placing men on a level of superiority and celebrating their sexual prowess:

The walls of their place were covered with these many photos of guys bending into the muff and chewing.

Also a snap of Roy reaching climax while jacking off. Roy had done it alone. I mean, tripped the camera. Himself. String. Wire. Some arrangement. Roy claimed he had to jackoff six times in order to get the perfect snap. A whole day’s work: there it was: this milky glob: a work of art. (p. 284)

Roy achieving orgasm six times in the same day is on the level of fantasy, since that would be highly improbable in reality, but it is an exaltation of his sexual capacity as a male. Also, the picture was taken by himself alone, which demonstrates that he could fulfil his sexual needs by himself, placing women in an inferior position.

Millett (1977) states that in Jean Genet’s (1910-1986) play *The Balcony* (1955), the character Armand ‘regards his penis as a talisman: both an instrument to oppress and the very symbol, in fact the reality, of his status: “My cock”, he once said, “is worth its weight in gold...”’ (GENET in MILLETT, p. 20). Roy’s picture is a symbol of male supremacy in the story in which women are not even significant. The first reference made to a woman is when Bukowski tells an anecdote about his first wife Barbara. They had been married for almost three years when Bukowski was introducing her to some of his friends and he did not even know her name, which reveals his indifference towards her:

Names! I had been married to my first wife for two-and-one-half years. One night some people came in. I had told my wife: “This is Louie the half-ass and this is Marie, Queen of the Quick Suck, and this is Nick, the half-



hobble.” Then I had turned to them and said, “This is my wife ... this is my wife ... this is ...” I finally had to look at her and ask: *WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR NAME ANYHOW?*”

“Barbara.”

“This is Barbara,” I had told them ... (p. 285)

Howard Sounes’ (2010) research reveals that Charles Bukowski really proposed marriage to Barbara Frye through correspondence for pity, because she complained she could not find a husband because she had ‘two vertebrae missing from her neck which, together with a slight curvature of the spine, gave the impression she was permanently hunching her shoulders’ (p. 37), but she got divorced from him two years and four months after their wedding, ‘accusing Bukowski of subjecting her to mental cruelty’ (p. 41).

The next reference to women in the story is actually not about women at all, Bukowski sees ‘a golden-haired kid run in. About eleven years old’, with ‘long blond curls. Glasses. Slim body’ (p. 287), who pays him compliments about his work, and proposes that ‘she’ gets old enough so they can marry and ‘she’ can support him, but the ‘girl’ is actually Paul, the son of Harvey who is infuriated by the scene.

The narrator’s idea of being supported by a ‘young lady’ demonstrates that women are for him servants who must be ready to serve him in both senses, sexual and financial. His next attitude toward women in the story is when he objectifies the bride’s mother, describing his view of her:

the bride’s mother was now showing plenty of leg, and it didn’t look bad, all that long nylon with the expensive stiletto heels, plus the little jewel tips down near the toes. It could give an idiot the hots, and I was only half-idiot. (p. 292)

Not content with all the disorder he had caused so far, he decides to approach the woman and ‘kissed her quickly upon her pretty knees and began to kiss (his) way upward’ (p. 292), but is repulsed by her, and she pushes him away just to see him falling ‘backwards upon the rug’ (p. 292). Her natural response to his attitude brings relief to female readers, exasperated by his disrespectful treatment of women.

The narrator calls her a ‘damned Amazon’ (p. 292), who were female warriors independent of men, who rule their own wishes. The manner in which he says it, makes the word offensive; however, the name is actually complimentary to women who seek freedom from men like him.

The only woman who seems to be sympathetic to him is a young girl who he meets in the store which he buys the little coffin; he says a joke and she laughs, but the only thing he

thinks about her is that he ‘can’t put it past the young girls anymore; they are an entirely superior breed’ (p. 293) showing he is incapable of seeing in her more than a potential ‘fuck’ he could have. The Bukowskian narrator’s thought is not different from what Millett found in Miller’s work, for ‘Miller’s hunt is a primitive find, fuck, and forget’ (MILLETT, 1977, p. 296)

Even when help could come from female hands, the narrator despises them and insults the two women who are passing him, when he is on the ground too drunk to get up and go home:

Two women walked by. They turned and looked at me.  
 “Oh, look at him. What’s wrong?”  
 “He’s drunk.”  
 “He’s not sick, is he?”  
 “No, look how he holds that bottle. Like a little baby.”  
 Oh shit. I screamed up at them:  
 “I’LL SUCK BOTH YOUR SNATCHES! I’LL SUCK BOTH YOUR  
 SNATCHES DRY, YOU CUNTS!” (p. 295)

Greer (2010) states that some men ‘appraise women with insolent stares in buses and subways’ (p. 283), which means they do not respect them. ‘As long as man is at odds with his own sexuality and as long as he keeps woman as a solely sexual creature, he will hate her, at least some of the time’ (p. 284) The situation is no different from that of the two girls who feel threatened by the narrator and inform the police that he had tried to rape them.

What is especially absurd is the narrator’s statement to the police that he ‘would never attempt to rape two ladies at the same time’ (p. 295), probably due to his incapacity of having intercourse with two women.

What the narrator does with all the women in the story is a violent deconstruction of the status of women through his verbal aggression and disrespectful attitude; he deserves no less than he gets when he is locked up in jail.

### **3.27) ‘My Stay in the Poet’s Cottage’ (p. 323)**

‘My Stay in the Poet’s Cottage’ is a fragment which gives an account of the first person narrator Bukowski’s stay in the poet’s cottage on the campus of the University of Arizona in Tucson.<sup>66</sup> Although the narrator makes no specific mention of the period when the

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<sup>66</sup> According to Howard Sounes, Bukowski spent the summer of 1967 as a guest in the poet’s cottage on the campus of the University of Arizona at the invitation of Jon and Louise ‘Gypsy Lou’ Webb, founders of the

events took place, his repeated references to Scott McKenzie's 'San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)' locate the story in 1967, the summer he spent on the Tucson campus.<sup>67</sup> There is very little plot as such – Bukowski complains about the heat, drinks copiously and, as usual, refers to every woman he sees as a potential sex object (including the 'young colored maid' that he plans to rape, the wife of a man he meets in a bar whom he invites to support him by working as a waitress, the girl who dances on the bar in front of him shaking her 'red satin panties' in his face, the drugstore waitress who 'wouldn't let you smell the stink of a pair of her dirty panties, yet she's as ugly as hell and doesn't even know it' (p. 327), and finally the girl on the train back to Los Angeles 'whose ass looked like the bottom of heaven' (p. 328) – the return to Los Angeles itself a welcome prospect since the city is 'full of cunts'). The great irony of the story is that, precisely during the 'Summer of Love', while the young hippies were enjoying free love in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, the 47-year-old narrator was stuck out in Arizona unable even to rape the help.

The narrator's initial idea of raping the coloured maid brings back the construction of the black female slave as a sexual servant of the white man. Kate Millett (1977) states that 'intercourse is an assertion of mastery, one that announces the man's own higher caste and proves it upon a victim who is expected to surrender, serve, and be satisfied' (p. 20). Bukowski considers himself to be higher caste because he is male and white, and, besides cleaning, the 'coloured maid' is expected to satisfy him sexually.

Fortunately, the black woman does not appear, because 'she had evidently heard of (him) too and stayed away' (p. 323), so Bukowski's plan was frustrated. However, the image of her is constantly in his mind, always related to the violent prospect of rape.

In order to distract himself, Bukowski turns on the television, which shows women on display wearing mini-skirts while dancing. Greer (2010) believes that women themselves accept their role of sex objects, and says they must stop caricaturing themselves with their clothes and silly names, they must stop 'faking all kinds of pretty tricks that they will one day have to give up' (p. 304). To be feminine is not to offer yourself seeking praise from a male.

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Loujon Press and editors of *The Outsider*, in which they had published Bukowski's poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. Sounes refers to the story as 'a spiteful column about (Bukowski's) friends, referring to Jon Webb sarcastically as "the great editor"' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 87). Sounes ascribes Bukowski's cantankerous ill humour to sour grapes, since he was jealous that the Webbs were devoting their attention to the publication of a book by Henry Miller rather than to the recording of Bukowski's own poetry.

<sup>67</sup> Scott McKenzie's song was released in May 1967 and became an instant hit in the USA and across Europe, spending the whole of the month of July at No 4 on the Billboard Hot 100. The song became an anthem of the hippy 'flower power' movement, much derided by Bukowski, and of the 'Summer of Love' in particular.

No matter how much media and society try to convince women, this kind of imposition must not be accepted. For Greer, the feminine stereotype is easier to be followed, which explains why women do not design their own image. She says women must reject the ascribed roles to them by society and stop being 'impotent, insecure and inferior beings' (p. 165).

The next woman mentioned by Bukowski is the wife of a man he has just met; he starts to feel her legs, with the excuse that she allowed him to:

I began feeling his wife's legs. She let me. She let me. She had the finest white hairs on these legs – wait! She was around 25! – I only mean they looked kind of white under the electric on those g.d. big legs. and she kept saying, I really don't want you but if you can get something ready you can have me. (p. 325)

He suggests that, even though she does not want him, she is ready to give him pleasure should he manage to get an erection, which only exists in his own mind, because no woman is prepared to give anyone pleasure if they are not aroused, except when they are obliged to. He continues the fantasy by saying that she said 'more than most of them say' (p. 325), as if women were creatures disinterested in sex, but still always available to satisfy men.

Since he could not raise an erection since he had drunk too much, he proposes that she should 'run away to Los Angeles with (him) and that she could get a job as a waitress and support (him)' (p. 325), and he is surprised at her disinterest in the proposal:

all she told me was that she *was* interested in Los Angeles. I told her to go take a piss and forget it. I should have stayed in the bar. Some girl had come out of the wall and danced on the bar; she had come out of the wall and danced on the bar; she had kept shaking these red satin panties in my face. (p. 325)

Bukowski depicts her as a woman interested in a new opportunity, capable of paying the price of using her own body, offering herself as a prostitute if he took her to Los Angeles. He believes the price is too high and regrets not staying in the bar where prostitutes charged money only.

Finally, he leaves Tucson, but not before denigrating the image of another woman. This time it is the waitress of a drugstore who becomes the victim of his misogynistic view of women; for him she is no more than an ugly woman who takes the customer's orders with reluctance. He attacks her because he believes she would not offer herself to him or to any other man as she should. According to Kate Millett:

All agree that the relation between the sexes is a matter of rule or be ruled; all agree that the recent liberation of sexual desire in women, and particularly the new right of sexual initiative, place women in a position to rule. Like all who support an ancient régime, the acquisition of any right on the part of the oppressed is interpreted as moral infringement of their own natural priorities. (MILLETT, 1977, p. 273)

Women conquered their right to say no to unwanted sexual relations; there is bitterness in the Bukowski's discourse at having lost the power men once had in their hands. He fights against women's rights and never misses a chance to objectify them, placing women where they should be, in his opinion.

On his way back to LA he travels with a 'girl in a blue dress whose ass looked like heaven. she was crazy' (p. 328). For the Bukowskian narrator, most women are mad, or prostitutes or libertines or any other negative word which he can use to describe them. They are no more than the 'cunts' he can so easily find in his hometown.

### **3.28) 'The Stupid Christs' (p. 329)**

'The Stupid Christs' is a linear third-person narrative in a predominantly realistic style with fantastic elements, in which the narrator focuses on two of his preferred satirical targets – the stultifying world of work and the stupidity of women. The protagonist, Dan Skorski, is a version of Bukowski. The character is a writer of short stories and poems who is obliged to support himself by menial work, in this case on the production line in a rubber factory. The story begins when Skorski leaves his job rather than accepting compulsory overtime. He is then invited to New York to work in the editorial department of a publisher, a position for which he is entirely unsuited. With his severance pay he flies back to California and crosses the Mexican border to Tijuana, where he plans to bet on the horse races. However he gets drunk and is robbed of all his money, recalling a previous drunken binge when he attempted to release a life-size Christ from its imprisonment as a religious icon. The story is notable for its unremitting misogyny. During Skorski's flight to New York he gets drunk and proposes raping the air stewardess in the aisle, because, he says, she would love the experience. Skorski describes her face as 'atrociously blank and stupid'; when the co-pilot comes to restrain Skorski, his unknown wife is described as 'insane'; in New York he assumes that one of the secretaries is 'just aching to be fucked' (p. 334); later, in Tijuana, women are characterised as 'pussy throbbing and pulsing at him' (p. 335), while the waitress is described as 'fat and stupid as a roach' (p. 336). What is particularly disturbing about the story is the unquestioning

confidence of the narrator-protagonist's conviction that all women are merely sex objects for the satisfaction of the 'twelve inches' of his erect penis, too stupid to have an alternative point of view of their own.

The narrator treats women as if they had an inferior mind. He offers no proof of a difference in mental capacity between the sexes, but the allegation that women have a congenital mental deficiency is persistent. To deduce patterns of behaviour from physiology is senseless; it would be more logical to do so based on the behaviour itself, especially if it is impossible to detect the so-called mind differences. According to Germaine Greer:

It was thought that the relative lightness of the female brain argued lesser mental powers, ... . The brain is so imperfectly understood that we simply do not know enough about its physiology and function to deduce facts about performance. (GREER, 2010, p. 114)

For the Bukowskian narrator, women's behaviour is almost always connected to stupidity or pettiness. His first mention of them in this story is when he answers his superior, Mr. Blackstone, who he calls 'the cigar', at the rubber factory:

"those are good man," said the cigar.  
"sure they are. half their salaries go to state and federal taxes; the other half goes to new cars, color t.v., stupid wives and 4 or 5 types of insurance." (p. 330)

The narrator includes the 'stupid wives' amongst the workers' property, as if they were something bought with their salary. Betty Friedan (2010), was one of the feminists who fought against that label. She said women are made to believe that they must fit into a myth of femininity. The 'feminine mystique', permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife ... Mary's mother' (FRIEDAN, 2010 p. 64).

For the Bukowskian narrator, when women are not stupid wives they are still stupid women who would like to be raped by him, like the stewardess who serves him on the plane he takes to go to New York City:

"Mr. Skorski," the stewardess said, "I insist that you go to your seat!"  
Dan grabbed her by the wrist.  
"I like you. I think I'll rape you right here in the aisle. think of it! rape in the sky! you'll LOVE it! ex-boxer, Rocky Graziano rapes stewardess while passing over Illinois! come 'ere!"  
Dan grabbed her about the waist, her face was atrociously blank and stupid; young, egotistical and ugly. she had the IQ of a tit-mouse and no tits. (p. 332)

Skorski goes even further when he responds to her screaming by threatening to show her twelve inches; she answers with a hiss like a snake. The comparisons made always put her in an inferior position; she has the IQ of a tit-mouse, she behaves like a snake, whose image is connected to betrayal, and she is not even good enough to fit the stereotype of beauty, because she has 'no tits'.

The next woman who serves him a drink is a waitress who works at Griffo's. She is different from the stewardess, because she places cocktails in front of him and serves him, a more proper role for a woman, in his opinion. The secretary who meets him at the office also plays the proper role as a woman, because she was 'just aching to be fucked' (p. 334); she even smiles at him as if inviting him for intercourse. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) states that it is required by society that a woman make herself an erotic object:

The purpose of the fashions to which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires; thus society is not seeking to further her projects but to thwart them. (p. 506)

At the same time the narrator criticises when women do want to have sex with him:

Dan found a bar and had a tequila. Mexican music was on the juke. 4 or 5 men sat around nursing drinks by the hour. no women around. well, that was no problem in T. and the last thing he wanted right then was a woman, that pussy throbbing and pulsing at him. Women always got in the way. They could kill a man in 9,000 different ways. (p. 335)

The inconsistency of Skorski's feelings about women is similar to that of Bukowski himself, who gave many interviews in which he was questioned about the way he wrote about women. Both see women as good and bad company. There are times when Skorski wants to have sex with them, and other times when he is afraid of their vaginas. Simone de Beauvoir (1997), explains this ambivalent attitude towards women as a male inferiority complex:

Here is miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed no one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility. Those who are not fear-ridden in the presence of their fellow men are much more disposed to recognize a fellow creature in woman. (p. 24)

For Skorski, 'every woman was a fuck', but when the bartender offers him a nice girl, he refuses, saying he is 'more interested in humanity in general than (he is) in pussy in the exact' (p. 336). He watches the waitress, and thinks she 'was fat and stupid as a roach, unthinking – she'd never had a toothache, she'd never been constipated even, she never thought about

death and only a little about life' (p. 336). Women are for him always disqualified and related to bad images, even when they play their proper role as sex objects, such as the prostitute he asks for:

he asked for a woman, she came and sat next to him. a little older than he had expected. she had a gold tooth in the center of her mouth and he had absolutely no desire, no desire to fuck her. he gave her \$ 5 and told her, he thought, in a very kind way to go away. She went away. (p. 337)

Simone de Beauvoir (1997) explains that, 'for the timorous puritan, the prostitute incarnates evil, shame, disease, damnation; she inspires fear and disgust' (p. 208). Skorski is not a puritan; he wants all women to serve him as prostitutes, but, when the opportunity arises, he refuses, disgusted by the prostitute's image. He does this twice, at the Mexican bar and when a 12-year-old boy offers him his sister.

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This chapter demonstrates that, even when women are not important characters of the stories, they are still portrayed pejoratively by the Bukowskian narrator. The stories chosen for more extended analysis still convey the idea that women are sex objects. However, the depiction of the male protagonist demonstrates a misogynistic Bukowskian narrator who is actually rather afraid of women. In 'Beer and Poets and Talk', the narrator listens with satisfaction to a fight between a couple in which the woman is beaten and silenced. 'The Great Zen Wedding' reveals a ridiculous narrator who, as always, fails to recognise how sexist his behaviour is and seems to be proud of his ill treatment of his fellow wedding guests, particularly the female ones. The anecdote in 'My Stay in the Poet's Cottage' demonstrates an impotent narrator, and, finally, 'The Stupid Christs' depicts a male protagonist who believes that women exist to satisfy men, but runs away from them whenever he has the opportunity of a sexual liaison.



### **CHAPTER THREE: STORIES WHICH DEPICT POSITIVE ASPECTS OF WOMEN, PARTICULARLY ‘THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN TOWN’**

The depiction of women by the Bukowskian narrator in the stories discussed in this chapter is far from simple; they are more than good or bad people, they are complex human beings whose behaviour is beyond classification. His view of them ranges from sexist and misogynistic to admiration and love. In some of the stories we can see all kinds of feelings mixed together, as in ‘Too Sensitive’, in which the female character is at the same time courageous and indifferent to the narrator’s feelings. The Bukowskian narrator reveals himself to be in love with women, but his relationship with them is a mixture of love and hate. When confronted by them he feels lost, impotent and confused. This is the true nature of a writer who is still considered to be a male chauvinist.

#### **4.1) ‘25 Bums in Rags’ (p. 89)**

This story is a fragment, narrated in the first person by Hank Bukowski, relating to events which supposedly occurred when he was 34, in 1954. He refers to his partner as Kathy,<sup>68</sup> and states that ‘she was as good a woman as (he) had found’ (p. 91). The narrator describes himself as a horseplayer, and is proud of the fact that he has not worked for more than six or seven months since he was 18. The story concerns a period of four days, beginning when Hank and Kathy have a fight because he is jealous of the attention she receives from their elderly neighbour. Kathy reports that she ‘reminds him of his daughter when she was young’ (p. 90) and Hank assumes the relationship between the neighbour and his daughter must have been incestuous. In his fury he goes to the horse track and loses 500 dollars; he gets so worried about their financial situation that he decides to swallow his pride and work the next day, which is a Sunday. He wakes up at 4:30 a.m. and stands ‘on the corner with about 25 bums in rags’ (p. 91). Newspapers are given to him to be distributed in his own neighbourhood, which is a source of acute embarrassment to him, and he only receives 3

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<sup>68</sup> Kathy is a pseudonym for Jane Cooney Baker, whom Bukowski met in The Glenview Bar on Alvarado Street (mentioned in the story) in 1948 and who lived with him in various houses in that area of LA until she left him in 1955. She ‘inspired much of Bukowski’s most powerful work’ (SOUNES, 2010, p. 27), and appears in the present collection of stories as Cass, Linda and Vicky, amongst others.

dollars for the work done.<sup>69</sup> He goes home, and is so frustrated that he gets drunk, ‘bang(s) Kathy 3 times’ (p. 96), and breaks a window, but he recognises that he and Kathy ‘had some laughs that night, and although (he) broke a few things (he) was not as nasty and stupid as usual.’ (p. 97). The following day he wins 140 dollars on the races, and Kathy cooks his favourite meat loaf and goes out to buy him whisky and cigars. While he waits for her he plays with his dog and reflects on ‘what a beautiful life’ he has (p. 98). Although Kathy’s role consists of providing sexual satisfaction for the narrator, and cooking and shopping for him, this is one of the few stories in which a relationship with a woman is depicted as good by the Bukowskian narrator. It is particularly significant that, in the earlier part of the story, he refers to sex with Kathy as ‘making love’, rather than ‘mounting’ or ‘raping’.

Kathy is first objectified by ‘the old guy next door (who) would actually slobber at the mouth when he saw her’ (p. 89), who insists on seeing Kathy, but Hank impedes him from doing so to protect her, and because of his own jealousy. Hank’s attitude towards Kathy is initially positive, however, but he goes on to pick a fight with her, even knowing she is ‘not fucking the old turkey’ (p. 90):

“I suppose you think I let him in after you go to the racetrack?”  
 “I don’t even wonder about that.”  
 “what do you wonder about?”  
 “all I wonder is which one of you rides topside.”  
 “you son of a bitch, you can leave now!”  
 I was getting on my shirt and pants, then socks and shoes.  
 “I won’t be 4 blocks away before you’re locked in embrace.”  
 she threw a book at me. I wasn’t looking and the edge of the book hit me over the right eye. a cut started and a spot of blood hit my hand as I tied my right shoe.  
 “I’m sorry, Hank.”  
 “don’t get NEAR me!” (p. 90)

His reaction is that of a jealous and insecure man. According to Germaine Greer (2012):

the jealousy of a man about his woman is obviously egotistical ... (and) it is not usually the assumption that women are promiscuous which provokes male jealousy in our society but rather the assumption that they are merely acquiescent in sexual relations. (p. 173)

Hank knows that Kathy has nothing to do with the old man, but even so he feels threatened by him as though she could be stolen.

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<sup>69</sup> The narrator is particularly angry because the payment contravenes the ‘basic wage law – one buck an hour’ (p. 96).

She feels offended and responds with violence, revealing herself to be imprudent and irrational, but he does nothing to hurt her. On the contrary, he is the one who is hurt by her before he leaves. When he returns home, he informs her that he has lost 500 dollars on the horses, and she feels guilty:

“jesus. I’m sorry,” she said, “it’s my fault.” she came up to me, put her arms around me. “god damn, I’m sorry, daddy. It was my fault, I know it.”  
 “forget it. You didn’t make the bets.”  
 “are you still mad?”  
 “no, no, I know you’re not fucking that old turkey.”  
 “can I make you something to eat?” (p. 90)

Her behaviour is that of a submissive woman; she blames herself for his unwise loss of money, and then offers him a meal. Betty Friedan (2010) explains that in the seventies, many women reduced their existence to fit into the ‘feminine mystique’, which was to be a mother and a wife. Women lessened the importance of their own lives in order to live for their husbands; Kathy blames herself for her husband’s mistakes and is ready to serve and take care of him, so she puts on ‘lipstick in front of the mirror’ while she is ‘pinched on the ass and kissed behind the ear’ (p. 91), and goes out to buy her husband a fifth of whiskey and a newspaper. Her life is focused on pleasing her husband:

“get me some more beer and cigars too. I need to forget.”  
 she left and I listened to her heels clicking on the drive. she was as good a woman as I had found and I had found her in a bar. I leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. a bum. I was a bum. always this distaste for work, always trying to live off my luck. when Kathy came back I told her to pour a big one. she knew. she even peeled the cellophane off my cigar and lit it for me. she looked funny, and fine. we’d make love. we’d make love through the sadness. (p. 91)

At one point in the story Hank gets angry with Kathy because she has been asleep while he has been working. Instead of being offended she offers to help him finish his job. Before they leave she goes to the toilet, which gives Hank another opportunity to reflect on the inferiority of women:

I waited out there while she took her sleepy female piss. god, they were SLOW! the cunt was a very inefficient pissing machine. dick had it all beat. (p. 94)

According to Betty Friedan (2010),

The concept “penis envy,” which Freud coined to describe a phenomenon he observed in women – that is, in the middle-class women who were his patients in Vienna in the Victorian era – was seized in this country in the

1940's as the literal explanation of all that was wrong with American women. (p. 96)

Hank subscribes to Freud's theory of 'penis superiority', and his comment demonstrates how he sees women as inferior beings. Friedan (2010) explains that,

The old prejudices – women are animals, less than human, unable to think like men, born merely to breed and serve men – were not so easily dispelled by the crusading feminists, by science and education, and by the democratic spirit after all. They merely reappeared in the forties, in Freudian disguise. (...)

Freudian theory about women is obsolescent, an obstacle to truth for women in America today, and a major cause of the pervasive problem that has no name. (FRIEDAN, 2010, p. 95-6)

Hank's infantile perception of the superiority of the penis in relation to the vagina as a 'pissing machine' is a classic example of the pervasiveness of Freudian ideas in sexual politics.

Hank vents his frustration at the end of his working day by 'banging' Kathy 3 times, and he recalls that he and Kathy 'had some laughs that night, and although (he) broke a few things (he) was not as nasty and stupid as usual' (p. 97). In comparison to the depiction of female characters in the stories analysed in the two previous chapters, Hank has a kind attitude to Kathy; however, she is shown to be submissive, and her characterisation is superficial, as if she has no self without him.

#### 4.2) 'Animal Crackers in My Soup'<sup>70</sup> (p. 444)

'Animal Crackers in My Soup' is an apocalyptic fantasy featuring the graphic portrayal of female zoophilia for the gratification of a voyeuristic male readership.<sup>71</sup> Narrated

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<sup>70</sup> The title of the story is that of a song made famous by the seven-year-old Shirley Temple (1928-2014) in the film *Curly Top* (1935). The innocent lyrics acquire a sexual level of *double entendre* in the context of the story:

"Animal crackers in my soup / Monkeys and rabbits loop the loop, / Gosh, oh gee, but I have fun, / Swallowin' animals one by one. / In every bowl of soup I see, / Lions and tigers watching me. / I make 'em jump right thru a hoop, / Those animal crackers in my soup. // When I get hold / Of the 'Big bad wolf' / I just push him under to drown. / Then I bite him / In a million bits / And I gobble him right down. / When they're inside me / Where it's dark / I walk around like Noah's ark. / I stuff my tummy like a goop / With animal crackers in my soup."

<sup>71</sup> The story was first published in the pornographic magazine, *Adam* (SOUNES, 2010, p. 195). This magazine was brought out by the Knight Publishing Corporation in 1956 in an attempt to emulate the success of *Playboy*. The intended readership was made clear in the cover legend 'The man's home companion'. In October 1969, *Adam* Special Report #4, 'The Erotic Devices', showed a head-and-shoulders view of a naked woman, her eyes closed in sexual ecstasy, holding a vibrator against her neck. The cover claimed that the magazine was 'A first

in the first person by the fifty-year-old bum Gordon Jennings, it tells of the encounter of two outsiders prior to the obliteration of San Francisco in a thermonuclear explosion. The narrator meets Carol, a thirty-year-old heiress, when he rings the bell of her mansion to ask for a glass of water. He is invited inside and finds himself in a free-range menagerie, the Liberated Zoo. Carol invites him to stay and he observes her having sex with her animals, including a snake and a tiger. She becomes pregnant and, when the couple go into town to the supermarket, her reactionary neighbours invade the house and shoot all the animals, judging Carol to be insane and her lifestyle to be a threat to them. The story ends in a San Francisco hospital after Carol has given birth to a child that is a hybrid of all the animals. As the nurse holds the baby up the city is destroyed by a hydrogen bomb. The relationship between Jennings and Carol is described as a meeting between kindred spirits, although Carol is shown to be the dominant sexual partner.

‘Animal Crackers in My Soup’ is perhaps the most difficult story to classify in the entire collection, because of the complex depiction of the female protagonist Carol. When the first-person narrator meets Carol for the first time he describes her thus:

A woman of about thirty came to the door. She had long hair, a brownish red, quite long, and these brown eyes looked out at me. She was a handsome woman, dressed in tight blue jeans, boots, a pale pink shirt. Her face and eyes showed neither fear nor apprehension. (p. 444)

Carol is a fearless woman who kindly offers Gordon more than a glass of water. Initially she gives him food and shelter, and then she gives him her friendship and protection against a hardened and lost society. She speaks as if it is the stranger who should fear her, because she had been seen as crazy and put in a madhouse for three months. Fortunately she had money and strength to fight against the people ‘trying to run (her) out’ (p. 445) of her Liberated Zoo. According to Germaine Greer (2012),

Womanpower means the self-determination of women, and that means that all the baggage of paternalist society will have to be thrown overboard. Woman must have room and scope to devise a morality which does not disqualify her from excellence, and a psychology which does not condemn her to the status of a spiritual cripple. (p. 130-1)

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for an in-depth analysis of the mechanization of sex in Puritan America. Centuries-old sex toys are being improved, new gadgets for heightening sexual pleasure and now mass-production for the “kick” seeking market.’ The Special Report was written at much the same time as Bukowski wrote ‘The Fuck Machine’. In June 1971, in a clear provocation to second-wave feminists, the cover of Vol. 15 #5 announced an article entitled, ‘How to Use Women as Sex Objects’. Charles Bukowski published stories in the magazine at least until March 1971, when he published ‘Sound and Passion’ in Vol. 15 #3 (<http://thetrashcollector.com/eroticamagazinesadam.html>).

Carol is lucid, vivid and she will not change because her manner of living threatens society. She dresses in old clothing, and she and Gordon always ‘found things to laugh about. Genuine laughter. (Society) could not understand’ (p.453). She has ‘womanpower’, and knows she is not disqualified; on the contrary, she is a visionary who will prepare ‘a new creature to inhabit what is left of the earth’ (p. 451). Her Liberated Zoo represents her sexual freedom. Gordon believes that ‘Carol’s love for (the animals) put them into a rather gentle and almost humorous state of passivity – a transfixed state of love’ (p. 447), which made it possible to put her plan into action, giving life to a creature which would ‘contain the best of all the creatures, including man, in order to survive within the small particle of life which will remain’ (p. 451), while she enjoys her own sexuality.

Carol guides the tiger’s gigantic penis into her open vagina as the narrator watches from an open doorway. She evidently enjoys having intercourse with all her animals, and,

she just radiated more and more. Her hair seemed alive; it seemed to leap about with her movements, and the light from the window shone through it, bringing out the red. Her eyes were quite open, simmering, yet without fear, without doubt. Those eyes: she let everything in and everything out. She was animal, and human. (p. 449)

Carol is free and recognises what Germaine Greer (2012) describes as enemies: ‘doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, marriage counsellors, priests, health visitors and popular moralists’ (p. 362). Some of Carol’s actions are precisely those that Greer sees as essential in the liberation of the woman:

She (fights) the guilty of failure in an impossible set-up, and examines the set-up. She (ignores) interested descriptions of her health, her morality and her sexuality, and assesses them for herself (analysing) her buying habits, her day-to-day evasions and dishonesties’ (p. 362)

Like Greer’s liberated woman, the manner of Carol’s life threatens the patriarchal society in which she lives.

According to Gordon, ‘you had to believe Carol. Carol was all there was to believe’ (p. 450). She is a kind of mystical figure who senses what is about to come, she predicts the fifty-five graves of her Liberated Zoo, and also the first of the many hydrogen bombs that would fall around the world.

Carol believes she does not need marriage, but marries Gordon just in case her predictions are incorrect so that he can inherit her estate; ‘dreams can be wrong,’ she says, ‘though, so far, mine haven’t been’ (p. 455). She is the one who looks after him, and he

recognises ‘how very odd the whole thing had been ... the love and the agony. But for it all, the love had outdueled the agony’ (p. 456).

Crazy Carol of the Liberated Zoo is a complex female character; she is loved by the narrator; she is strong and free. Her liberation makes her a marginal in the view of society. However, it is because of her ‘womanpower’ that life will remain on earth.

#### **4.3) ‘A Dollar and Twenty Cents’ (p. 364)**

The third-person narrator gives a maudlin account of the end of the life of Mr Sneed, a 60-year-old ‘bum’. The man is walking after sunset along an empty beach, feeling finished and remembering his ‘hell of a childhood’, when he realises that all he has left is ‘a dollar and 20 cents’ and memories of good and bad women. A group of young people see him and refer to him as ‘it’; he defends himself, saying ‘there’s no shame in old age’ (p. 365), but one of the young boys, Rod, says that ‘there’s a shame in wasted years’ (p. 365), and that the old man looks ‘like waste’ to him. Rod asks what the old man would do if one of the girls ‘put some pussy’ on him, which is immediately contested by the girl, who says she hates Rod’s attitude towards the old man and herself. Mr Sneed goes back to his rented room, where his 65-year-old landlady, Mrs Connors, gives him some soup, which he accepts at her insistence, but immediately throws out of the window. He lies down on his bed, where he dies in the dark after listening to the sound of the ocean and his own sigh. ‘A Dollar and 20 Cents’ is unlike most of the other stories in the collection, because women, as represented by the girl on the beach, are given a voice and defend themselves when portrayed as sex objects, and also because it is one of the rare opportunities when old people are shown sympathetically; old Mrs Connors is kind, feeding the man who is about to die, and the old man himself argues that there’s no shame in being old, contradicting the Bukowskian narrator’s own standpoint in so many of his other stories.

The young girl who has a voice, not only defends herself against objectification, but also defends Mr Sneed:

“supposin’ one of these girls put some pussy on you, pops, what would you do?”

“Rod, don’t TALK that way!”

a young girl with long red hair spoke. she was arranging her hair in the wind, she seemed to sway in the wind, her toes hooked into the sand.

“how about it, pops? what would you do? huh? what would you do if one of these girls laid it on you?”

he started to walk, he walked around their blanket up the sand toward the boardwalk.  
 “Rod, why’d you talk to that poor old man that way? Sometimes I HATE you!”  
 “COM’ERE, baby!”  
 “NO!”

According to Germaine Greer (2012), ‘women’s weapons are their tongues’ (p. 368). Given a voice, the young girl can refuse to be reduced to ‘pussy’, as if she is no more than that; she can also help the poor old man who is mocked for being old. He is laughed at by the young male group, because they assume that being old makes him impotent and impotent men cannot exert their dominant role. Greer argues that women need ‘to be emancipated from helplessness and need and walk freely upon the earth that is (their) birth-right’ (p. 370). However, the young girl gives up her fight when she continues to be with the one who objectifies her; Gordon turns around and sees the one who had defended him being chased by Rod: ‘the girl screamed, then laughed. then Rod caught her and they fell in the sand, wrestling and laughing. he saw the other couple standing up-right, kissing’ (p. 365).

Humiliated, Gordon goes home and is then helped by another woman, Mrs Connors, who brings him a meal. She is despised by Gordon for being old, and ‘he was glad he couldn’t see her face in the dark’ (p. 366). He considers her to be useless for the same reason that he himself sees no reason to live now that he is impotent. Gordon simply ceases to exist at the end of the story. Although the narrator appears to be sympathetic in his handling of Gordon, in fact, as always, he overestimates sex and reinforces Freud’s theory that existence is explained by sexuality – when you no longer have a sexual life, you die.

#### **4.4) ‘Goodbye Watson’ (p. 312)**

‘Goodbye Watson’ appears to be more of a fragment than a short story and it is written in the first person. The unnamed narrator reflects on the importance of betting on horse races as a formative experience for young writers, and draws an analogy with Hemingway’s predilection for watching bullfights. The value of the experience, according to him, is that, in the process of attempting to predict winners, one becomes accustomed to losing, ‘which helps you realize yourself’ (p. 313). This, he argues, is far more valuable for a writer than reading Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, D. H. Lawrence or other models. He goes on to recall his days at the Olympic boxing ring in Los Angeles, particularly the salutary experience of his favourite, Watson Jones, being unexpectedly beaten by a newcomer called Enrique



Ballanos.<sup>72</sup> Women are present in the story as the ‘dyed redhead(s) or blonde(s)’ (p. 314) who accompany the men to the ring. He recalls his own companion, Jane,<sup>73</sup> remembering with a certain pride her ability to exhaust other men sexually and even to knock him out in one of their many fights. There is, indeed, a measure of respect for her in the language he uses to describe their sex life. On the night after Watson lost his fight, he and Jane ‘made love twice’ (p. 316), and fell asleep beside an open window before he had to get up, blue with cold, and return to his job at the overhead lighting factory<sup>74</sup> the following morning.

The narrator is obviously in love with Jane, judging by the manner she is presented in the story; she is his partner and companion in the boxing matches and horse races, and they seem to enjoy each other, sharing the same interests in life:

her name was Jane and we had many a good ten-rounder between us, one of them ending in a k.o. of me. and I was proud when she’d come back from the lady’s room and the whole gallery would begin to pound and whistle and howl as she wiggled that big magic marvellous ass in that tight skirt – and it *was* a magic ass: she could lay a man stone cold and gasping, screaming love-words to a cement sky. then she’d come down and sit beside me and I’d lift that pint like a coronet, pass it to her, she’d take her nip, hand it back, and I’d say about the boys in the galley: “those screaming jackoff bastards, I’ll kill them.” (p. 314)

Jane does not care about the other guys screaming, she simply sits down near her partner and looks at her programme, discussing it with him. Later that night he is ‘fighting with (his) woman, cursing her sitting there showing (him) all that fine leg, that (he) admitted that the better man had won’ (p. 316). The story ends with a most uncharacteristic description of harmony between the narrator and his partner:

I was wounded. she was beautiful. we went to bed. I remember a light rain came through the window. we let it rain on us. it was good. it was so good we made love twice and when we went to sleep we slept with our faces toward the window and it rained all over us and in the morning the sheets were all wet and we both got up sneezing and laughing. (p. 316)

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<sup>72</sup> Watson Jones (1919-1983) and Enrique Bolanos [not Ballanos] (1924-2012) were real-life boxers. However the [www.box.rec.com](http://www.box.rec.com) site does not record any bout between the two at the Olympic Auditorium in the late 1940s /early 1950s.

<sup>73</sup> Jane Cooney Baker was Bukowski’s real-life partner from 1948 until the mid 1950s. Although their relationship was indeed characterised by her promiscuity and their violent fights, he was devastated by her death from cancer on 22 January 1962, which inspired him to write what his biographer considers to be some of his most moving poetry (SOUNES, 2010, p. 29, 50).

<sup>74</sup> Bukowski himself worked at The Sunbeam Lighting Company for a short period (SOUNES, 2010, p. 31).

Even though they are poor and live on society's margin, they take what they can get and 'laughed laughed, Jesus Christ (they) laughed until (he) thought (they) were crazy' (p. 316), and they had each other's company and life was easy and fun while they were together.

#### 4.5) 'Ten Jack-Offs' (p. 76)

In this story the narrator named Bukowski gives an account of a visit he makes to his friend, 'old Sanchez', who lives with his partner, Kaakaa, 'a young woman who says very little, paints, walks about looking sexy, and makes love to him and him to her, of course' (p. 76). The couple live outside Los Angeles, leading a self-sufficient life-style in a two-storey shack built by Sanchez himself. The title of the story refers to a photograph taken by Sanchez, who had to masturbate ten times in order to capture the moment of his ejaculation,<sup>75</sup> but this is just a minor subject in the context of the story. Bukowski complains to his friend about the monotony of his eleven years working at the same job, 'the hours dragging over (him) like wet shit' (p. 76);<sup>76</sup> at the same time he says that he is 'taught at several universities, some prof is writing a book' on him and that he has 'been translated into several languages'.<sup>77</sup> When Kaakaa appears she seems to be oblivious to the fact that both Sanchez and Bukowski are lusting after her and 'waves through it all glorious as avalanche smashed by sun' (p. 80). At the end of the story, apparently moved by the relationship of his two friends, Bukowski says that he has written 'a little illegal story of love' (p. 81) which is beyond himself but perhaps understandable to the reader. What is notable in this story is that the female character, who enjoys painting and reading Kafka, and who is an equal partner in her lovemaking with Sanchez, is portrayed as much more than a mere sex object.

Kaakaa has a room of her own and the support of her husband to be an artist; she is a sexy and intelligent woman who 'used to like Kafka' (p. 78) and she has love to feed her soul. The narrator's description of their relationship is almost poetic:

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<sup>75</sup> This appears to have been a popular pastime amongst Bukowski's friends for, in 'The Great Zen Wedding', his friend Roy 'claimed he had to jackoff six times in order to get the perfect snap' of his own orgasm (p. 284).

<sup>76</sup> 'Bukowski desperately wanted to leave the post office so he could devote himself to his writing. He was forty-nine and the job was also grinding him down physically.' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 99)

<sup>77</sup> At this time, Bukowski already had many works published and translated and 'the little Black Sparrow books and the Open City column were turning him into a minor local celebrity and there were people at the post office who resented this.' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 89)

next thing I know he's got me over his shoulder, Sanchez has and he's carrying me to his upstairs pad, you know, where he and his woman do the thing, and then I'm down on the bed, he's gone, door closed, and then I hear some kind of music downstairs, and laughter, the both of them, but kind laughter, no malice, and I did not know what to do. (p. 81)

In an interview for Marc Chénétier in 1975 for the *Northwest Review*, Bukowski claimed that he was sentimental: 'that's why I have trouble with women, I get attached. All my women all say "Oh you write this hard stuff but you're soft, you're all marshmallow inside" (*Laughs stupidly*) and they're right. I don't have it ... (qtd. in CALONNE, 2004, p. 142). Amongst all the misogynistic stories in which the Bukowskian narrator portrays women as mere sex objects, we see here a sentimental and contradictory narrator who admires the love between Kaakaa and his friend Sanchez, a love that he wanted for himself.

Sanchez brings a bottle of wine to Bukowski and invites him 'to come downstairs, dance and sing, talk' (p. 81) with his wife and himself, but Bukowski falls asleep. The next day he describes the first view he sees:

in the morning when I awaken, go down to piss, come out from pissing, I find them both asleep on that narrow couch hardly enough for one body, but they are not one body and their faces together and asleep their bodies together and asleep. (p. 81)

He comes to the conclusion that 'the genius and his love (are) both better than (him)' (p. 81), and advises the reader: 'don't keep more than you can swallow: love, heat or hate' (p. 82), suggesting that this love was 'beyond (him)self, but perhaps, understandable to' the reader (p. 81-2).

#### 4.6) 'Too Sensitive' (p. 340)

This story is prefaced with two of Bukowski's own pseudo-philosophical thoughts, in the form of quotations, as they come to him while drinking on the night of 27 June 1967, in which he argues that a man's spirituality is in inverse proportion to the cleanliness of his kitchen. The unidentified first-person narrator ponders that a man's dirty kitchen reflects a brilliant mind, while a clean kitchen reveals the mind of a 'freak'. However, the same is not true for women, because, in the narrator's sexist opinion, a dirty kitchen shows how little a woman cares about her working man. The narrator arrives home after his gruelling night shift and finds his kitchen messy and smelly; too tired to clean it himself he takes a shower and goes to bed. His woman is in bed reading and mentions a writer friend, Benny Adimson, who

has just lost his job and now finds himself unable to write while he is unemployed. The narrator suggests that Benny apply for a job at the post office, but his partner declares that he is 'too sensitive' to work there, and they get irritated with each other. However, on reflection, he thinks he may have been unkind in his portrayal of his lady – he may have 'wandered from kitchens to vindictiveness', and he recognises that she 'has very much courage in many ways' (p. 344).

Although the first-person narrator is not identified, the prefatory quotations from Bukowski himself suggests that this is an autobiographical story. In addition, the woman in the story seems to be his partner in 1967, FrancEye, born Frances Elizabeth Dean (1922-2009), who had given birth to Bukowski's only child, Marina Louise Bukowski, three years previously. Like the woman in the story, FrancEye was closely associated with the Southern California poetry community. According to Howard Sounes (2010), FrancEyeE,

involved herself in causes and with groups which Bukowski, the outsider, considered a waste of time. He wrote to the Webbs that FrancEyeE was fighting 'to save and understand all mankind' and it was not a battle he thought she had much chance of winning. He was also contemptuous of her poetry friends, people like Stanley Kurnik who sometimes came over to talk about literature. (p. 87)

Since Bukowski worked as a letter filing clerk at the post office throughout the 1960s, we understand that the woman's comment about her friend being too sensitive to work at the post office is an implied reference to Bukowski's lack of sensitivity. FrancEyeE was mocked in much of Bukowski's work; however he dedicated a poem to her, entitled 'poetess', which 'showed a more affectionate side to their relationship. Bukowski describes how she looked after him when he has been drinking, and praises her own poetry' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 68). The Bukowskian narrator's rare recognition that 'there are good women in the world' (p. 341), and that 'it was just not a good night for her or for (him) either' (p. 344), is perhaps notable as one of the exceptions.

#### **4.7) 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town' (p. 1)**

This story is a nostalgic reminiscence in which the unidentified first-person narrator recalls a brief relationship he had with a 20-year-old woman called Cass, which began a few days after she was released from the convent boarding school where she had been educated, and ended some six months later when she committed suicide. The story starts with a sympathetic physical and psychological description of Cass:

Cass was the youngest and most beautiful of 5 sisters. Cass was the most beautiful girl in town. ½ Indian with a supple and a strange body, a snake-like and fiery body with eyes to go with it. Cass was fluid moving fire. She was like a spirit stuck into a form that would not hold her. Her hair was black and long and silken and moved and whirled about as did her body. Her spirit was either very high or very low. There was no in between for Cass. Some said she was crazy. (p. 1)

The representation of Cass is one of a singular person, 'Cass had mind and spirit; she painted, she danced, she sang, she made things of clay, and when people were hurt either in the spirit or in the flesh, Cass felt a deep grieving of them' (p. 1); through the eyes of the narrator we see how exceptional she is. The world's pain is just too much for her, and even though he tries to help her, she is mercurial, unreachably locked in her suffering.

The narrator meets her for the first time at the West End Bar, where she shocks him by mutilating herself by running a hatpin through her nose. He takes her back to his place and they have sex the following morning. As their relationship develops, the narrator has to bail Cass out several times when she is arrested 'for drunkenness and fighting', but he decides to leave after a meaningless argument and 'bums around' for six months. When he returns, Cass is working as a prostitute, but tells him he won't have to pay her. Back at his place, when she undresses, he sees an 'ugly jagged scar across her throat' (p. 5), and she tells him she had done it herself with a broken bottle. The narrator tells her that he loves her, and the next day he suggests that they 'shack together', but she refuses. The following week he finds a job as a packer in a factory and spends his week working. On the Friday night he goes to the bar hoping to see her, but the bartender informs him that Cass had cut her throat and had been buried the previous day. The narrator drinks until the bar closes and then drives home, haunted by the thought that he should have insisted that she stayed with him, instead of accepting her refusal.

Simone de Beauvoir (1997) explains that social discriminations seem outwardly insignificant, but 'produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature' (p. 25). Cass is seen as mad by people around her for being a free spirit who does not obey society's conventions. This induces in Cass a self-destructive behaviour fed by her marginalisation and objectification at the hands of patriarchal society. Beauvoir explains that 'the true problem for a woman was to reject these flights from reality and seek self-fulfilment in transcendence' (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 76). Self-fulfilment in transcendence for Cass was death, because she refused to be a sex object.

Some of Cass's physical characteristics are shown through the eyes of the narrator, like the 'razor marks all along her left arm', and 'the permanent scar along the left cheek', given to her by girls of the convent, who were jealous of her beauty. The narrator describes Cass as 'a person full of kindness and caring' who 'gave herself away without knowing', a person who 'at the same time ... would leap back into areas of wildness and incoherence' (p. 3). He refers to her as a 'Schitzi ... a beautiful and spiritual *schitzi*'<sup>78</sup> (p. 3). While describing her, the narrator comments on how unjustly she had been treated:

Her father had died of alcohol and her mother had run off leaving the girls alone. The girls went to a relative who placed them in a convent. The convent had been an unhappy place, more for Cass than the sisters. The girls were jealous of Cass and Cass fought most of them. She had razor marks all along her left arm from defending herself in two fights. There was also a permanent scar along the left cheek, but the scar rather than lessening her beauty only seemed to highlight it. (p. 2)

It is generally accepted that Cass is a highly romanticised representation of Bukowski's first partner, Jane Cooney Baker, with whom he lived from 1947 to 1955. 'The only information about who she really was has come from the few biographical details Bukowski provided in his interviews. He said she was a half-Irish/half-Indian orphan, raised by nuns after being abandoned by her parents' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 28). However, the characteristics of Cass and the events of the story itself are entirely fictitious. Bukowski was ten years junior to Jane, who was 38 and the widowed mother of two children when he met her. Unlike Cass, Jane did not commit suicide, in fact dying of cancer and cirrhosis of the liver in 1962, seven years after she left Bukowski. She blamed herself for her husband's death and began to drink heavily:

It was a year later that she met Bukowski in LA. Jane was thirty-eight, an alcoholic who had lost touch with her family. She was also getting a little crazy, and had a reputation for attacking men she took a dislike to. But she allowed Bukowski to drink with her and they left The Glenview together, picking up two fifths of bourbon and a carton of cigarettes before going back to his place.

'Say, I don't know your name. What's your name?' asked Bukowski, when they were in bed.

'What the hell difference does it make?' she said. (SOUNES, 2010, p. 29)

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<sup>78</sup> Since this word is not to be found in any dictionary its use constitutes a crux. It seems probable that Bukowski meant *schatzi* (a German word for sweetheart). He may not have used German actively for decades since leaving Germany at the age of 3, so he was possibly misremembering a word he last heard from his mother.

Although Bukowski does not state that he himself is the narrator, his use of the German term of endearment *schitzi* to describe Cass is a fairly significant clue, since the word *schatzi* had very likely entered his vocabulary as a child when it was used by his German mother. Also, like the narrator of the story, Bukowski in his early years, had done a number of jobs in factories.

The narrator describes himself as probably the ‘ugliest man in town’, which is interesting in opposition to the beauty of Cass – as in Coulomb’s law, which states that opposites are attracted by each other. He is described by Cass as ugly, but she corrects herself and asserts that he has a ‘fascinating face’:

You don’t know how lucky you are to be ugly, because if people like you then you know it’s for something else. ...  
I don’t mean you’re ugly. People just think you’re ugly. You have a fascinating face. (p. 5)

In the documentary *Born Into This* (2003), Bukowski states that City Lights Books had decided to use his face on the cover of *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness* because it attracted people’s attention; in other words, it was a ‘fascinating face’ which, according to his last wife Linda Lee, reflected all his suffering.

According to David Calonne (2012), Bukowski’s encounter with Jane was ‘by far most cataclysmic event of 1947, (since she) would become his muse for the next decade and haunt him for the rest of his life’ (p. 36):

He met Jane Cooney Baker at a bar on Alvarado Street. He frequently recounted how he walked into the Glenview one night. He was warned that the lady he observed sitting by herself was ‘crazy’ and that he should be careful, but naturally he approached and sat beside her. This dramatic moment would be told and retold in story, essay, novel as well as the film *Barfly*. (p. 36)

The narrator of ‘The Most Beautiful Woman in Town’ meets Cass for the first time at the ‘West End Bar’ and Cass asks him if he considers her pretty:

“Drink?” I asked  
“Sure, why not?” ...  
“Do you think I’m pretty?” she asked.  
“Yes, of course, but there’s something else ... There’s more than your looks ...”  
“People are always accusing me of being pretty. Do you really think I’m pretty?”  
“Pretty isn’t the word, it hardly does you fair.” (p. 2)

At that moment Cass takes out a long hatpin from her purse and sticks it through her nostrils, asking the narrator what he thinks of her prettiness now. Immediately afterwards, she mentions that people are always ‘accusing’ her of being pretty. It seems that her response to the ‘accusation’ is to destroy the evidence:

Cass reached into her handbag. I thought she was reaching for her handkerchief. She came out with a long hatpin. Before I could stop her she had run this long hatpin through her nose, sideways, just above the nostrils. I felt disgust and horror. (p. 2)

Cass constantly mutilates herself, with a hatpin and in other ways, in order to destroy her own beauty and become undesirable. She destroys her face with a penetration just as sex acts had destroyed her self-esteem. The hatpin is what Freud would describe as a phallic symbol – a symbolism which is made even clearer in Bukowski’s story ‘Six Inches’, where the husband, who has been shrunk to the size of a penis by his wife so that she can insert his whole body into her vagina, takes his revenge by stabbing her hatpin, ‘half again longer’ than himself, into her heart.

The narrator pulls the hatpin out from Cass’s nose and holds his handkerchief over it to staunch the bleeding. The bartender calls her attention, saying that if she acts up like this again she’ll be out of the bar, but she answers ‘Oh, fuck you, man!’, going on to say that it is *her* nose and she can do what she wants with it, but the narrator tries to dissuade her from repeating the act by saying that it hurts him:

“It’s *my* nose”, said Cass, “I can do what I want with my nose.”  
 “No,” I said, “it hurts me.”  
 “You mean it hurts you when I stick a pin in my nose?”  
 “Yes, it does. I mean it.”  
 “All right, I won’t do it again. Cheer up.” (p. 3)

After the narrator has removed the hatpin from her nose, he tells the bartender that ‘she’ll be all right’ (p. 2), perhaps believing he can take care of her and ease her torment. She kisses him while she holds the handkerchief to the wound and they only leave the bar at closing time. When they arrive at the narrator’s home Cass asks him if he wants to have sex then or in the morning:

“When do you want it? Now or in the morning?”  
 “In the morning,” I said and turned my back.  
 In the morning I got up and made a couple of coffees, brought her one in bed.  
 She laughed. “You’re the first man I’ve met who has turned it down at night.” (p. 3)



He says they ‘needn’t do it all’ (p. 3), which demonstrates that she is more than sex to him, but she insists that she wants to. She goes to the bathroom and reappears showing ‘her long black hair glistening, her eyes and lips glistening, *her* glistening ... She displayed her body calmly, as a good thing. She got under the sheet’ (p. 3).

“Come on, lover man.”

I got in.

She kissed with abandon but without haste. I let my hands run over her body, through her hair. I mounted. It was hot, and tight. I began to stroke slowly, wanting to make it last. Her eyes looked directly into mine. (p. 3)

When the narrator asks her name, she answers, ‘What the hell difference does it make?’ (p. 3); he laughs and they continue making love, exactly as when Bukowski first made love to Jane. When they finish she gets dressed and he drives her back to the bar, but he admits that she was difficult to forget.

According to Calonne (2012), Bukowski said that ‘Jane was a natural. And she had delicious legs and a tight little gash and a face of powdered pain. And she knew me. She taught me more than the philosophy books of the ages’ (qtd. in CALONNE, 2012, p. 37), a good definition of a woman who was difficult to forget! One of Bukowski’s subsequent partners, Linda King, was aware of Jane’s impact on him. According to her,

he expected all his girlfriends to behave as Jane had. ‘It sounded like she was an absolute sleep-around what-ever,’ she says. ‘She was an alcoholic and she went out and fucked whoever would give her some booze. If he didn’t get home, his woman would be gone. He talked about her a lot’. (In SOUNES, 2010, p. 32)

Howard Sounes (2010) believes that this ‘relationship left Bukowski with a very poor opinion of women’, which led him to call ‘his girlfriends “whores” or “bitches” and describe sex in brutal language, frequently using “rape” as a synonym for intercourse’ (p. 32). Even though Bukowski demonstrated his love for Jane and knew how much she suffered; he portrays her as ‘a woman of such loose morality she was virtually a prostitute’ (SOUNES, 2010, p. 32). Whether she was really a libertine is not important, what is relevant is Bukowski’s understanding that ‘the reason for (Jane’s) irrational anger was “because the world has failed (them) both”’ (CALONNE, 2012, p. 37).

Later in the story, Cass goes to jail ‘for drunkenness and fighting’, and the narrator bails her out. After some time, he decides to leave after a meaningless argument and ‘bums around’.

I left town for six months, bummed around, came back. I had never forgotten Cass, but we'd had some type of argument and I felt like moving on anyhow, and when I got back I figured she'd be gone, but I had been sitting in the West End Bar about 30 minutes when she walked in and sat down next to me. (p. 4)

Cass's physical aggression with others is reminiscent of the fights that Jane Cooney Baker used to have with Bukowski, which 'got really vicious, dangerous to themselves and others' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 30). When Bukowski 'came back to the court on South Coronado where he and Jane were living, she was often gone, the bed unmade and dirty dishes in the sink' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 33). Although they had a turbulent relationship, they remained together, because 'Jane was his first serious girlfriend, only the second woman he had slept with' (p. 29):

He was initially attracted by her looks, particularly her legs which she liked to show off, but he probably would have fallen for Jane whatever she looked like because she was the first woman who had ever paid him any attention and, once he had 'cured' her of smashing a glass in his face when the urge took her, he found they had much in common. 'She had a strange mad kind of sensibility which knew something, which was this: most human beings just aren't worth a shit, and I felt that, and she felt it,' he said. (SOUNES, 2010, p. 29)

Sometimes Bukowski 'found her in one of the bars on Alvarado Street, sitting with a man who had been buying her drinks' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 33). In 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town', when the narrator meets Cass at the bar he notices that she has driven in two pins with glass heads under each eye, and he complains that she is still trying to destroy her beauty, but she says it is just the fad. He asks her to pull the pins out and she obeys him. She informs him that now she is hustling, but he won't have to pay anything for her:

"What are you doing?" she asked.  
 "Nothing. I can't get on to anything. No interest."  
 "Me neither. If you were a woman you could hustle."  
 "I don't think I'd want to make that close a contact with so many strangers. It's wearing."  
 "You're right, it's wearing, everything is wearing." (p. 5)

The recognition of the difficulty of a prostitute's life by the narrator is one of the rare moments in which the Bukowskian narrator perceives that sex objects might actually have feelings. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) states that the prostitute 'incarnates evil, shame, disease, damnation; she inspires fear and disgust; she belongs to no man, but yields herself to one and all and lives off such commerce' (p. 208):

In this way she regains that formidable independence of the luxurious goddess mothers of old, and she incarnates the Femininity that masculine society has not sanctified and that remains charged with harmful powers. In the sexual act the male cannot possibly imagine that he owns her; he has simply delivered himself over to the demon of the flesh. (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 208)

Cass belongs to no one and even though she sells her body to survive, she is destroyed every time she does so. However, she is still prepared to have sex with the narrator free of charge, so they leave the bar together to go to his apartment. When she undresses he sees an ‘ugly and jagged scar across her throat (...) large and thick’ (p. 5):

“God damn you, woman,” I said from the bed, “god damn you, what have you done?”

“I tried it with a broken bottle one night. Don’t you like me anymore? Am I still beautiful?”

I pulled her down on the bed and kissed her. She pushed away and laughed, “Some men pay me that ten and then I undress and they don’t want to do it. I keep the ten. It’s very funny.”

“Yes,” I said, “I can’t stop laughing... Cass, bitch, I love you... stop destroying yourself; you’re the most alive woman I’ve ever met.” (p. 5)

Cass is seen by men as a ‘sex machine’. Even the narrator shares this view when he says he is interested in her body, but he claims that he is different from other men who see her as no more than a sex object.

Some said she was crazy. The dull ones said that. The dull ones would never understand Cass. To the men she simply seemed a sex machine and they didn’t care whether she was crazy or not. (p. 1)

The narrator says that those who do not understand Cass are ‘dull’; however, he recognises that she is special, mysterious and sensitive. He knows she has a strong personality, and that she is inconstant, a bomb waiting to explode and bring tears to the eyes of those who love her. She is lost in an unfair world. From the very outset one can see that he is touched by her; he understands her – however, he seems to be the only one. Cass as a sex machine must play her role, and because of that she suffers. As a result, she adopts,

an attitude of negation and denial, she is not absorbed in the real: she protests against it with words. She seeks through nature for the image of her soul, she abandons herself to reveries, she wishes to attain her being, (...) To prevent an inner life that has no useful purpose from sinking into nothingness, to assert herself against given conditions which she bears rebelliously, to create a world other than that in which she fails to attain her being, she must resort to self-expression. (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 663)

For Cass, self-expression takes the form of trying to cut her throat with a broken bottle.

In an attempt to save her from herself, the narrator takes Cass to the beach the following day, and they sit on the sand drinking and eating, and hold each other until they fall asleep. Afterwards, they go back to his place and have dinner. He suggests that they could ‘shack together’, but, after a long pause, she turns the offer down. He drives her back to the bar, buys her a drink and leaves. The next day he finds a job as a packer in a factory and spends his week working. One week later, he goes to the West End bar, sits down and waits for her. After having waited for hours he gets drunk and the bartender starts talking to him:

“I’m sorry about your girl friend.”  
 “What is it?” I asked.  
 “I’m sorry. Didn’t you know?”  
 “No.”  
 “Suicide. She was buried yesterday.”  
 “Buried?” I asked. It seemed as if she would walk through the doorway at any moment. How could she be gone?  
 “Her sisters buried her.”  
 “A suicide? Mind telling me how?”  
 “She cut her throat.”  
 “I see. Give me another drink.” (p. 6)

The narrator has failed; he drinks until the bar closes and then drives home haunted by the thought that he should have insisted that she stay with him, instead of accepting her no. He realises that everything about her had indicated that she cared about him and he had been too unconcerned. He understands that ‘Cass the most beautiful girl in town was dead at 20’ (p. 7). In the final paragraph a car honks its horn loudly and persistently. He puts down his bottle of wine and screams out: ‘GOD DAMN YOU, YOU SON OF A BITCH, SHUT UP!’ (p. 7), and night falls and there is nothing he can do.

The most beautiful woman in town expressed her distrust of the world as given; she collapsed with so much sadness; she suffered against her will. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) argues that a woman ‘dares not to revolt; she submits unwillingly; her attitude is one of constant reproach’ (p. 575) in a world where to be a woman is to suffer the injustice of fate, to have a destiny of submission and objectification. Beauvoir asserts that,

A free individual blames only himself for his failures, he assumes responsibility for them; but everything happens to a woman through the agency of others and therefore these others are responsible for her woes. Her mad despair spurns all remedies; it does not help matters to propose solutions to a woman bent on complaining: she finds none acceptable. She insists on living her situation precisely as she does – that is, in a state of impotent rage. (...) She holds the entire world responsible because it has been made without her, and against her; she has been protesting against her condition since her adolescence, ever since her childhood. (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p. 575)

Cass, the youngest of five sisters, whose father died of alcohol and whose mother abandoned her, had little chance to be happy and succeed in this patriarchal world. Being poor, she took up prostitution in order to live. Her beauty, instead of a gift, was a curse that led her to suffering. She refused to accept such a destiny and the only solution for her was death. Like Cass, Jane Cooney Baker's behaviour was condemned from her adolescence onwards, because she enjoyed parties, drinks and dancing, which was considered inappropriate for a woman. She got pregnant when she was just a teenager and her husband Craig Baker was doing so poorly in business that he started to drink heavily. After a fight with Jane, he lost his life in a car crash. Jane felt so guilty that she started drinking heavily and lost touch with her family and with the world around her. Neither Cass nor Jane had much chance, and there was nothing the narrator/Bukowski could do to change their 'destinies'.

Jane died on the evening of 22 January 1962. 'Her body was riddled with cancer; she also had cirrhosis of the liver' (SOUNES, 2010, p. 50). Although she and Bukowski had been leading separate lives for seven years when she died, he was moved to write a number of grief poems, which were included in *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over The Hills* (1969), a collection he dedicated to Jane. Among the most affecting of them is 'for Jane, with all the love I had, which was not enough':

I pick up the skirt,  
 I pick up the sparkling beads  
 in black,  
 this thing that moved once  
 around flesh,  
 and I call God a liar,  
 I say anything that moved  
 like that  
 or knew  
 my name  
 could never die  
 in the common verity of dying,  
 and I pick  
 up her lovely  
 dress,  
 all her loveliness gone,  
 and I speak  
 to all the gods,  
 Jewish gods, Christ-gods,  
 chips of blinking things,  
 idols, pills, bread,  
 fathoms, risks  
 knowledgeable surrender,  
 rats in the gravy of 2 gone quite mad  
 without a chance,

hummingbird knowledge, hummingbird chance,  
 I lean on this,  
 I lean on all of this  
 and I know:  
 her dress upon my arm:  
 but  
 they will not  
 give her back to me.  
 (BUKOWSKI, 1969, p. 37-8)

It does not seem unreasonable to detect in the narrator's sense of loss following the death of Cass a pain analogous to that felt by Bukowski following the death of Jane.

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Although they constitute a very small minority of the 64 stories in the collection, the short stories discussed in this chapter prove that it is not possible to state that all Bukowski's work is misogynistic and sexist. They show that the Bukowski was capable of being sensitive to the feminine condition; he reveals himself as a man who has loved and lost his greatest love, a man who is also a victim who has suffered the world's injustices.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

*Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions, and General Tales of Ordinary Madness* was published in 1972, but the 64 stories contained in the collection had been printed individually in a range of different magazines over the preceding five years. In 1967, when Bukowski wrote the first of the stories, he was already 47 years old and felt himself to be an old man. He was indeed the eponymous 'Dirty Old Man' whose anecdotal columns for *Open City* were collated and published in book form in 1969. It is not surprising that he should have felt himself to be old during the 1960s, when twentieth-century culture underwent a seismic shift. Arguably the keynote of the decade was struck in 1960, when the US Food and Drug Administration approved the first oral contraceptive pill, which, for the first time in history, freed women's sexual lives from the fear of unwanted pregnancy. The resultant sense of liberty was embodied in the decade's fashion icon, the miniskirt, commercialised by Mary Quant in 1965. Building on the advent of rock'n'roll in the 1950s, popular culture enjoyed an unprecedented boom led by the phenomenal success of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The use of psychedelic drugs and marijuana paved the way for the Hippies and the Summer of Love in 1967 and Woodstock in 1969. At the same time the decade was overshadowed by the threat of the atomic bomb and, from 1963 onwards, the escalation of the Vietnam War.

It is not difficult to see why Bukowski, brought up in the 1920s and 1930s, and undoubtedly bemused and alienated by much of what he saw happening around him, should have seen the 'Swinging Sixties' as his opportunity to catch up on all the sexual action that had eluded him for much of his younger years. For him, attractive young women, their legs alluringly displayed and their libidos liberated, were there for his use, sex objects for his greedy gratification. It was therefore mystifying to him that, along with their newly acquired sexual freedom, women should also be vindicating their right to be considered the equals of men in the home and the workplace.

The publication in 1953 of Howard Parshley's English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was the prelude to a growth in women's consciousness of their rights, which culminated in the publication, a decade later, of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Three years afterwards, in 1966, Friedan co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) to lead the campaign for equal opportunity in the workforce, political rights for women, and social equality in relationships such as marriage, which resulted in more than 20,000 women protesting on the streets of New York and throughout the country. At the demonstration, Friedan spoke about the strength and ability of women to rise above their

oppression. Her ideas would be developed by Kate Millett in her Ph.D. thesis, concluded in 1969 and published the same year under the title *Sexual Politics*, and by the Australian academic, Germaine Greer, who published *The Female Eunuch* in 1970.

As far as Bukowski was concerned, the attacks by the feminists upon his writing were wholly unjustified, born of a partial reading of his work. My research has demonstrated that, on the basis of this particular collection of stories, and with a very small number of exceptions, Bukowski's sense of grievance at the feminist criticism of his writing was, at least, naïve, and arguably disingenuous. In the corpus of 64 stories most references to women reveal a misogynist Bukowskian narrator, who usually sees women as mere sex objects. The function of women is to provide the male with a sexual outlet. They are inanimate objects to be used; and judging by the content of the stories, men look for the sexual pleasure women can provide as if it were no more than their obligation. Those female characters who want more than sex or, even worse, seek pleasure for themselves, are punished with death, because any woman who wants her own sexual satisfaction is no more than a stinking monster. When they are not killed, they are disrespected by the use of epithets that reduce them, metonymically, to their sexual parts. They are, to use Germaine Greer's term, the Great Bitch, and the aggressive penis-weapon is used to finish them off.

In most of the stories there is a violent deconstruction of the status of women through the verbal aggression and disrespectful attitude by the narrator. He certainly does not accept that during his time women had conquered their right to say no to unwanted sexual relations; there is bitterness in the Bukowskian narrator's discourse at having lost the power men once had in their hands and he rails against women's rights. For him, women's struggle for liberation is, almost always, connected to stupidity or pettiness.

Although, for the Bukowskian narrator, the proper role of women is to make themselves erotic objects, in many stories the narrator has an ambivalent attitude towards them; he is afraid to have intercourse with them, because of his sexual inferiority complex, which demonstrates an anxiety about his own virility. He is jealous and insecure, and frequently mocks himself for being old and impotent and unable to play his role of male dominance.

However, despite the vile and vulgar persona built by Bukowski himself, he has a strange and unique way of revealing his complex feelings about women to the world, for he affirms women have given him more highs and magical moments than anything else. His statements in interviews about women are frequently contradictory, but he affirms both negative and positive aspects constitute the complex panel of women's behaviour. He stated



that he was neither anti-woman nor pro-woman; in his opinion he just wrote about his personal experiences. When he was asked about women's liberation, he affirmed that it was good but weakening, in the sense that it makes a woman lose her own individual thinking process in favour of a group's ideas. He went so far as to describe women's sexual liberation as 'bullshit' in his interview for Silvia Bizio (*High Times*), and he was infuriated by the label feminists gave him. He said it was not fair to be called a misogynist, because he simply portrayed the human beings the way they are, saying that he made himself 'a bastard' many times in his writing. For him, feminist judgements were based on bits of his work, not on the totality of it, and he was sure they attacked him without going into the whole thing he had created.

Bukowski accepts that the female has power over men, showing his male characters' feelings to be frustration, panic, dominance and loss. This can be seen in '3 Women', in which the narrator has sex with three women, but in the end they abandon him, which demonstrates that he was the one who was used. In 'A White Pussy', the first-person narrator is invited to have sex by a prostitute, but goes home frustrated by being too drunk to perform. In 'A Rain of Women', the narrator encounters women drivers and customers and his attention is focused exclusively on their sexuality, or lack of it; however, he is affected by the same impotence, which he sees as contaminating society around him, and lacks the confidence to chat up any of the women. These examples demonstrate the fragility of the male characters who are the responsible for the female sexual objectification.

Throughout the stories the male protagonists speak of women metonymically as 'pussy', 'cunt', 'box', 'pair of legs', 'ass', 'skirt', to name but a few, and they are seen as nothing more than a receptacle for an erect penis. When a male protagonist is married, he treats his wife abusively, referring to her as a thing, saying she is only good for fucking. For the Bukowskian narrator, women are neurotic, and he sees his female co-workers as prostitutes at his disposal. He stresses his own brutality and treats women as if they were disposable, serving no useful purpose after he has obtained his pleasure. It seems automatic to see women as objects available for his gratification; their sole function is to give him sexual pleasure and they are completely satisfied in giving him pleasure, even if they receive none in return. The perfect woman is a mechanical female, who can provide everything a man needs without asking anything in return.

The events in the stories are predicated on the inevitable superiority of the male sex in the Bukowskian narrator's universe, showing women as inferior minds; however, he offers no proof of any difference in mental capacity between the sexes, but the allegation that

women have a congenital mental deficiency is persistent. For this reason there are no women writers, at least no good ones. When a poetess appears, the narrator makes scathing comments about her, condemning her appearance, her politics, her sexuality, her morals and her aspirations, and states that she uses her children as her weapons in order to get money from her ex-husbands while living with various men. Females are simply promiscuous and mad, and if they do not serve as sexual objects, they are simply old women, who have no legs, breasts or brain.

For the Bukowskian narrator, great writers have the right to be promiscuous. His relationships with women are characterised by drunkenness, verbal abuse and physical violence, revealing the full extent of his brutal attitude to women and his belief that physical violence is a satisfactory response to verbal abuse. Disenchanted with women he seeks solace in gambling, masturbating and drinking, because he has been 'burned by the ladies'. According to him, girls don't search out the common labourers; they are only interested in men with money. He laments that he can only get women when they are used, deformed, diseased or mad, and his language reduces women to the level of consumer goods – since he cannot get top quality he prefers to be alone.

The Bukowskian narrator's violent attitude towards women is reflected in his use of the verb 'rape' as a synonym for sexual intercourse, in seven of the stories: 'No Stockings', 'Rape! Rape!', 'The Fuck Machine', 'Non-Horseshit Horse Advice', 'The Great Zen Wedding', 'My Stay in the Poet's Cottage' and 'The Stupid Christs'. Although it does not appear in the story 'The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California', the necrophilia practiced by the two men is effectively rape. In these stories the narrator has no qualms about raping women, although the use of the verb 'commit' appears to indicate that he at least recognises that it is a criminal act. The narrator is arrested for attempted rape after screaming at two passing women that he is going to suck their vaginas dry, in the story 'The Great Zen Weeding'.

Women in the stories are deeply humiliated and verbally abused. Tanya, the mechanical woman, is punished because she has feelings towards the narrator and refuses to have sex with another man, and because of that she is gang raped by men who rip and tear her apart. The Bukowskian narrator refers to every woman he sees as a potential sex object that he plans to rape, and the city of Los Angeles, where he lives, is for him a place full of 'cunts', as if women were no more than their genitals. In 'Rape! Rape!', the use of the word is more complex, because it is open to interpretation whether the narrator rapes the female character in her short yellow dress or not, since the act appears to be consensual; considering that he uses

the word as a synonym for sexual intercourse, it appears that the distinction in this particular story is far from clear.

It is common to find in Bukowski's writing examples of sexist, misogynistic discourse. His depiction of women is pejorative in 57 stories, almost 90% of the total. A tiny minority portray women in a favourable light, and a few others show a more ambivalent attitude on the part of the narrator. 29 of the stories, almost half of the collection, feature female protagonists in a negative, sexist light, often in a deeply offensive manner. 28 of the stories mention women pejoratively, even though the character is not a protagonist of the story; and only seven stories, a mere 10% of the total, show some positive aspects of women, even though, in most of them, these are mixed with negative aspects too.

However, it is undeniable that the portrayal of Cass in 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town' reveals a markedly more sensitive narrator than the misogynistic one in almost all the other stories in the collection. Her marginalised status demonstrates that she is a victim of society, and she is the clearest exception in Bukowski's representation of the feminine universe. Through the eyes of the narrator this feminine character reveals herself to be sensitive and unjustly treated by people around her; he analyses the impositions that are made upon her and suffers with her pain. She is unlike the other female characters depicted by the Bukowskian narrator in her complexity, and because his attitude towards her is kind and protective.

Even though they constitute such a small minority, these seven stories prove that it is not possible to categorise all of Bukowski's work as misogynistic and sexist. In 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town' he shows that he can be sensitive to the feminine condition. There seems little doubt that Cass is a romanticised portrayal of Bukowski's erstwhile partner, Jane Cooney Baker. She also appears as Vicki in '3 Chickens', Linda in '3 Women', Madge in 'The Beginner', Vicky in 'Reunion' and in 'Life and Death in the Charity Ward'. Her presence is alive in a blanket in the story 'The Blanket', she is the woman he 'buried, outdrunk and outfucked' in 'Beer and Poets and Talk'; she is Kathy in '25 Bums in Rags', and she goes under her own name in 'Goodbye Watson'. But, first and foremost, she is Cass in 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Town'.

Bukowski's relationship with Jane was characterised by drunkenness, verbal abuse, physical violence and sexual betrayal. Even so, they remained together for eight years, from 1947 to 1955, compelled to feed the sick love they felt for each other. Details of their life are mentioned in several of the stories, including the addresses of some of the places where they lived. She is the one who suggests that he should start betting on horses instead of drinking, in

the hope of saving his life after he almost died of an ulcer. In some of the stories, he recalls when he was living with a 'lady of the streets', who was notoriously promiscuous. Curiously, the prospect of having sex with her when she returned home after having had sex with '2 or 3 or more men' did not appear to constitute an emotional problem for Bukowski, who prided himself on his own promiscuity, but rather one of physical disgust. Despite their fights, they always ended up making love, which shows how complex their disturbing relationship was. In counterpoint to the bad aspects of their relationship, Bukowski describes Jane as a good a woman, and even recognises his own stupid behaviour. There is, indeed, a measure of respect for her in the language he uses to describe their sex life; he makes love to her rather than rapes her and they have many positive aspects in their relationship, such as sharing the same interests and enjoying each other's company.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that the stories in which Bukowski shows any kind of empathy towards women constitute a very small fraction of the collection as a whole. Certainly Kate Millett and Germaine Greer provided critics with the tools necessary to identify the objectification of women in literary texts, so Bukowski's writing was invitingly open to attack. From his point of view it was an unfortunate coincidence that the publication of his stories coincided with the rise of militant Second-Wave Feminism in the latter half of the 1960s and the early 1970s.

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