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**The Portrayal of Women and Men in Charles Bukowski's Fiction**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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## Abstrakt

Ve středu zájmu této práce se nachází autor Charles Bukowski, a jak název práce napovídá, konkrétně pojetí žen a mužů v jeho vybraných dílech. Tato práce se snaží vyhnout domněnkám o Bukowského osobních názorech a raději se zaměřuje na samotné psané slovo a to na „Zápisky starého prasáka“ a „Ženy“. Díky výběru právě těchto děl budeme moci probrat změny postojů Bukowského v době, kdy se měnily i názory na ženy.

Hlavní oporou této práce jsou jazyk a sexualita. A to proto, aby byla zpochybněna idea, že hrubý a jednoduchý jazyk není vhodný k literárnímu uznání. Cílem této práce je ukázat, že takovýto jazyk byl v dílech použit úmyslně. A to například proto, aby Bukowski mohl lépe zobrazit mysl svých protagonistů. Z podobných důvodů bude analyzována nejvíce diskutovaná a kritizovaná složka děl, sexualita. Smyslem této analýzy bude ukázat, že Bukowski osvobodil téma sexuality s humorem a ironií.

Následně práce zasadí Bukowského do kontextu času, prostoru a osobního vývoje, aby naznačila pokrok jeho práce. Jak ale bude ukázáno, Bukowski stejně jako jeho dílo může jen těžko být kategorizován s určitostí. I přes to, zvážíme Bukowského krátce ve vztahu k Beatnikům, což nám umožní zabývat se Bukowského politickými, apolitickými postoji.

Druhá část práce bude analyzovat vybrané povídky ze „Zápisů starého prasáka“. Nejdiskutabilnější téma sbírky, sexualita, bude rozebrána. Tímto chceme ukázat, že je nespravedlivé se soustředit pouze na sexualitu ve sbírce, protože Bukowski do některých povídek díla promítal i své komentáře a názory na společnost. Je třeba zmínit, že tato práce připouští, že Bukowski umí být vulgární, ale hlavním cílem je poskytnout lepší pochopení a kritiku ukrytou ve víru sexuálních referencí.

Analýzu „Zápisů starého prasáka“ bude následovat rozbor „Žen“. Od začátku bude ustanoveno, že pokud „Zápisky“ nebyly pouze o sexu, pak „Ženy“ jsou ještě méně o sexualitě a naopak se zaměřují na slabosti lidských vztahů. „Ženy“ ukážou, že Bukowski se snaží vysvětlit čtenáři chování svých postav a to především hlavního mužského protagonisty, Chinaskiho. Je tomu tak, aby byl demonstrován vývoj v Bukowského stylu. V zásadě tím, že tato práce ukáže pokrok v jeho uměleckém výrazu, Bukowského náhled na lidský úděl bude zdůrazněn a bude zobrazen jako autor i jiných než obscénních povídek.

V závěru práce budou poznatky z jednotlivých rozborů dány dohromady a to jako obhajoba Bukowského uměleckého práva tvořit a vyvíjet své povídky tak jak uznal za

vhodné. V podstatě spočívá hlavní argument této práce ve faktu, že mnoho kritiků přehlédlo hlubší význam Bukowského díla proto, že se soustředili na Bukowského užití jazyka nebo na něj samotného. Přesně takovému přístupu se tato práce snaží vyhnout.

Klíčová slova: pohlaví, šovinismus, politika, umělecká svoboda

## Abstract

The subject of the present thesis is the author Charles Bukowski and as the title suggests his portrayal of women and men in the chosen works. This thesis strives to avoid presumption of Bukowski's personal sentiments and views, and instead focuses on the written word itself, namely on the *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* and *Women*. By choosing *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* and *Women* we will be able to discuss changes in Bukowski's attitudes throughout a set period of his life, during a time when attitudes towards women were changing.

The pillars of the thesis are language and sexuality. Hence, this thesis challenges the image of crude and basic language not being worthy of literary acceptance. This thesis will show that such language was chosen deliberately. It will be explained, for example, that one of Bukowski's reasons for doing so, was to better reflect the minds of his protagonists. Similarly, sexuality, as one of the most discussed and criticised of Bukowski's themes will also be analysed. The object of this academic discussion is to show how Bukowski liberated the subject of sexuality by using humour and irony in his writing.

Consequently, the thesis will also contextualise Bukowski in terms of time, place and personal development, in order to show progress and development in his work. It will be shown that Bukowski, much like his works, could not be easily categorised. Nonetheless, Bukowski will be shortly considered among the Beat generation, as this allows us to consider Bukowski's political, apolitical (at the first sight) attitudes.

The second part of the thesis will analyze the chosen stories from *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*. The most questionable theme within the collection, namely sexuality, will be discussed. It will be done so to show that it is unjust to concentrate merely on sexuality within this collection as Bukowski tends to project his comments and opinions on the society in some of the stories. It is worth noting that this thesis admits that Bukowski can be vulgar, but the main aim of the thesis is to provide a deeper understanding and critique hidden in the vortex of sexual reference.

Following the discussion on *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, the focus will be drawn to the analysis of *Women*. From early on, it will be established that if *Notes* was not just about sex alone, then *Women* is even less about sexuality and more centred around the frailty of human relationships. *Women* will demonstrate that Bukowski wants the reader to understand the behaviour of his characters and especially that of his main male protagonist, Chinaski. It

is done so, in order to demonstrate the devolvement in Bukowski's style. Essentially, by showing progress in his artistic expression, the thesis highlights Bukowski's insight into the human condition and shows him as more than just an author of some obscene stories.

All of the abovementioned examinations are brought together in the conclusion to the thesis in a defence to Bukowski's artistic right to create and develop the stories as he chose. Effectively, the prevailing argument rests on the fact that many critics were to overcome with emphasis on Bukowski's personal believes and his use of language that they often overlooked the deeper meaning in his fiction, and that is exactly what this thesis aims to combat.

Key words: Charles Bukowski, gender, chauvinism, politics, artistic freedom

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

The aim of this introductory chapter is to present the objective of the thesis, its core texts and the individual parts forming the thesis. Firstly, I will elaborate on the main objective of this thesis, which is to avert biased presumptions on Bukowski's views, by drawing focus to the written word itself rather than to the political speculation on its meaning. Secondly, Bukowski will be presented in the way Peter Jennings described him in his introduction, as "[a] prolific author [...] with an emphasis on the ordinary lives of poor Americans."<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, before proceeding to the structure of the thesis, it is necessary to mention that throughout this work, Russell Harrison's *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* will often be used, as they are perceived as an objective (concerned with numerous themes in Bukowski's work, not merely with sex and vulgarity) view on Bukowski's work. The focus will be in particular on his essay *Sex, Women and Irony* and the introduction to the collection of the essays. This works very well with the aim of the thesis, as Harrison moved past the traditional criticisms and focused on Bukowski's writing, quoting extensively from Bukowski and analysing the messages. Similarly to Harrison, the aim of the thesis is to show, that Bukowski was wrongly unappreciated. Paul Clements summarises this idea as: "[...] for Harrison, the reason that Bukowski has not acquired the reputation he should have is because he wrote about the American working class and criticized the work ethic."<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 Thesis introduction

Although Charles Bukowski wrote works of fiction, the "Anti-Bukowski brigade" chastises his works for being politically incorrect and in particular for being "a chauvinist of utmost proportions."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Bukowski is often denounced for being not only chauvinistic, but also narcissistic, or misogynous; and the true value of freedom of art and fiction vanish in the process. In the light of this, it is Bukowski's work that is placed in the centre of this thesis. Although, it is hard to argue that literature is completely separated from

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Jennings, *The Wit and Wisdom of Charles Bukowski, Charles Bukowski Quotes*, (Peter Jennings: Kindle Edition, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Clements, *Charles Bukowski, Outsider, Literature and the Beat Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3

<sup>3</sup> Aubrey Malone, *The Hunchback of East Hollywood*, (Manchester: Headpress, 2003), 111

the political life (as for example, the early outrage against Bukowski came right in the time of the “second wave” of women’s liberation<sup>4</sup>), Bukowski’s work does form a part of literary canon and therefore it should be judged on the grounds of artistic and literary merits. Ignoring the artistic merit of his work means ignoring the fact that Bukowski’s work underwent many years of development and change.<sup>5</sup> The particular two works chosen for this thesis are *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* and *Women*. These two texts were chosen for several reasons, as will be explained later. Yet the main reason for choosing such different texts was the fact that both of them illuminate perfectly the development in the artistic expression over a period of time. The analysis of these individual texts will show that irrespective of the alleged animosity of Bukowski towards women in general, he could not have written the works as he did without using the female characters as he did to deliver his message. Essentially, this thesis is a defence of Bukowski’s artistic right to write and develop the stories as he chose, irrespective of what he may have himself believed. The entire thesis, as much as this introduction, aims to show a broken person in a broken world, who did not intend for the reader to identify with either him personally or his characters, much less with the female characters.

This line of thought was in particular developed and followed by Harrison. His is the only serious literary study concerned with Bukowski as other critics do not bother to ascribe Bukowski any value (see above mentioned point on identification with the characters). Similarly to Harrison’s views, this thesis aims to show that Bukowski wanted to reveal a side of America not appreciated by most citizens, the dark side. Unfortunately, that back-fired and resulted in the rejection of Bukowski’s oeuvre: “dismissed as a cynic, a chronic malcontent, an individual who has failed to ‘adjust.’”<sup>6</sup>

### *1.1.1 Thesis structure*

Having briefly introduced the thesis, the next four subchapters of the introduction will look as follows:

Firstly, the discussion will dive deeper into the reasons for choosing the two core texts, *Notes* and *Women* and this will link to the core pillars of this thesis - sexuality and

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<sup>4</sup> Russell Harrison, *Against the American Dream; Essays on Charles Bukowski*, (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1994), 184

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, 184-185

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, 12- 15

language. These must be analyzed within Bukowski's oeuvre, as the critics are most often concerned with Bukowski's usage of sex in his writing. The reason why sexuality and language are dealt with as a joint topic is because Bukowski was criticised for being both, crude in his expression and unnecessarily sexual. Then the discussion will dive deeper into Bukowski's background, primary female influences, and potential categorisation as a *Beat* writer help to illuminate the complexity of Bukowski's work. Having done this, this thesis will proceed to the actual detailed analysis of the two core texts. Lastly, the conclusion, will summarise the main thoughts from each and every part.

### *1.1.2 Introduction to the chosen texts*

Even though greatly different, *Notes* and *Women* share crude and liberated sexual expression and language. This chapter aims to explain the reasons for choosing such different texts for a single analysis.

*Notes of a Dirty Old Man* were published nine years before *Women*, in the year 1969 by Essex House and caused immediately a wave of accusations of chauvinism. At the same time *Notes* remain being work that made Bukowski more popular than any of his previous works. The collection was chosen to show that Bukowski intended to merely write and express freely through fiction. Furthermore, this collection is an example of Bukowski's work that must be read in its complexity as a piece of fiction, even though Bukowski did partially project his own experience into individual stories. This complexity is already to be found in the various genres, which are to be found in the collection. Bukowski goes from stories to essays as far as to something resembling pages from a diary. This melange of genres also contributes to audience's misconception of reality and fiction. Meanwhile the plot of the collection is marginal.

Another reason for analysing *Notes* in this thesis is to show Bukowski's resentments towards being categorized as a mere sex writer, this early in his career. *Notes* were chosen for this thesis mainly to show that at this stage of Bukowski's artistic expression, it is more important than ever to distinguish whose story is told. The women's role, in the stories, is often disparaged by a man driven by a sexual desire. Nonetheless, if these male characters are observed, their whole lives depend on women, who prevail over them. The analysis of *Notes* will disprove the idea of Bukowski writing mere sex stories and degrading women to sex objects. As for example David S. Calonne does, who talks about the melange of themes, in the

following way: “[...] mixing the Eastern European tradition of dark psyches at war with themselves and others with cool, subversive American style informed by all the counter-cultural themes and obsessions of the sixties and seventies.”<sup>7</sup> This thesis will aim to show that there was more to the characters and stories. Furthermore, *Notes* will be used as an example of the beginning of the complexity of Bukowski’s work.

As *Notes* is a representative of an earlier work, *Women* 1978 was chosen as it represents Bukowski’s later, more mature work which raised another wave of feminist accusations against Bukowski for being a narcissist. The analysis of *Women* will show that similarly to *Notes* Bukowski aimed to express and to share his experiences concerning, among others, women. Hence *Women* was also chosen for its complexity. This thesis will introduce the complexity of *Women* as well as Bukowski’s growing outrage for being misinterpreted as a writer who tends to degrade women, which shows that Bukowski did not aim to cause any offence with this work neither. This thesis aims to show based on the chosen texts that Bukowski is often misunderstood because of the crude language and harsh images which nonetheless do not intend to degrade any gender, they merely want to show the world in the way Bukowski saw it. *Women* is a text chosen because of its more obvious complexity which makes an easier case for Bukowski who was not a chauvinist.

Hence both texts were chosen to show Bukowski’s complexity in thinking. Given that the two works are ridden with sexual stories, in order to analyse the texts, we must first look at the way language was used to depict sex.

## 1.2 Language, violence and sexuality within Bukowski’s oeuvre

This sub-chapter is concerned with Bukowski and his work, analyzed in the context of language and sexuality. Consequently, this chapter aims to show that Bukowski was trying to hint at the true meaning behind his stories; and explains that the characters in his fiction merely happened to be female, in a sense that their gender was of no relevance.

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<sup>7</sup> David Stephen Calonne, *More Notes of a Dirty Old Man: Uncollected Columns*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 2013), 228

### 1.2.1 Sexuality

One critic wrote: “Bukowski’s antics with women, his thoughts about them, are one vast and sniggering cliché. He has nothing to tell us about them because; I’m convinced he knows nothing about them.”<sup>8</sup> This is why Bukowski and his views are still such a fascinating subject for the literati, the need to understand him prevails and his perception of women shall be explored in more detail below. Bukowski wrote extensively and very openly about sex, this appalled many but before this sub-chapter addresses sexuality in Bukowski’s work, let us consider that crude attitude toward sexuality may have been Bukowski’s expression on the society. It must be done so as most critics concentrate merely on Bukowski’s treatment of sex and women, without addressing the fact that Bukowski predominantly wrote about: “the issue of social class, the critique of the American Dream [...]”<sup>9</sup> This attitude towards the common man as a social class is one of the aspects of Bukowski’s work greatly unappreciated by his critics. As for example James R. Hepworth generalizes Bukowski as: “at his best, Bukowski gives expression to the vitality and the aspirations of the common man. At his worst, he’s a vulgar anti-intellectual who combines aggression with conformity and reverts to the crudest forms of frontier psychology [his] relationship to literature is parasitic.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, the simple language reflects the simple minds of his protagonists, who are the common man. The lower social class could not have been portrayed honestly, had flowery language been used for the most basic of human activities, e.g. sex. Bukowski wrote as he did and in the manner in which he did because he believed: “[an] intellectual says a simple thing in a hard way. An artist says a hard thing in a simple way.”<sup>11</sup> Bukowski liberates and praises pure sexuality, which is a subject rarely discussed openly. He liberates the sexuality through giving a simple voice to his characters by using very basic language (see discussion on *Notes* and *Women* below).

Having considered Bukowski’s portrayal of sex within the relevant social class, let us look at why Bukowski’s depiction of sex and relationships is considered: “either funny or offensive, depending on one's taste.”<sup>12</sup>

Before the discussion can proceed, we must introduce Hank. Bukowski had a reoccurring character through his works – Hank Chinaski, the author’s literary “alter-ego.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Harrison, 183

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, 11

<sup>10</sup> James R. Hepworth, “Love Is a Dog From Hell: Charles Bukowski as Parasite, Redskin Poet, and Sentimental Slob,” *Gramercy Review* 2 (1978), 57-63

<sup>11</sup> Charles Bukowski qtd. by Peter Jennings, *The Wit and Wisdom of Charles Bukowski; Charles Bukowski Quotes*, (Peter Jennings: Kindle edition, 2014)

<sup>12</sup> David Charlson, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*, (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 54

It is indisputable that both Bukowski and Chinaski are obsessed with sex and women. Nevertheless, this obsession must not be misinterpreted as hatred because both sexes are treated in the same way. Let us therefore not forget what Bukowski said about his characters: “I treat men worse every time [...] [it] is about making mistakes in a messy world.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, when Bukowski mocks Chinaski, who is far from a “virile he-man figure”<sup>15</sup> and is frequently impotent, he does so in order to show Chinaski’s absurd paranoia that his woman might be unfaithful to him. Just as Bukowski is willing to expose such a discrete and sensitive topic, he is also willing to address other issues, which the society is not so comfortable discussing openly. Essentially, nothing seems to have been “holy” to Bukowski, so much so that he would not stop at a subject on ethical grounds. As he put it himself: “[a] man’s either an artist or a flat tire and what he does need not answer to anything, I’d say, except the energy of his own creation.”<sup>16</sup>

If one accepts that everything about Bukowski’s works was art and that no one should therefore demand answers or justifications from him, then it is possible that he was never a chauvinist, as that is merely a label the critics had put on his expression, which ought not to have been labelled in the first place. In fact, it can be argued that labelling an apolitical writer with a political label, for “chauvinism” is a word used for those, who do not fit the politically correct society, well that undermines the artistic expression, because it is a very narrow paradigm of perception. It is necessary to understand that sexual relations with women are merely one part of Bukowski’s oeuvre. Some believe that the misconception of Bukowski may be caused by wrong editing of Bukowski’s oeuvre. Doren Robbins proposes that more careful editing of Bukowski’s oeuvre is required:

*Bukowski’s less poetic alcoholic manias, the really comically lame machismo inflatedness, and general idealization of the raunchy might be edited out one day and forgotten as eccentricities [...] Maybe they won’t. At worst they are harmless malfunctions which are a small portion of a larger and stronger body of work.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Clements, *Charles Bukowski, Outsider, Literature and the Beat Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 45

<sup>14</sup> *Bukowski: Born into This*, Dir. John Dullaghan, Prod. Diane Markrow, John McCormick, Magnolia Pictures, 2003, 1:16:50

<sup>15</sup> Howard Sounes, *Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, (Edinburgh, GB: Rebel Inc., 1998), 107

<sup>16</sup> Jules Smith, *Art, Survival and So Forth: the Poetry of Charles Bukowski*, (Detroit; Gale Research Center, 1987), 153

<sup>17</sup> Doren Robbins, “Drinking Wine in the Slaughterhouse with Septiagenerian Stew: for Bukowski at 71,” *Onthebus* 3-4 (1991), 285

As the last comment shows, the critics did not only comment on Bukowski's work, they also discussed Bukowski's personal life. He is often criticised on the grounds of his rich sexual life which leads many critics to a simplified chauvinistic reading of his work.<sup>18</sup> One must keep in mind that Bukowski did not aim for the reader to identify with his work, much less so with his characters; he wrote ninety-three percent autobiographical content, where the rest was improved upon by fiction.<sup>19</sup> It is as though, he simply wrote what he knew, rather than inventing fiction, where his readers could identify with inventive themes. The male protagonist of the novels, who tends to objectify women, subverts the objectification of women into depicting the male protagonist (himself) as a male chauvinist.<sup>20</sup>

With the growing malcontent accusations by many, Bukowski, even though oblivious to such commentaries at first, commented openly on what he intended with his work: "All these poems aren't about sex. I don't fuck all the time. I don't think about sex all the time. I don't hate women and I don't hate men and I don't children and I don't hate dogs ... Well, there's certain dogs I might dislike – when I step in their shit, you know."<sup>21</sup>

On the grounds of the above-mentioned, it is plausible that Bukowski is rather questioning the sexist and chauvinistic attitudes. On the other hand, it could be argued that Bukowski simply did not understand women and could therefore not be hostile toward them, at least not intentionally.

### 1.2.2 Language and violence

The critics and feminists irritated by Bukowski's anti-literary, anti-intellectual approach overlook the true meaning of the text and its relation to the interesting historical period because of an unsophisticated language that does not attract critic's eye twice; yet, it is only through the use of words that writers can express their sentiments, including matters related to sex and sexuality. According to Adam Kirsch, for example, in a 2005 article in *The New Yorker*, Bukowski is: "easy to love, especially for novice readers [but] for more demanding readers, he remains . . . hard to admire."<sup>22</sup> As the language is condescending at times, the satirical tone behind it is often forgotten. Hence, one obtains a reduced meaning of characters (female characters especially) by misreading the books. Language is one of many

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<sup>18</sup>Harrison, 11-22

<sup>19</sup>Sounes, 7-11

<sup>20</sup>Harrison, 210-215

<sup>21</sup>Charles Bukowski, "Hello It's Good to Be Back," 00:01:12 – 00:01:42

<sup>22</sup>Adam Kirsch, "Smashed; Books", *The New Yorker* 81, (2005)

means of Bukowski's expressing his opinion on the American situation (as mentioned above), as well as on women and men. Arguably, language is one of the elements that contributed to a misunderstanding of Bukowski, a man who addressed directly his era without any camouflage, and should be therefore analyzed in greater depth. As Bukowski endeavours for a broken, real portrayal of himself (generally) at the very bottom of the American society, the harsh language, which he uses allows for a lot of flexibility in artistic expression. Such harsh and unpleasant tone, both coming from Bukowski and his characters is however not aimed against any gender. In order to fully comprehend Bukowski's stylistic choices, Julian Smith's provides a useful commentary:

*The tools in his craftsman's bag are used to create an impression of artless spontaneity. How is this textual illusion obtained? By the use of the first-person singular; a vigorous street language with no recourse to dictionaries, complex words or intellectual concepts; by the use of first names or real names as though the reader were an acquaintance; by the cultivation of a no-bullshit approach, as though the speaker were too busy telling the truth to dilute it with high cultural values; and most effectively by jokes and asides to the reader... Bukowski flavours the lexical stew of Notes with misspellings, ungrammatical constructions, sentences with no verbs, repetitions, split infinitives, much slang and swearing, sexual innuendo and other linguistic ambiguities that enable him to splice sexuality, violence, nastiness and humour. By deliberately leaving in the text the sort of grammatical confusions common in speech but usually suppressed in written English, Bukowski is indicating that he wants to align with spoken rather than written conventions [...].<sup>23</sup>*

This idea of the importance of a clear language, even though repeatedly contemptuous can be summarized as:

*His language, and the reality his language conveys (which is an internationally recognizable language and reality of most of the urban world), is not so much a defence against, of the prevailing value systems, but a naked display of what it is like to be a conscious victim within a society that fails with virtually unrelieved aggression for those who are not rich, or can offer services to the rich. [...] everything is allowed.<sup>24</sup>*

Finally, it is obvious that Bukowski used such language in order to be clear about his message. Furthermore, his characters use such simple and earthy language as it is like them

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<sup>23</sup> Julian Smith, "Charles Bukowski and the Avant-Garde," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 5/3, 1985, 56-59

<sup>24</sup> Robbins, 282-285

and it is a voice well known to them. Hence, he is addressing people living in a society with broken values.

### 1.3 The development and the context of Bukowski's oeuvre

Having established the objective of this thesis as well as the fact that Bukowski deserves not to be omitted as a mere vulgar person condescending toward women, this thesis will place Bukowski in the context of his era. It will be done in light of some significant facts from Bukowski's life as well as his contribution to literature outlining the complexity of his work. Furthermore, as women are the ever-present theme of this thesis, the primary female inspiration of Bukowski, his mother, will be considered shortly as she is Bukowski's benchmark when judging women.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the context of Bukowski's oeuvre as well as some facts from his life are presented in order to have more factors influencing Bukowski's work as it underwent many years of change. Please note that although this sub-chapter discusses Bukowski's influences, it will link to how Bukowski expressed these, namely through his literary character of Hank Chinaski.

Let us begin with some contextualising facts concerning Bukowski. Charles Bukowski was an American writer of German descent. Few authors have caused such uproar as he did, so much so, that he was referred to as the "laureate of American lowlife."<sup>26</sup> Bukowski's work undertook many years of change. He started by contributing to small presses within the years 1950s and 1960s. It was after the defeat in the Vietnam War, in the sixties, when Bukowski: "appeared on the scene to successfully win the audience's approval with his, unvarnished, all-too direct poetry."<sup>27</sup> Sixties were also the era when Bukowski returned to his lengthy job as a letter filing clerk in Los Angeles. It was in the year 1969 that Bukowski quit this job and wrote his first novel *Post Office*, which is as the title hints, based on the previous experience. This was also the year, when Bukowski started contributing to Black Sparrow Press. This publishing house published over decades of years Bukowski's greatest novels as for example: 1975 *Factotum*, 1982 *Ham on Rye*, 1994 *Pulp*. Even though Bukowski's body of work was truly large; he created about ten collections of poetry, five

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<sup>25</sup> Gerry Locklin, "Notes on Bukowski," *Charles Bukowski a Sure Bet*, (Malborough: Water Row Books, 2013),1

<sup>26</sup> Iyer Pico, "Celebrities Who Travel Well," *Time*, Retrieved April 24, 2015

<sup>27</sup> Abel Debritto, *Charles Bukowski, King of the Underground: From Obscurity to Literary Icon*,(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 145

novels and five short-story collections, he did not become recognized nor appreciated in neither of previously mentioned genres. To be precise, America appreciated Bukowski less than Europe by refusing him any kind of serious critical scholarly response.<sup>28</sup> By the end of 1970s Bukowski achieved a true European reputation. It was in his native Germany though, where he became one of the most published authors by 1980s.<sup>29</sup>

It is highly important to discuss the many years of change Bukowski's work underwent as it was also influenced by many social changes. Harrison discusses the idea that Bukowski's ideas of women were formed in a different era than they were published, with the following results:

*First, chauvinistic traits were more likely to be perceived as salient and evoke stronger reactions in the context of the raised and rising consciousness of the 1970s and 1980s than even more chauvinist books of his contemporaries which had, however, been published earlier. Secondly, the fact that Bukowski's books were being written well after the start of the women's movement meant that that movement affected them as it hadn't others.*<sup>30</sup>

Having placed Bukowski in the context, it is necessary to consider his first female influence. It must be done, as Bukowski was surrounded by women his whole life and tended to be influenced by them. From this follows that the primary female inspiration for Bukowski was, as for many other authors, his mother.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, a childhood without love and full of fear made Bukowski talk about his childhood as: "A twisted childhood has fucked me up."<sup>32</sup> The German origins certainly do not justify the cruelty of his father; nevertheless his mother rather blindly followed her husband instead of helping her son.<sup>33</sup> Bukowski often spoke of the physical beatings he took from his father, even though as time went on, he accepted the idea of learning about pain through the ordeal.<sup>34</sup> Katharine Bukowski (Charles' mother) behaved as shamefully as her husband; she witnessed the horrors (Charles's beating) in silence.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gerald Locklin, *Charles Bukowski: A Sure Bet*, (Sadbury, MA: Water Row Press, 1995), 31-32

<sup>29</sup> Harrison, 11

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, 19

<sup>31</sup> Howard Sounes, *Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, (Edinburgh, GB: Rebel Inc., 1998), 7-11

<sup>32</sup> Charles Bukowski qtd. by Howard Sounes, 10

<sup>33</sup> this can be seen in some of his poetry, notably the pieces about his mother, such as "A Smile to Remember", where he even considers his mother as being "my mother, poor fish", who wished him happiness, but was as hopeless as a fish.

<sup>34</sup> *Bukowski: Born into This*, 1:00:50

<sup>35</sup> Barry Miles, *Charles Bukowski*, (Virgin Books; Reprint Edition, 2010), 10-15

These may be the origins of a lifetime of distrust to women as Katharine Bukowski was the primary unfortunate female role model for Bukowski. This strong childhood influence became the benchmark – for the decades to follow, full of women with his mother’s characteristics, more precisely, with the worst he knew of his mother. This may be one of the reasons why in the first part of Bukowski’s “productive” life women are most often portrayed through their relationships with Hank, Bukowski’s ‘alter-ego’. Hence, at this stage of Bukowski’s career, women are undeniably dependent on their relationship with Chinaski.<sup>36</sup> Bukowski’s relationship to his mother helps to understand the distrust Bukowski may have formed towards women. Nonetheless, he could hardly imagine his life without them and prioritized them in his own way: “There is always one woman to save you from another and as that woman saves you she makes ready to destroy.”<sup>37</sup>

### *1.3.1 Charles Bukowski and the Beat generation*

As this thesis touched upon the many years of change, which Bukowski’s work underwent, this subchapter will begin with the importance of these numerous changes in the context of post-war literary world. Some of the classical contexts will be discussed. It is impossible to contextualise Bukowski’s oeuvre definitively though. It can place him among the writers who drank heavily, for example. It is Stan Theis who introduces the idea of the correlation between heavy drinking and great writing:

*[...] more than a little pride in having become the best alcoholic possible while still preserving his ability to write effectively. He has no regrets about any of it. In fact, he relishes the possibility of being part of the lineage of the best writer-drinkers: O’Neill, Faulkner, Hemingway, London and others. Bukowski knows the strange and desperate lives drunks live better than most. And for him, as for Chinaski, the booze can only free up the typewriter keys for better service.*<sup>38</sup>

This classification seems to be rather romanticized; therefore this thesis will contextualise Bukowski in consideration of the historical era, not his drinking. Bukowski is traditionally associated with two major post-war movements, namely with the Beats and the Confessionals. It is indisputable that Confessionals influenced Bukowski’s poetry. The problem of the categorisation of Bukowski is as follows:

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<sup>36</sup> Harrison, 159

<sup>37</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Love is a Dog from Hell: Poems*, (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1977 ),172

<sup>38</sup> Stan Theis, “Bukowski’s Hollywood,” (Los Angeles; Enclitic, 1989), 93

[it] would be difficult to prove that Bukowski was a Beat, a confessional, or a staunch supporter of the counterculture ideology. [...] Bukowski was indeed an outsider who was not interested in school of any kind. [...] Yet, as most biographies and studies point out, Bukowski's attitude, by his own admission, resembled that of Robinson Jeffers, one of the very few contemporary authors that he ever praised in print.<sup>39</sup>

To return to the term "outsider" Debritto uses, the idea of other outsiders influencing Bukowski comes to mind. It was in the 1950s that Bukowski discovers a source of inspiration in Dostoyevsky, Hamsu and especially Céline.<sup>40</sup>

Another possible categorisation of Bukowski is among the post war "small press movement": "Charles Bukowski was a product of the small press movement, an unparalleled phenomenon in the so-called little magazines that proliferated in the United States during the 1960s."<sup>41</sup> It is so, as Bukowski contributed for many years to newspapers as Open City, for example. Meanwhile, Charlson recognizes the difficulty of any definite categorisation of Bukowski and applies the term "Dirty Realism": "Raymond Carver is the most famous and respected practitioner of what has come to be called 'Dirty Realism,' and that is probably as close as critical terminology gets to describing Bukowski's work."<sup>42</sup>

Having considered some of possible categorisations of Bukowski, the thesis will proceed to discussing the relation of Bukowski and the Beats. It is impossible to discuss Bukowski without mentioning the generation leading the counterculture of the era – the Beats generation. The spontaneity of this generation can be described as:

[they] championed spontaneity as one of its central defining values. Wanting to experience and express life as directly as possible, the Beats promoted numerous spontaneous art forms and social behaviours, ranging from stream-of-consciousness confessional writing and improvised jazz poetry performances to spur-of-the-moment road trips and uninhibited sexual and drug experimentation.<sup>43</sup>

As the Beats can hardly be separated from politics, politics of the era and Bukowski's political attitude will be discussed. Although Bukowski was not interested in

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<sup>39</sup> Debritto, 23

<sup>40</sup> David Charlson, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*, (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2006), 108

<sup>41</sup> Debritto, 1

<sup>42</sup> Charlson, 260

<sup>43</sup> William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*, (Santa Barbara; ABC-CLIO, 2005),

politics to the same extent as the Beats, and he was rather bored with his experiences of life on the road (unlike the Beats),<sup>44</sup> the genre made Bukowski's career partially possible, because the Beats widened the taste. On the other hand, as someone who did not intend to be political, Bukowski was judged by the same standard as the Beats, hence perhaps, the hostile attacks on his chauvinism.

However, before actually touching upon the relationship between the Beats and Bukowski, it is crucial to discuss the development of Bukowski's work in its entirety. This has to be done to show that Bukowski's works underwent many changes throughout time and that (as will be shown later) Bukowski rejected the literary movement, although he is often linked to them.<sup>45</sup>

Harrison refers to Kate Millett's historical placing of the women's movement. He does so in order to show that if one agrees with her that the years 1930 – 1960 represented “a counter-revolutionary period with respect to women's liberation”<sup>46</sup>, then it brings us to the previously mentioned idea of when Bukowski's ideas were formed and published: “part of his (Bukowski's) boyhood, all of his adolescence, and part of his maturity took place during an era of reaction against women's gains, while his novels were written and published in the middle of the ‘second wave’ of women's liberation.”<sup>47</sup> This explains the fact that chauvinistic attributes to Bukowski's work were more apparent and evoked more substantial reactions as a consequence of the 1970s and the 1980s sociological movements' e.g. political and ecological awareness and feminism. In fact, Bukowski's early works were created during the second wave of feminism, which had in its focal point the political independence of women.<sup>48</sup> So, it stands to reason that the aggression against anything that was not aimed at empowering women, would have been stronger at that time than ever. Karin Huffzky, one of the earlier critics, arguably wielding these exaggerated criticisms: “In his underground society he [Bukowski] describes a purely masculine world, in which women are hardly more than splashes of a puddle through which hardy fellows traipse, mostly drunk, or in which they wallow.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, if one were to give merit to Bukowski's literary works, then it could also be argued that Bukowski merely questioned attitudes towards women through his artistic

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<sup>44</sup> Malone, 8-10

<sup>45</sup> Lawlor, 27

<sup>46</sup> Harrison, 184

<sup>47</sup> Harrison, 184

<sup>48</sup> Harrison, 183

<sup>49</sup> Harrison, 214

expression and that by ignoring the complexity of his works, such critics as Huffzky oversimplified the context.

Let us begin with the 1960s, which was a great period of change in the USA. The Sixties were more than a period of counterculture and the social reforms; it was the era breaking social taboos namely racism and sexism. The Sixties are also the era of *Notes* (published 1969) and the 70's are the era of *Women* (published 1978). It seems that the 60' provided a greater individual freedom, which the 50' did not provide. With this idea in mind, it is easier to understand the emergence of a rich underground scene. This underground scene was one of many means of reaction of the USA entering (among others) the Vietnam War. Whereas the Beat generation, Allen Ginsberg namely, was the leading force of the counterculture, Bukowski did not participate, as would seem at the first sight. Duval goes as far as expressing the inability of Bukowski being a part of the active political life: "It was impossible for him to speak on behalf of others, on behalf of the people, because he was a man of the crowd [...]." <sup>50</sup> Generally speaking, the Beats represent the "new"; the force that helps the progress while leaving the mainstream in the past.

This finally brings us to Bukowski's relationship with the Beats. Charles Bukowski disparaged the Beats, even though there were many similar aspects between them. Bukowski seems almost violent when speaking about the members of the Beat generation: "Pros seem to turn to pricks, finally. See Mailer, Genet, Burroughs, Ginsberg, who the hell else? showing at the Chicago Yippie thing. As giants of Humanity? Bullshit. As Giants of Publicity." <sup>51</sup> This anger seems to be caused by the fact that Bukowski could not stand intellectuals, who according to him, have an opinion on everything while forgetting the everyman: "I've seen too many intellects who must speak diamonds every time they open their mouths. I get tired of battling for each space of air for the mind. [...]I find that I must return to my cave." <sup>52</sup> It seems that one of the things that brought Bukowski pleasure was to mock the contemporary culture with its representatives. Nonetheless, Bukowski did comment on the current political, economical and social situation but he did so in his semi-fictional works, not with the real deeds. This idea could be concluded in Sounes' words:

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<sup>50</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats*, Trans. Alison Ardron., (Northville: Sun Dog, 2002), 63

<sup>51</sup> Bukowski, *Screams from the Balcony: Selected Letters 1960-1970*, (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1995), 339

<sup>52</sup> Bukowski, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1969), 21

*Bukowski liked to mock the counter-culture, having little time for drugs, pop music or radical politics. But many of the young writers and publishers who liked his work were deeply involved in these things and Bukowski was inevitably drawn into what was happening in the late 1960s.*<sup>53</sup>

A person who mocks counter-culture in the USA is often someone who diverges from the American Dream. While the Beat writers did try to redefine the definition of the American Dream, Bukowski: “denies the efficacy of the American Dream.”<sup>54</sup> Bukowski does so in two ways: firstly, by degrading the routinized work (known so well to most of the Americans) and secondly, by his anti-consumerist approach. Essentially, it can be said that: “rejection and ignoring of Bukowski is a result of many Americans’ reluctance to acknowledge the fact that ours is a class society, something Bukowski’s work constantly reminds us of.”<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Bukowski remained (on the first sight) greatly apolitical. Hence, when comparing Bukowski and some great Beats such as Ginsberg or Burroughs, it is obvious, that Bukowski lacked a great revolutionary commitment. Duval comprehends completely this idea: “On one side there was the constellation of Beat writers [...] On the other side there was a loner, a rebel for all causes, a total dissident even within the counterculture.”<sup>56</sup> Despite the differences between the Beats and Bukowski, there is one indisputable similarity: “The Beats were more upmarket; bums, but heavenly bums. They, too, put their hand to a range of jobs, led a bohemian lifestyle and spent time in prison.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Sounes, 83

<sup>54</sup> Harrison, 13

<sup>55</sup> Harrison, 13

<sup>56</sup> Duval, 24

<sup>57</sup> Duval, 24

## CHAPTER II

### Notes of a Dirty Old Man

#### 2.1 Notes of a Dirty Old Man – Introduction

This introductory chapter to *Notes* aims to firstly introduce Bukowski's intention behind this controversial collection and emphasizes the fact that *Notes* is a work of fiction. Furthermore it will outline the complexity of the work through expressing Bukowski's opinion on political affairs, among others, which is also to be found in the collection. Nonetheless, the true aim of this chapter is to explain the exceeding usage of sexuality in *Notes* and finally this chapters aims to show a complex image of both sexes in this collection.

As *Notes* caused many chauvinistic accusations of Bukowski, one would expect that Bukowski's intention behind this collection was to shock. Nonetheless, the truth could not be further away. At this rather early stage of Bukowski's professional career, he cared little of what others thought of his work, or more precisely of his persona. Thus he did not aim to shock with this collection he merely wanted to write: "[...] I am just an old guy with some dirty stories. Writing for newspaper, which, like me, might die tomorrow."<sup>58</sup> This statement, taken from the foreword of *Notes*, concludes Bukowski's intention for his *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*. If taken out of context, no discussion about his being characterized as a dirty old man would be needed. However, words preceding this statement help to clarify the meaning: Bukowski claims, in the succinct introduction that nothing is as natural to him as writing about whatever he wishes after being given absolute artistic freedom from the newspaper Open City. He does so though, not in order to seek help or from such similar attention-seeking desires, he simply wishes to express himself and to leave something to be remembered by.<sup>59</sup> Other short stories, even though still fictional, represent Bukowski's opinion not on gender, but rather on political affairs that influence most strongly the day's society from his view point, as well as his personal opinions on art and culture. One of such stories: "Unsigned" will be analyzed later with other stories.

As the stories were originally published in a newspaper, they did not have a title. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this thesis, the three stories chosen for a closer analysis have

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<sup>58</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 7

<sup>59</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, Foreword

been attributed with a possible name, for the sake of a better orientation within the thesis. The previously mentioned (chronologically third) “Unsigned” was attributed with such title as it is some woman’s signature, who sends the story protagonist Bukowski a vulgar letter. This particular story was chosen for a closer analysis to show that one of the themes in the collection, besides sex, is the way Bukowski expresses his opinion on society. Chronologically first story “Moss and Anderson” got its title based on the main protagonists. Another possible title to consider is “Sharing the Prejudice of Experience”, as the only moment when the protagonists truly open themselves, is when romanticizing in their own way. This particular story was chosen firstly, to discuss the dullness of other male protagonists than Chinaski’s. Secondly, to demonstrate that Bukowski makes his characters aware of the future misogynous accusations. Finally, as this thesis emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between reality and fiction, the analysis of the story enabled to consider a particular projection of Bukowski into the story. Chronologically second story chosen for a closer analysis is called “Pink Panties”. The title was based on the reoccurring motive of pink panties, which appears in the story. This story was chosen for similar reasons as the previous. It is yet another example of men lost desperately in women’s world. Furthermore, as the main protagonist is an author called Bukowski, a possible closeness to the actual author appeared.

Nonetheless, the most often asked question linked to *Notes* nonetheless, why is there so much sexuality and is it really all about sex? The clearest explanation is to be found in Bukowski’s words from an interview with Duval:

*Well, you see, we go through phases of writing. For a while, I wrote about sex, I explored it. Much of it was done when I first started writing. Because I had to make money fast, because I didn’t have any. I was fifty years old, and I quit my job at the post office, and I was in that room in Hollywood. So I drank and I wrote sex stories for the sex magazines, who paid very well at that time. [...] So I made my living writing these short stories for the sex magazines and they were very nice to me, the checks arrived continually, bing, bing, bing, and I kept writing these sex stories. The only thing I did... You know, most sex stories in the sex magazines were (with a long suggestive tone): HE HAD A BIG THING, AND HE STUCK IT IN AND HE PUT HIS HAND ON HER ASS, etc. So, I didn’t like that. I put sex in it, but I would put a story around it, to please myself. [...] So this is how the sex stories came about.*

*Even though they have sex, you will find sex is not the story; sex is in there, but there is another story going on. So it was never sex-obsessed. But I had to put sex in to sell the story.*<sup>60</sup>

It is amazing that Bukowski despises that early in his profession the idea of being merely the dirty writer, who knows nothing but sex and rather appreciates the subject for its inherently literary potential. That is why it is extremely important to always consider the whole story, as presented by Bukowski to the reader; the sex story as well as the actual story. Nonetheless Bukowski's indecent imagery sometimes appears to be on the verge of becoming misogynistic and sexist as if the whole point is to degrade women, but the themes, topics and the final created picture give an interesting, complex image of both sexes and the era. Hence, Bukowski's usage of the theme of females and sex, in the stories is not a sheer reflection of a filthy and vulgar persona, nor is it intended to be read in such a way. Thus an open mind helps the reader to appreciate the numerous themes appearing in *Notes*; there is sex, romance, relationships and ever-present women.

### *2.1.1 Reality and fiction*

As the previous subchapter introduced Bukowski's literary intention of *Notes*, this subchapter will follow in emphasizing the necessity of differentiating the reality, hence the world and opinions of Charles Bukowski from fiction that is the world he creates for his characters. The two main arguments chosen for this subchapter are: firstly, the necessity of differentiating between Bukowski and his protagonists and secondly, the original appearance of the columns in a newspaper. These two crucial facts were chosen as a support argument for *Notes*, in order to clarify the reason of the general misunderstanding of *Notes*.

In order not to diminish the stories as a vulgar expression of a "dirty old man" one must keep in mind that they were always intended to be read as fiction, even though biographical traces of Bukowski's life can be found there. Howard Sounes explained Bukowski's fictional intentions in connection with a later work, nonetheless his opinion is also applicable on *Notes*:

*This is a work of fiction and any resemblance between the characters and persons living or dead is purely coincidental [...] While it is usually a mistake to assume that people in novels are facsimiles of people in life, this disclaimer is disingenuous [...]. Bukowski's*

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<sup>60</sup> Duval, 20

*working method had always been to create characters based closely on himself and those around him [...].*<sup>61</sup>

The greatest misconception about Bukowski's true intention in *Notes* is caused by the fact that *Notes* represent a mixture of reality and fiction. In order not to make biased presumptions, it is more than ever necessary to understand the difference between the real author and the fictional characters. Hence, as the persona of Charles Bukowski, the author, must be differentiated from the protagonists of the stories, the real life and fiction must be identified correctly. That also means that a firm distinction needs to be drawn between Bukowski's characters' stories and real stories that actually happened to Bukowski. As it will be shown, the male protagonists of the stories carry elements different to those of Bukowski; hence their attitude towards women cannot be unified with Bukowski's.

Another fact, which greatly contributed to the misconception of *Notes* is that these short stories appeared originally in newspaper. As newspaper is traditionally a source of reality for most readers, the original appearance of the columns in a non-fictional source contributed to fiction being mistaken for reality. In order to understand these short stories, it is important to appreciate that even though they were published rather unceremoniously in a newspaper, there are significant differences between the columns published in the newspaper and the actual collection. Naturally, the journalistic style allowed for no dates in the original publication, no titles, and no by-line. Such style is expected by anyone reading the paper and allows them to link the idea straight to the idea of an objectified reporting. Removing these kinds of catchwords (dates, titles etc.) forces the reader to re-evaluate a number of assumptions: mainly the connection between fact and fiction—or more specifically, the connection between the idea that news is generally accepted as a fact, and that fiction ostensibly lacks such type of frame of reference.

## 2.2 "Moss and Anderson"

This subchapter is the first of the three, which will analyze particular stories of *Notes*. Firstly, it is worth mentioning that the name of the story does not appear in the collection and was chosen merely for a better orientation in this thesis. This story was chosen for a closer analysis because of numerous reasons. It will be shown from the very beginning

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<sup>61</sup> Sounes, 7

that one of these reasons for a closer analysis of this story was not the plot itself. Furthermore, a critique of Adam Kirsch will be disproved. Another reason for analysis of this story lies in the necessity of distinguishing between the dull main protagonists of this story. Finally, the way Bukowski projected himself into the story will be presented.

It is necessary to firstly introduce the plot of the story even though it is rather marginal. Nonetheless, it must be done so, for a better understanding, why this particular story was chosen for a closer analysis. The story opens with some talk about a ball game. The discussion of these two friends slides swiftly to the theme of women, through usage of some rather harsh expressions. Nonetheless, they are aware of the incorrectness of their expressions and the whole story finishes with a phone call to their lady friend.

More important than the plot itself is the way the characters present their dull lives. From the very beginning of the story, Moss and Anderson merely drink their beers and complain, without proposing any solutions, over their pathetic situation. These two men, while contemplating about their unfulfilled lives denounce women to sex objects, on the first sight: “well, I’ve got to get some pussy pretty soon or I’ll go goofy.”<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, it is not in order to proclaim publically a harsh, simpleminded opinion on women. It is the way of demonstrating their absolute dependence and undisputable weakness when dealing with women: “‘you know,’ he said, ‘some men just aren’t any good with women. I never was any good with women. the whole things seems a terrible bore, and when it’s over you feel like you really been screwed.’”<sup>63</sup> Another possible name of this story could be “The prejudice of experience”, as both friends are so bad with the ladies that the only time, when they are actually able to provide the reader with their genuine feelings, is when talking about love, not sex: “I had a girl friend once, jesus, it was pure heaven, and no demands on soul or anything like that. [...] she died young. [...] I damn near drank myself to death.”<sup>64</sup> This brings to mind Adam Kirsch’s generalisation of Bukowski’s work: “a highly coloured, morally uncomplicated cartoon of the real thing.”<sup>65</sup> As there is nothing “morally uncomplicated” to Moss’s attitude towards love.

It is remarkable, that the simple language Bukowski gave to Moss and Andersson is enough to convey that they are aware of the political incorrectness, i.e. misogyny, and attempt to rebut their attitude because they recognise that blaming the other sex for their misfortunes

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<sup>62</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 45

<sup>63</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 52

<sup>64</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 46

<sup>65</sup> Adam Kirsch, “Smashed; Books,” *The New Yorker* Vol. 81, no. 4 (2005)

is somehow unjust. It is hence once again necessary to say that male characters' lives sketch women as being more important than men, as they are the focal point of men's attention at all times. This poignant obsessive preoccupation of the male mind even conducted Moss and Anderson to initially accuse women of their afflictions and consequently to admit the absurdity of such an accusation.

It is interesting to consider how Bukowski partially projected himself to the story. The closeness between Bukowski and these characters is when one of them mourns for the loved girl. As it was previously mentioned, Bukowski did not seem to care for many things in his life: he was apolitical, did not care for the accusations of his persona etc. Nonetheless, the only time he showed emotions was when talking either about his daughter or when disappearing from society entirely after the death of his wife.<sup>66</sup> Thereupon, he seems close to Moss who is one of the main protagonists of this story.

### 2.3 "Pink Panties"

It will be yet again shown at the beginning of the story that the plot itself is marginal. The true importance of the story will be portrayed through a paranoid male protagonist. The beauty of this story will be presented through the lowlife of a character, who romanticizes in his own crude way.

The name of this particular story was chosen because of the female character, whose name the male protagonist does not know and to whom he refers as to Pink panties. Let us proceed to the plot of the story. There is very little plot in the story; a writer called Bukowski sees a woman, not properly dressed, parking her car. After their short talk about her husband, who hides the lady's clothes sometimes, this Bukowski takes her to his place. They spent the night together and she borrows his pants. The story opens similarly as "Moss and Anderson", this time, the protagonist denounces a woman, he sees in Hollywood, to a mere pair of pink panties:

*I looked in. there sat this woman. she had on high heels, long dark stockings, blouse, earrings, wedding ring and panties. no skirt, just these light pink panties. I inhaled the morning air. she had this old woman's face and these young big unwrinkled girl's legs and*

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<sup>66</sup> Harrison, 184

*thighs. [...] under the blouse were young girl's breasts too. [...] I stood there watching the whirling of the buttocks under that pink tight sheen.*<sup>67</sup>

This is yet another example of Bukowski's character being obsessed with women, particularly with women's bodies. This male character is not only fascinated with the lady's appearance, he praises her beauty and sexuality in his own crude way throughout the whole story. This time, as the woman does not get a proper name throughout the whole story, it is once again perfectly plausible to accuse the protagonist of being a bare chauvinist. Nonetheless, none of such descriptions should be cut out of the context. The context to consider in this story is: the main protagonist is a classic Bukowski example of the American low life – a writer, probably not so famous, most possibly a drunk dawdling home after a night of drinking in Hollywood. Even such creature tries to romanticize: “love is a way with some meaning; sex is meaning enough.”<sup>68</sup> As in the previous story, the protagonist Bukowski does not generalize the human condition, he simply considers his situation. Hence:

*[...] this is the old pro's line. always pretend to be understanding, even when you are not. women never want sensibility, all they want is a kind of emotional vindictiveness toward somebody else they care for too much. women are basically stupid animals but they concentrate so much and entirely upon the male that they often defeat him while he is thinking of other things.*<sup>69</sup>

The comparison of women to animals is undoubtedly chauvinistic. Nonetheless, when Bukowski's lowlife of a character uses such harsh expression it is done so in order to emphasize the pathetic male character and at the same time his paranoid idea of the alleged superiority of women. Thus the importance of this story is to be found in the paranoia of the male protagonist. This male character predestines the “raison d'être” of the majority of Bukowski's male characters; it is a pathetic circle of emotional investments in women, driven by a constant fear of a rather excessive investment in the beautiful gender, which might nonetheless lead to their infidelity.<sup>70</sup> This pathetic paranoia about women's inherent tendency toward infidelity, sketches women yet again as being more important than men, as they are the focal point of men's attention at all times. Interestingly, one gets a rather profound picture of women or the importance of women for the male protagonist. Meanwhile the male

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<sup>67</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 93

<sup>68</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 93

<sup>69</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 94

<sup>70</sup> Harrison, 201

protagonist lacks any great characteristics, instead he has abounds of- weakness, dishonesty, and sexual uncertainty, if not impotency per se. Hence, neither sex exceeds the other.

#### 2.4 "Unsigned"

This short story was chosen for a closer analysis because of its complexity as out of the three stories it is the one that presents Bukowski's opinion on the American society. Once the vulgar sexual part of the story is not placed at the centre of the story, it presents an interesting opinion on the American society. Furthermore, this story will show that the sex and sexuality are less important for Bukowski than generally assumed. This short story was chosen primarily to show the way Bukowski presents a harsh picture on a man in the USA.

The potential name of this story was based on an anonymous, signed "unsigned", a vulgar letter the protagonist of this story – Bukowski receives. The plot of the story is very simple, as usual. As it was mentioned the protagonist is also an author called Bukowski, but this time he is closer to the real Charles Bukowski, as he even deals with the idea of what people think of him as an author: "people think I'm dirty."<sup>71</sup> The story opens with Bukowski obtaining a vulgar letter from an unsigned girl. Nonetheless, he does not respond in a similar way, he starts by wondering about the importance of sex in the United States: "here in the United States, especially, sex is inflated far beyond its simplest importance."<sup>72</sup> Bukowski continues to comment greatly in his own way on the whole American sex situation: "but the American male has had his brains beaten out by the American formal education and the American prenumbed parent and the American monster Advertising long before he was twelve years old."<sup>73</sup> Does Bukowski use such severe description of everyman in order to mock him and to look down on the society? After close reading of Bukowski's depiction of characters, it is undoubtedly not so. Closer reading of this character, for example, proves that Bukowski aimed to depict the American society having given its own proper examination. Let us consider the notion of Donald Masterson, who analyses Bukowski's attitude towards the corruption of this world:

*Among other issues, perhaps it is their (Bukowski's and Jeffers's) shared apocalyptic vision that has most unnerved scholars and editors. Apocalypics are rarely appreciated in their own time. . . . Both poets vehemently rejected the corrupt materialism that informed the*

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<sup>71</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 126

<sup>72</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 126

<sup>73</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 125

*American dream as it shaped this country's culture at mid-century. . . .each foresaw the cataclysmic outcome of a degraded society.*<sup>74</sup>

Hence, the hard unpleasant description aims to draw a more naturalistic and realistic image of American society, in the way Bukowski saw it. Remarkably, Bukowski does not promote the real importance of sex in the United States. The narrator speaks not under the pretence of a hopeless romanticism; instead, he provides a frame narration which clarifies his proper stance on women and sex: "sex is interesting but not totally important."<sup>75</sup> To be sure, that Bukowski, the protagonist of this story, speaks for Bukowski the author; let us consider what he says here about the usage of sex in his writing:

*so, to some writers, including the gloriously impertinent Bukowski, sex is obviously the tragicomedy. I don't write about it as an instrument of obsession. I write about it as a stage play laugh where you have to cry about it, a bit, between acts. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote it much better. he had the distance and the style. I am still too near the target to effect total grace. people simply think I'm dirty. if you haven't read Boccaccio, do. you might begin with 'The Decameron.'*<sup>76</sup>

The previously mentioned tragicomedy is more developed in the rest of the story; where a man going to the army fears only that he won't be able to sleep with his wife, while Bukowski remarks, that another man can always take his place. The tragicomedy of this particular story culminates with Bukowski running from a lady who endangers him.

It is necessary to understand. That this story concludes the real target of these columns, as it explains Bukowski's intention and presents his current opinions while leaving the sexual part of the story in the background.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter showed that in order to better understand *Notes*, several aspects must be considered. Similarly, it is not suitable to consider the biased critiques that generalize this collection as vulgar and containing merely obscene stories. It is indisputable that especially the expressions used to describe women are less than favourable and other chauvinist

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<sup>74</sup> Donald Masterson, "Jeffers is my god: Charles Bukowski's Commentary on Robinson Jeffers," *Jeffers Studies* 5 (2001): 10-19

<sup>75</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 125

<sup>76</sup> Bukowski, *Notes*, 126

attributes are to be found there. Nonetheless, this chapter aimed to show that if one accepts the language, he or she can come to terms that there is more to the stories than sex. Another important factor to consider was the way Bukowski projected himself to the collection. This enabled a better understanding of the fact that even a protagonist called Bukowski cannot be identified completely with the author Bukowski.

## CHAPTER III

### Women

#### 3.1 *Women* introduction

Before proceeding to the analysis of individual female characters in *Women*, it is crucial to introduce into a greater depth the work. There are numerous objectives of this introductory chapter to *Women*. Firstly, the reasons for choosing *Women* will be shortly summarized. Secondly, the main theme of *Women*, the relationships, must be introduced. Furthermore, as *Women* caused another wave of chauvinistic accusations, Bukowski's reaction and his intention behind this work will be presented. Most importantly, the importance of Bukowski's choice of language will be mentioned again.

As *Women* was written by a more mature author, aware of how his characters may be perceived, the focal point of the novel, the relationships, could not have been chosen by chance. Hence, as *Notes* is a representative of an earlier work, *Women* represents Bukowski's later, more mature work. As this novel was chosen for a closer analysis to show the evolvement in Bukowski work, let us briefly put it in the context. Harrison mentions an obvious change of Bukowski's writing especially in the comparison with the earlier *Post Office*: "just in the seven years between *Post Office* (1971) and *Women* (1978) there was an increased subtlety of characterization, a more nuanced treatment of psychological dynamics and less reliance on stereotypes."<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, Charlson recognizes that even though there are chauvinist attributes in the novel, he believes that "debunking of masculinity", which is obvious in *Women*, is to be found in *Factotum* (1975) and this trend continues up to *Ham on Rye* (1982), which similarly to *Women*: "[acts], surprisingly enough, as apologia, making up for the dirty old man [...]."<sup>78</sup>

*Women*, Bukowski's great opportunity to "discover" the other gender, raised another wave of feminist accusations against Bukowski for being a narcissist. Obviously it was not the first time for such a controversial persona, as Bukowski frequently caused an uproar with his "narcissism". The critic of Norman Mailer, a well known American essayist, stated that: "It is too simple to think of narcissist as someone in love with himself. One can detest oneself

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<sup>77</sup> Harrison, 183

<sup>78</sup> David Charlson, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*, (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 130-160

intimately and still be a narcissist. What characterizes narcissism is the fundamental relation. It is with oneself.”<sup>79</sup> Which brings us back to the previously mentioned relationships in *Women*, be it with Chinaski, between women themselves or all together. Therefore, the most important relationship of *Women* is not Chinaski’s with Chinaski nor Bukowski’s with Bukowski that would be too much of a simplistic perception. As it was necessary to explain Bukowski’s extended usage of sex in *Notes* and Bukowski’s mere aim to write freely, it is crucial to understand that Bukowski wrote *Women* not to mistreat women, but to share his newly gained experiences.

Let us consider what Bukowski answered to a Belgian reporter in an interview, when directly accused of being a chauvinist based on *Women*, more precisely, when he was bluntly accused of reducing women to: “a behind and a pair of tits.”<sup>80</sup> As Bukowski was not oblivious to such accusation in this period of his life, his reaction in this interview, as in many others, drew attention to the fact that one obtains a reduced meaning of female characters in his novel only if one misreads the book: “Oh, come on, you’ve read it and that’s all you got.”<sup>81</sup> This brings us back to the importance of Bukowski’s language as well as the complexity of his oeuvre. Remarkably, Bukowski’s chauvinist tendencies are supposed to be a result of devaluating women through romantic relations with them. Therefore no notion of love is ascribed to *Women* just as to the other novels: “love is a synonym for a sexual intercourse”, this casual misinterpretation from the previous interviewer unleashes the author’s response: “Love is a dog from hell, it has its own agony...I don’t know where you get your concept from, man. You’re really fucked up.”<sup>82</sup> Joanna Bull, one of Bukowski’s past lovers, became the basis for *Mercedes* in *Women*. Like all other characters she is also portrayed in rather raw terms, however, she never held it against Bukowski because she believed that his writing was just a way to express something interesting rather than writing about stereotypical, boring ‘healthy’ relationships.<sup>83</sup> Arguably, Bukowski may have not intended to cause offence. Similarly, believing that he were hostile to women, may misled, because Bukowski was a very protective father, and he tried to shield his daughter from male advances, which he so explicitly portrayed himself. Had he had no regard for women, he would not have warned one of his friends to respect his daughter whilst she was studying in his vicinity.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Harrison, 154

<sup>80</sup> Dir. John Dullaghan, 1:15:31

<sup>81</sup> Dir. John Dullaghan, 1:16:27

<sup>82</sup> Dir. John Dullaghan. 1:16:40

<sup>83</sup> Sounes, 185

<sup>84</sup> Locklin, 57

For the purposes of the present thesis, three major women were chosen for a closer analysis. It is plausible to argue that other women appeared to be even more important in the novel though. These three particular women Lydia, Katherine and Dee Dee were chosen for certain reasons. Firstly, Lydia helped to understand that Chinaski is well aware that he is a broken person and matches better with a rather unstable woman. The relationship with Lydia affects Chinaski in the following relationships. Secondly, Katherine was chosen for a closer analysis to support the fact that Chinaski can hardly be in a relationship with a woman much saner than he is. Finally, Dee Dee proves that Chinaski was able to create a friendship with a woman. All three relationships resemble in the way they are terminated, as Chinaski seems not to be worthy of these women and makes the women leave him.

Hence, this thesis aims to show based on the chosen texts that Bukowski is often misunderstood because of the crude language and harsh images which nonetheless do not intend to degrade any gender, they merely want to show the world in the way Bukowski saw it. *Women* is a text chosen because of its more obvious complexity which makes an easier case for Bukowski who was not a chauvinist.

## 3.2 Lydia

### 3.2.1 *Lydia King and Charles Bukowski*

To return to the previously mentioned importance of relationships in *Women*, this chapter aims to outline the first important relationship of the book. Nonetheless, before proceeding to the relationship of Lydia Vance and Chinaski, the real inspiration, Lydia King, must be introduced. More importantly, King's and Bukowski's relationship will be presented, as it was partially the inspiration for the relationship in the novel. The real relationship will be presented including its eccentricities and King's opinions. Finally, Bukowski's projection of his own experience into Chinaski will be mentioned in relation to the development of Chinaski.

As *Women's* beauty lies in its interpersonal relationships, it is not sufficient for the purposes of the thesis, to merely describe the women, it is necessary to incorporate the whole relationship. The first and the most important relationship in *Women* is that with Lydia Vance, the sculptress, the ultimate mad artist and Chinaski. Lydia Vance is not a figment of Bukowski's imagination. She is based on a real person, Bukowski's former girlfriend, Lydia King, for whom he cared deeply. Although some of the more eccentric incidents such as the

flying typewriters were also based on true stories. The relationship between Bukowski and King lasted for three years and was terminated by Lydia throwing on to the street Bukowski's typewriter and books because of all of his drunken binges and his infidelities.<sup>85</sup> Lydia King explained the eccentricities of and the reasons behind the end of her relationship with Bukowski: "It wasn't that he had other women. It's that he always wanted me to know about them, always wanted to tell me all the details about what they did together. Who does that unless they really want to make you mad?"<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, King and Bukowski were separated by twenty years (him being the senior), when their relationship started. Bukowski being older, hence having a change of perspective from the stereotypical patriarchal representation is also projected in Chinaski. This brings us to the candy/Venice beach scene: "Jesus Christ, here I am with you, you're twenty years older than I am. I could have something like that (referring to a handsome, strong black man on the beach). What the hell's wrong with me? ... Look. Here are a couple of candy bars. Take one."<sup>87</sup> The lack of response to Lydia's cruel comments seems both a moral defeat as well as a victory for Chinaski. He does not diminish anymore to any sort of vulgarity nor aggression. Hence, Paz's description of a *macho* is definitely not applicable anymore. Harrison summarizes Chinaski's evolution in this relationship: "[previously] it had been Chinaski who objectified women, saw them primarily in terms of their physical attractions... Here this view is projected onto Lydia, who is shown as rejecting companionship."<sup>88</sup> It is a truly remarkable change. In many ways, Bukowski shows that the human connection can be made by even the most isolationist of character, Chinaski. This change in him is both touching and sentimental as he is clearly marked by his relationship with Lydia, and arguably their romantic relationship is less important than their strange symbiosis.

### 3.2.2 Lydia

Having considered the real Lydia and her relationship with Bukowski, this subchapter moves to the succinct depiction of Lydia. Essentially, it is necessary to mention the way Bukowski depicts Lydia. This brings to mind Lydia's independence and consequently the way she presents herself to Chinaski. Furthermore, this chapter introduces the idea of

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<sup>85</sup> Justin Berton, "Charles Bukowski love letters sold, maybe more," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 8, 2009. Retrieved May 7, (2010), 25-37

<sup>86</sup> Berton, 25-37

<sup>87</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 20

<sup>88</sup> Harrison, 204

Lydia being the “perfect match” for Chinaski and finally, changes concerning Chinaski when he is with Lydia.

Let us begin with the way Lydia is depicted. Lydia Vance is one of the first women who are illustrated in colours, independently of Hank and of her relation to Hank.<sup>89</sup> Let us demonstrate this independence on a rich poem that Lydia sends to Hank:

*Come out, old troll,  
Come out of your dark hole, old troll,  
Come out into the sunlight with us and  
Let us put daisies in your hair...*<sup>90</sup>

Chinaski’s interpretation of this poem is: “The poem went on to tell me how good it would feel to dance in the field with female fawn creatures who would bring me joy and true knowledge.”<sup>91</sup> It is beautiful that Lydia presents herself to Chinaski as a free artist, writing poems, sculpting, independently on what others (Hank) might think. According to Harrison, Lydia Vance was Bukowski’s: “most successful attempt at presenting such a relationship in depth and [...] at creating a ‘round’ character other than the protagonist.”<sup>92</sup> It is Lydia who takes the initiative and looks up Chinaski. What is typical for Lydia is that from the start, she is presented as a true eccentric, impulsive, almost a mad person: “Lydia jumped up on the coffee table. She flung her long brown hair from side to side. She was insane; she was miraculous.”<sup>93</sup> Lydia seems to be a perfect woman for him, as Harrison suggests: “...Chinaski needs a woman with emotional problems so that, viewing her as ‘crazy’, there will be little chance for the real intimacy that would allow a relationship to develop.”<sup>94</sup> Thus mentally unstable Lydia and shockingly vulnerable Chinaski are a combination, which leads to many breakups and consequent reconciliations: “We split up at least once a week – “Forever” – but always managed to make up, somehow.”<sup>95</sup> After much struggle, the final break up sets forever these characters’ place: Lydia is a powerful woman driven by a sexual desire, Chinaski, the more rational out of the two, is far away from a prototypical male protagonist, as we know them, hence is rather subverted.

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<sup>89</sup> Harrison, 180

<sup>90</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, (London: Virgin Books, 2009), 10

<sup>91</sup> Bukowski, 10

<sup>92</sup> Harrison, 198

<sup>93</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 3

<sup>94</sup> Harrison, 199

<sup>95</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 29

### 3.2.3 Lydia and Hank

Having touched upon Chinaski's behavior when with Lydia, this subchapter is concerned with Chinaski's development and compares him with the previous Chinaski. This chapter opens with Chinaski as the changes in his behavior help to understand better Lydia's eccentricities. Consequently, this chapter aims to show that Lydia was not depicted as a lunatic in order to be humiliated but rather to show that Chinaski could hardly have a functioning relationship with a saner woman. Essentially, this chapter will present the sexual relations of this particular relationship, which nonetheless move to the background of the relationship. Hence, it will be shown that the importance of the relationship lies elsewhere.

Let us commence with a closer analysis of Chinaski's behaviour. Even though Chinaski changes greatly in many aspects, he remains a social outcast. Interestingly, one would expect Chinaski to be disinterested in the social norm, but the opposite is true, though: "I'd like to rip off your jacket – we could begin there!' Lydia walked off. It hadn't worked. I never knew what to say to the ladies."<sup>96</sup> This brings us to the stereotypes people tend to formulate. Chinaski seems disappointed as he does not manage to act as men are supposedly expected to, hence does not find the proper, adequate words. Moreover, Chinaski's discouragement has only the form of verbal aggression, not physical, which would be more typical for the former Chinaski of previous stories. According to Harrison the "old" Chinaski would have liked to rip off more than the *fringe* of the jacket.<sup>97</sup>

To return to Lydia's eccentricity, Chinaski does not mind her lunacy. On the contrary, Chinaski seems to prefer Lydia being unstable emotionally, which is presented in the scene preceding their first sexual encounter where Lydia tells Chinaski about her mental state: "She also told me she'd had some kind of break-down and spent time in a madhouse. I kissed her and told her that was fine."<sup>98</sup> Chinaski's attitude toward Lydia's mental issues brings us back to the previously mentioned fact that he seeks emotional investment into a woman. Unfortunately, his constant jealous paranoia terminates his relations. The unromantic scene preceding their first love making sets the mood for further action. As Lydia tells Chinaski about her mental problems at such peculiar time, the reader starts to predict their twisted end. Moreover, Lydia warns Chinaski not to climax into her. Both "preparations" and

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<sup>96</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 8

<sup>97</sup> Harrison, 198-199

<sup>98</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 18

following action set the tone and consequently ruin it: “Lydia, I love you.”...Get the hell away from me!”<sup>99</sup> Hence, the possibility of love is removed.

Nonetheless, as the relationship progresses, Chinaski is more and more aware of the difference in the age and he prefers Lydia to think of him as being sexually incompetent, rather than let her know that his feelings had changed. This is a fact, which would be unthinkable for the former Chinaski. Obviously, Chinaski contributed to Lydia’s insanity, where sex is really not the main focus, but the emotions are. He even summarizes their relationship as: “[the] good parts of our relationship felt like a rat walking around and gnawing at the inside of my stomach.”<sup>100</sup> Therefore Chinaski decides to get her back, because: “she seemed to care a lot more for me than before we parted.”<sup>101</sup> Hence, one forgets about the sexual relationship as Chinaski’s relationship with Lydia is the closest he gets to a real relationship with any human. Chinaski even romanticizes this idea: “When I was drunk and Lydia was insane we were nearly an equal match.”<sup>102</sup>

In order to fully comprehend the importance of Lydia and her relationship with Chinaski and the irony of the relationship, the traditional way of reading such a novel would mean identification of the reader with the character. Nonetheless as Bukowski does not aim for the reader to identify with the characters, the irony behind the story gets lost. Harrison points out that:

*Here, and in other passages in Women, the reader’s identification with the protagonist is threatened. In the earlier novels there was no doubt as to whose side the implied author was taking and where the reader’s sympathy was being directed. [...] Now Bukowski is consciously questioning Chinaski’s behavior and the male role in such situations and trying to present events from the woman’s perspective as well.*<sup>103</sup>

Lydia’s relationship with Hank was of the greatest importance and affected Chinaski up to the point where his following relationships are mere substitutes of Lydia.

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<sup>99</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 19

<sup>100</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 48

<sup>101</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 60

<sup>102</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 37

<sup>103</sup> Harrison, 201

### 3.3 Katherine

#### 3.3.1 *Laura Stanley alias Katherine*

The aim of this subchapter is to introduce another great woman of *Women*. Firstly, Laura's nickname is explained. Secondly, her relationship with Chinaski is succinctly introduced. In essence, this chapter intends to introduce the importance of the explanation of individual characters through this particular relationship. Finally, the reversal of roles will be explained as well as its consequences, meaning Katherine's sovereignty over Chinaski. Lastly, the paradox of this relationship will be shortly introduced and analyzed into a greater depth in the following subchapter.

It is crucial to begin where the previous chapter finished and to return shortly to Lydia; if Bukowski succeeded in presenting a "three dimensional" character in the case of Lydia Vance, he goes even further with Katherine, another greatly influential character in *Women*. Chinaski renames her as Katherine, thanks to her beauty and resemblance to Katherine Hepburn. Chinaski met Katherine on one of his readings in Huston and she then visits him in L.A. Firstly, it seems as if Chinaski found what he was seeking for a long time: "Katherine, you are *the* exceptional woman I've been looking for."<sup>104</sup> A search which was rather convoluted and unclear up to this point. Also, Katherine is not a blunt, uninteresting character, she has been through a lot (an unfortunate marriage); Chinaski copes well with his profound feelings for her. Hardly, could he choose a woman more different to him, as she does all the healthy things, one is supposed to. This time, Bukowski attempts to clarify his characters' behaviour (as will be shown in the breakup scene). More precisely, Harrison claims:

*In the earlier novels Bukowski was content to let events speak for themselves without making much of an attempt to get at his characters' motivation. In Women he is trying to explain and to have his readers understand why his protagonist acts as he does, to make events intelligible.*<sup>105</sup>

This importance of understanding characters' behaviour is striking in Chinaski's relationship with Laura, as yet again, the roles are reversed. As far as the reversal of roles is concerned, it is necessary to quote a very emotional scene for Chinaski: "I was in love again, I was in trouble [...] For the first time I thought of marriage."<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, Chinaski's newly

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<sup>104</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 91

<sup>105</sup> Harrison, 204

<sup>106</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 98-99

found appreciation for marriage is ironically mocked as Katherine refuses Chinaski's marriage proposal and is suddenly identified with a patriarchal role,<sup>107</sup> where she reduces the "profound" relationship to a mere sexual involvement: "It's just *sex*, Hank, it's *just sex*!"<sup>108</sup> Another example of Katherine being up on Chinaski, is to be found in a similar scene as in the "candy scene" with Lydia. Chinaski omits yet again a mean remark from his woman concerning their appearance as a couple: "Hey, they all saw this young girl kissing this old man. [...] (Chinaski) I don't give a damn..."<sup>109</sup> Chinaski is yet again made a fool and laughed at by a young woman who obviously seems to be his superior.<sup>110</sup>

Even though, on the one hand this might be considered as another example of Katherine's uniqueness, as other female characters (Lydia for example) would love to marry Chinaski, on the other hand, this is a beginning of a great paradox. Katherine was familiar with Chinaski's lifestyle, as they met on one of his readings, nevertheless, she overlooked his being finally efficiently organized (life wise) and did not expect more than sexual relation with him.

### 3.3.2 *Chinaski losing Katherine*

The previously mentioned paradox opens this subchapter. As this whole subchapter is concerned with the breakup between Katherine and Chinaski, the deeds preceding the termination of the relationship will be presented. Consequently a certain "pattern" concerning Chinaski's breakups will be introduced. This chapter ends with an interesting juxtaposition of themes, which Bukowski uses when terminating the relationship. One of the juxtaposed themes is used to enclose this chapter; the car metaphor, which is a reoccurring theme in Bukowski's work. Finally, the objective of this subchapter (similarly as in the subchapters concerning Lydia) is to support the statement that Bukowski was not such a chauvinistic writer.

As far as Bukowski's necessity to explain characters' behavior goes, it is even more accurate for the end of Chinaski's relationship with Katherine. This part, when Chinaski "loses her"<sup>111</sup> is a continuum of the previously mentioned paradox. Even though, Katherine was supposed to be familiar with Chinaski's lifestyle, she identifies him with the "lowlifes"

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<sup>107</sup> Harrison, 204

<sup>108</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 100

<sup>109</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 107

<sup>110</sup> Soounes, 187

<sup>111</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 105

from the racetracks, where Chinaski takes her: “I knew she was connecting me with the racetrack people and the boxing crowd, and it was true. I was with them, I was one of them. Katherine knew that there was something about me that was not wholesome in the sense of wholesome is as wholesome does.”<sup>112</sup> This paradox may be intensified through the question, why would Chinaski take her there? Which brings us to a similar situation as with Lydia, where though it seemed the woman broke up with Chinaski, it is more plausible that Chinaski’s conscious deeds “made” the woman break up with him. The actual break up between Chinaski and Laura is a succession/juxtaposition of profound feelings, love making and cars, more specifically Chinaski’s Volks:

*Meanwhile the police had recovered my Volks. We went down to where it was impounded. [...] It wasn't a happy day for me. [...] Then they called her flight and we kissed. 'You're going to miss your flight', I said. [...] Katherine walked into the boarding tunnel and was gone. I walked back to the parking lot, got in the Volks, thinking, I've still got this.*<sup>113</sup>

Harrison explains this juxtaposition of such themes as a certain form of identification between the sex and the car, which consequently leads to Chinaski’s dilemma of human objectification.<sup>114</sup> Bukowski’s poem “I didn’t want to” about a person breaking the stereotypes on the first glance, and giving importance to losing someone, helps to understand the irony behind Bukowski’s association of “death” of the relationship with the possibly true love and the “death” of his first car:

*I really did buy my first automobile for \$35 and I asked the man,  
'does the motor start? Does it have a key?'  
It didn't have any springs or a reverse gear and to make the  
headlights work I'd have to hit a hard bump in the road  
and I had to park it on a hill to get it started,  
it ran for two years without my changing the oil and when the car  
finally died I just left it and walked away. The  
drunken lady who had been along for that first ride past the  
hospital, she lived a little longer, with me and without me,  
but mostly with me, she died and I buried her one warm  
afternoon north of Anaheim, and the best thing I like about*

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<sup>112</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 104

<sup>113</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 107

<sup>114</sup> Harrison, 206

*her was she never said, "let's talk this thing out."  
She was typist for a large downtown furniture store  
and she had the most beautiful legs I have ever seen before or since.  
I should have to love her more than I did but I didn't want to.<sup>115</sup>*

After losing such a caring person, the relationships after Katherine, similarly as after Lydia, are less profound. Nevertheless, Bukowski continues to succeed to depict a picture of the 70'. The relationship between Chinaski and Katherine is the perfect example of Bukowski's evolvment during the time. The accuracy, with which Bukowski treats this relationship and presents the scenes of the calm intimacy, is not a work of a neither chauvinistic nor misogynist author.

### 3.4 Dee Dee

Similarly as in the previous subchapters, this subchapter will be dealing with another great woman of Chinaski. Firstly, Dee Dee Bronson will be introduced. Yet again, Lydia will be mentioned, as Dee Dee was chosen for an analysis as she is completely different to the first great woman of Chinaski. Even though, it will be shown that Dee Dee was primarily a friend to Chinaski, and Chinaski's description will show her as a rather independent woman, a romantic relationship between Dee Dee and Chinaski occurred. Nonetheless, it will be shown that the importance of Dee Dee lies in her rationality. Finally, this chapter will consider Chinaski's evolvment and the inevitable breakup.

Proceeding to the relationship between Chinaski and Dee Dee; the relationship with Dee Dee Bronson is one of those of a greater importance. Dee Dee was a friend to Chinaski, who cared for him and even tried to help him get over Lydia: "You'll make it. We'll get you over Lydia. We'll pull you through. [...]It must be that I am not good with the ladies (Chinaski)[...]You're good enough with the ladies [...] And you're a helluva writer (Dee Dee's response)."<sup>116</sup> Dee Dee seems to be one of few women whose: "conversation was decisive and entertaining. She [Dee Dee] was able to make me laugh, which I needed."<sup>117</sup> The fact that Chinaski needed a "friend's" help, a female friend's help after a break up, is a nice

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<sup>115</sup> Bukowski, *The Continual Condition: Poems*, (New York: Ecco, 2010), Kindle

<sup>116</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 50

<sup>117</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 50

example of Chinaski's view on women, where he does not see them as mere sexual objects. Let us therefore consider Chinaski's description of Dee Dee:

*Dee Dee had a place in the Hollywood Hills. [...] Dee Dee was about 40, had black, cropped hair, was Jewish, hip, freaky. She was New York City oriented, knew all the names: the right publishers, the best poets, the most talented cartoonists, the right revolutionaries, anybody, everybody.*<sup>118</sup>

Unfortunately, Dee Dee is in love with Chinaski: "You know, I think I was always in love with you. For years. You know, when I used to come and see you, [...] I would want you. But you never noticed me."<sup>119</sup> The fact is unfortunate, as it is impossible to further investigate Chinaski's friendship with a woman and as Chinaski does not have the same feelings for Dee Dee, the inevitable end is near. Dee Dee's rational character was completely different to Lydia's and Chinaski is well aware of this fact: "You make me feel good. (Chinaski to Dee Dee) Lydia was always on the attack."<sup>120</sup> Therefore Chinaski feels close to her. This initially non-sexual relationship is one of the greatest proves of Chinaski's evolvment and the imminent and turbulent termination of the later relationship with Dee Dee may be explained through Miles' idea: "His [Chinaski's] relationships with women had to be tempestuous in order to be real. But when he fell in love, he fell deeply."<sup>121</sup> Hence, Chinaski did not fall in love, when it would have been sensible to do so, when his lifestyle allowed for a potentially healthy relationship, and perhaps Dee Dee is an example of a woman too sane, too mature for him.

### 3.5 Other women in *Women* and Chinaski

Having considered some of the most important relationships of *Women*, this subchapter deals with the themes appearing in the background, which are of a great importance. The main reoccurring theme is alcohol. The reasons for a closer analysis of alcohol will be explained in the relation to sex and Chinaski's potency. Consequently, it will be shown that Chinaski's role as a macho disappears. All the arguments will be presented through another relationships and women of Chinaski, namely with Joanna, Mindy and Liza.

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<sup>118</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 85

<sup>119</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 47

<sup>120</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 47

<sup>121</sup> Miles, introduction

When dealing with *Women* it is crucial not to forget a recurring theme – the alcohol, as it is one of the elements undermining Chinaski’s traditional male role. Interestingly, even though we established that Chinaski searched for a special woman, he continued drinking, even though it affected all of his relationships. May it be the problem of his low self-esteem? The best examples of Chinaski’s abusive drinking leading to his inability to perform sexually and satisfy his partners are to be found in the less striking relationships of the novel.<sup>122</sup> Namely, this chapter will mention Joanna, Tammy and Mindy.

There is Joanna, a temporary compensation from Tammy: “Be kind to me, Joanna, sucking and fucking aren’t everything.”<sup>123</sup> In the case of Joanna, Harrison comes with the very possible interpretation that Joanna, possibly just as Lydia, is a sexual predator who asks Chinaski to leave when he cannot perform anymore.<sup>124</sup> “I lasted five days and nights (says Chinaski). Then I couldn’t get it up anymore. Joanna drove me to the airport.”<sup>125</sup>

Even though Chinaski is aware of the tragedies in his life, he seems rather numb and accepts the facts as they come.<sup>126</sup> Nonetheless, Chinaski always presents his pathetic situation with irony, as for example, in the case of Mindy: “Mindy and I finished the bottle and then went to bed. I kissed her for a while, then apologized, and drew away. I was too drunk to perform. One hell of a great lover.”<sup>127</sup> and Liza: “Finally I rolled off. ‘Sorry, baby, too much to drink.’”<sup>128</sup> There are numerous scenes of such unpleasant situations in the novel. Hence, sex becomes Bukowski’s tool for irony and sadness in Chinaski’s life. Harrison admits that the position of sex has many meanings, but it is indisputable that Chinaski is not a macho man, nor a misogynist, because his impotency, a sign of weakness, is not something a sexist man would show so lightly:

*Sex is often satisfying with the same women with whom sex has been less than satisfying. But it can’t be denied that all of this constitutes a distinctly unmacho (not to mention unromantic) depiction of lovemaking. [...] In any event, there has been a significant amount of slippage in how much control the man has – the decision to have sex, for example,*

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<sup>122</sup> Harrison, 208

<sup>123</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 126

<sup>124</sup> Harrison, 208

<sup>125</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 130

<sup>126</sup> It could be possible to interpret Chinaski’s numbness through Bukowski’s poem “The Shoelace”

<sup>127</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 77

<sup>128</sup> Bukowski, *Women*, 209

*is often the woman's. [...] It is in this larger change that the primary significance of the novel lies. What has happened is that the male protagonist is now being treated ironically.*<sup>129</sup>

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter showed that the novel is rather concerned with relationships not sex per se. Hence, sex is merely one of many themes. As Bukowski finally explains his characters' behaviour, his male protagonist, Chinaski seems to evolve and to be aware of his deeds. Furthermore, individual women were portrayed in the relationship with Chinaski as well as on their own. Consequently, the fact that they were also portrayed on their own, not merely through Chinaski's point of view, gives the novel a new dimension. Finally, it was shown that the women in the novel can live happily without Chinaski.

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<sup>129</sup> Harrison, 210

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has aimed to understand sentiments expressed by Bukowski throughout a set period of his life. By choosing *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* and *Women* we are able to examine potential changes in his attitudes over a period of nine years, during a time when attitudes towards women were changing rapidly in Western culture, lead in part by the vivid freedoms experienced on the West coast of America where he lived. The works themselves show a clear development in Bukowski's style of writing and expression, but more importantly that the misogynistic attitude for which he is perhaps best known is in reality a crude trope which distinguishes no more between gender than it does race or creed. Bukowski did not write mere sex stories degrading women to sex objects, and there is a greater merit to his work than he is often given credit for.

In order to show the merit of Bukowski's work, this thesis challenges the perception that crude and basic language is not worthy of literary recognition. Historically we see that works which are now seen as literary masterpieces were not crafted for an intellectual audience and as such did not require high minded language. They were instead intended as a broad comment on society at the time, and it is this accurate portrayal that has subsequently brought them to prominence. We see this in poetry, such as Alexander Pope's "Rape of the Lock", novels like *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin, and plays such as *A Street Car Named Desire*, by Williams Tennessee. With this in mind we should look at Bukowski's language not as crude but deliberate and apt for the society he wrote for.

It is clear that a number of critics have a problem with the author's use of language, but it is worth noting that, the experience and expression of common people is historically not that which is used by authors. This is understandable when writers must craft images from mere words, but gives a skewed view of what is correct literary language when placed against natural speaking style. Bukowski takes language which is closer to what we know to be "real", and using a more established literary style (such as Shakespeare to take an extreme example) would have probably made Bukowski's stories impotent in the face the message he wanted to deliver. In addition, the content clearly raises serious issues and concerns about what is accepted as suitable as subject matter for literary expression. In the case of Bukowski, as it was explained earlier, critics have become fixated only by his depiction of sex and his treatment of women. The aim of this thesis is to show, that similarly to Miller, Bukowski

wanted to liberate the subject of sexuality in literature, which was a theme generally repressed at the time. It can be said that the humour and irony behind this liberation of sexuality was lost on some commentators because they could not look past the use of aforementioned crude language. Literature by its very nature is deeply subjective, and whilst it is understandable that some critics may find this goes against their personal sensibilities, it does not mean that such language is not a useful medium to express comment on society or that often explicit content detracts from the message behind a novel. Sexuality is analyzed in this thesis as it helps us understand that in Bukowski's literature "everything is allowed". Commenting on a misogynistic streak in society does not make Bukowski himself a misogynist; anymore that commenting on an increase in state intrusion by Orwell in *1984* made him an advocate of such an expansion of the state. It is reasonable to assume that such a prolific author such as Bukowski was well aware that when his drunken protagonists insulted their female counterparts, they also insulted those in society for whom they represented in the process. It is hard to admire a drunken slurring man, who abuses someone else, and knowing this, Bukowski exposed Chinaski as a weak creature with little self respect. A misogynist, by definition, sees women as near worthless and men by default as superior. The degradation of Chinaski is a prevailing theme, and his most sensitive problems e.g. impotency are openly discussed. A misogynist author is unlikely to degrade men and women equally.

The thesis has also strived to contextualise Bukowski in order to shed some light on how his work progressed over time and how, much like his works, he was a man, who could not easily be categorised. There is an understandable desire to categorise authors, placing their styles in a specific space and time in order to scrutinise their influence and understand their impact. Bukowski is often seen as either a mere drunk author or discussed in the context of the Beats. Neither of these descriptions is correct on its own, and such simple categorisations belie the man's true complexities and without exploring them further can lead to a failure to appreciate the significance of his work.

Bukowski himself was someone, who came from a broken home and had some unfortunate female "role-models" in his life. Naturally, his background has influenced his artistic expression as he based a number of his characters on women he actually knew in real life, such as Lydia in *Women*. For the purposes of this thesis, it was necessary to establish that Bukowski's who life was surrounded by women, who provided little more than a negative influence. The treatment and nature of some of the women within Bukowski's stories should

always be seen within this context. It is in understanding this role in influencing him that his mother, wife and daughter were mentioned shortly in different parts of the thesis.

The more natural contextualisation of Bukowski though is his association with the Beat generation. The Beats, as previously discussed, cared about the political environment in which they lived, a level of feeling which Bukowski himself eschewed. Yet this famously apolitical author was, be it consciously or not, more political in his work than his own protestations suggest he would willingly admit. Bukowski's characterisations suggest there is concern for the individuals who appear on the bottom of the social scale, such as Chinaski. Bukowski presents such individuals in his own harsh way, and it has been necessary to discuss whom Bukowski blames for the unfortunate fate of his characters. Chinaski, through all his trials and tribulations, receives no support from the characters around him or the state in which he lives. Whilst this description fits with the view that Bukowski views the good in people pessimistically, we can also say that he comments on the lack of support by the United States at the time on which he lived. The American dream, and the country in itself, has always championed ruthless individualism, freedom and small state politics. An attitude, which still prevails today. But in Chinaski, we see the darker side of this state absenteeism. Left alone, with no support, the characters spirals into self-destruction and drags many down with him. Subconsciously or otherwise, in doing this Bukowski highlights the flaws in the system in which he lives.

The economic system in the USA champions Adam Smith and his "invisible hand" principle, whereby the individual triumphs of the few can raise society. Smith argues that this selfishness, in the end, is beneficial. Bukowski demonstrates clearly that his system is far from perfect, and the bravado of the United States during this period lacks a true foundation. Loss Glazier notes that Bukowski presents man as "blind to his responsibility for creating the process of dehumanization."<sup>130</sup> There is no character more 'blind' than Chinaski, whose unchecked degradation of women shown that the "invisible hand" can simultaneously raise up a nation, and pull the rug from under the feet of humanity.

Having explained Bukowski's literary intention as well as his literary means, we must finally conclude, through the analysis of *Notes* and *Women*, the versatility of Bukowski and repudiate the idea that he wrote mere sex stories. In *Notes* Bukowski writes on a variety of themes. In case of both "Moss and Anderson" and "Pink Panties", the male protagonists

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<sup>130</sup> Loss Glazier, "Mirror of Ourselves: Notes on Bukowski's *Post Office*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1985, 39-42

and their dull lives are presented through a simple language, seen as pathetic and their lives ridiculed. By contrast “Unsigned” shows that Bukowski was a versatile author capable of writing more than mere sex stories, commenting on society. Furthermore, the published response shows that Bukowski could do this deliberately; allowing us to assume that there can have been a motive behind his characterisations and his plotlines.

Meanwhile, there were more individual parts analyzed in *Women*. The whole analysis opened with previously mentioned Lydia. The analysis of the fictional story and the portrayal of Lydia seemed to be the most complex as it was accompanied with the commentary of Bukowski’s previous wife. Therefore this analysis helped to understand the eccentricities of Bukowski’s life that obviously influenced his literary work. This first relationship seemed to have influenced other great relationships of Chinaski in the novel. Firstly, as from Lydia onwards he seems to be happier with mentally unstable women. Not to ridicule them in any way but rather to show that Chinaski himself is an unstable character. This argument was supported in the relationship with Katherine who thanks to her sanity seemed to be the most superior to Chinaski. Such relationships as the one with Dee Dee proved that Chinaski was not only interested in sexual relations but was capable of having female friends. The second pattern appearing from Lydia onwards is the one concerning the breakups; even though Chinaski seems to admit that his women terminate their relationship in most cases, he does not admit that he consciously behaves in a certain way to cause the breakups. This argument is of a great importance as Chinaski loses all his alleged chauvinistic attributes. Finally, some other minor relationships are mentioned to support the argument that the relationships of *Women* were far more versatile than the critics admit.

However, we are only able to draw these conclusions and see Bukowski’s depth of understanding by shifting our focus towards his wider work, rather than assuming that Bukowski’s only motive was to write salacious novellas.

Finally, we can see from the above that Bukowski, both in his personal life and his literary works, was more than a sensationalist writer. Whilst he is clearly a critic of women, his contempt extends beyond this into humanity as a whole and wider society. There is no dispute that Bukowski can be simplistic and vulgar, but these attributes mask a deeper understanding and critique which is often lost in the maelstrom of sexual reference. To focus on his treatment of women, and to apply this treatment to a modern day audience with much greater respect for the gender is to misunderstand Bukowski. If we look beyond the view we hold dear today that women are equal members of society and discount the shock we often

feel when seeing how Bukowski treats his characters, we can see that his criticisms are universal, and he holds all humanity to account for its actions. We are all terrible in his eyes. The contemporary view that Bukowski is a misogynist is engrained in literary thinking, but it is a view point which deserves to be challenged. The need for modern critics to display their equality credentials can lead us to overlook an author who in reality has much to say. In doing this, we see that Bukowski continues to have a profound impact, challenge our sensibilities, and most importantly of all: make us think.

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