



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Reviewer's Report on B. A. Thesis
THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AND MEN IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S FICTION
by Božena Valdajeva

Charles Bukowski is one of the bestselling anglophone literary authors of the twentieth century, and yet his reputation in academic criticism is almost a diametric inversion of that. In this thesis, the student wishes to make a case for Bukowski's stature by the measures of literary criticism. That she fails to do so is not a reason for failing her thesis; rather it is her poor standards of argument and evidence, the low level of her English prose style and incorrect formatting. I will go through each of these below, explaining why **I do not recommend the thesis be defended at this time (nedoporučuji práci k obhájení)**.

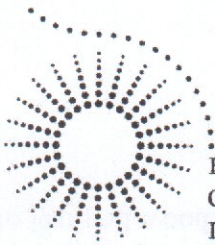
First, the argumentation. Against accusations of misogyny in the work, the student demonstrates that Bukowski's depiction of women, especially in the prose work of that title, often exceeds such a characterization. She gives an account of some female characters as rounded individuals, not reducible to sex objects. Yet, mindful of the many passages in the prose that could justifiably be construed as misogynistic, the student argues that rather than expressing such opinion, Bukowski is thematizing it, as here:

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. (49)

Thus, the logic of this is that Bukowski is a crypto-feminist, an *agent provocateur* dramatically alerting readers to the dangers of treating women disdainfully. While I'm unconvinced by the characterization, the larger point here is the student, in her enthusiastic advocacy of the author, is unable to acknowledge that the opposing view has much evidence to support it (for instance, p. 28 is a good example of her summary dismissal of one of Bukowski's critics). The further complication is that the student's position also prevents her from acknowledging that one of the main reasons for the popularity of Bukowski's work is that it flies in the face of most forms of feminism.

On the matter of politics, there is similar confusion, as the student wishes to argue for Bukowski as a political writer, despite his statements that he was uninterested in such issues. Granted, the public proclamations of many writers are in contradiction with their works, and again one of the main attractions of his *oeuvre* for two generations of readers is that, in his lifestyle, he did not strive for success, as American society in the mid-century conventionally defined it. (If he was pleased to receive money later in his career, it was because it was earned without compromise.) The contradiction emerges in the discussion of Bukowski and the Beats:

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."



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Bukowski does so in two ways: firstly, by degrading [*sic*] the routinized work (known so well to most of the Americans) and secondly, by his anti-consumerist approach. (23)

There are two problems here. First, the Beats also strongly criticized working conditions and consumerism, so the distinction between their “redefining” and Bukowski’s “denial” is unclear. Second, the passage gives the impression that Bukowski as a writer expressed concern for people suffering under capitalism, when he mostly expressed concern for himself. A page before this, the student writes that Bukowski cares for “the everyman” (*sic*, 22), but the quotation that follows immediately clearly indicates that Bukowski is thinking only about himself. That the student makes an incorrect comparison with the Beats, is not so significant, rather it is the fact that once again, in trying to make Bukowski into something he wasn’t, the student widely misses what he was (and what remains one of the attractions of his work for many readers): above all, an egotist of large proportions. One may argue that the expression of such egotism illuminates the contradictions of US democracy, but that does not yet make Bukowski a political writer like, say, Orwell, who presents arguments and analysis in his treatment of politics.

Furthermore, the student repeatedly argues against straw men, depicting literary critics as people too prudish to appreciate bad language and sex scenes in fiction, as in the following passage from the conclusion:

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. 48–49

Obscenity in literature was a central theme of twentieth century culture. Many literary critics forcefully defended the worth of works considered obscene or pornographic, from *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Lolita* to *Howl*. The difficulty for the student’s argument is that literary critics in general (by passing over Bukowski) have made a distinction between the aforementioned works and Bukowski’s, deeming the latter of less interest, and this has nothing to do with the frank representation of sexuality. Adam Kirsch remarks that Bukowski is, ultimately, a conventional writer; certainly in the context of the list of titles above, he does not strike one as original. It seems as though the student has confused feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s with literary critics in general. So, because she has misrepresented literary critics *en masse*, the student is unable to apprehend such a distinction, and her thesis suffers as a result. This is the most significant failing of the argument.

The second issue I mentioned is the low level of the prose. There are mistakes in spelling, formulation and register on almost every page. I have marked many of these in pencil in my copy of the thesis, but give a few here:



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Effectively, the prevailing argument rests on the fact that many critics were to overcome with emphasis on Bukowski's personal beliefs 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. (7)

At the same time Notes remain being work that made Bukowski more popular than any of his previous works. (11)

Bukowski's work undertook many years of change. (17)

This male character predestines the "raison d'être" of the majority of Bukowski's male characters [...] (30)

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 [...] (43)

The student refers to "Jane Austin" and "Williams Tennessee" (48).

The third issue concerns the incorrect formatting of long quotations (the first instance is at the end of p. 14).

The last two problems would be sufficient to justify returning the thesis to the student for revision. Thus, with regret, I cannot recommend the thesis be defended in its present form.

doc. Justin Quinn Ph.D.
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