

The Dirty Old Man Complex: Finding Charles Bukowski's Place in the Literary Canon

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Literary significance is only privileged to certain texts throughout history, based upon its content, its style, or its cultural significance. Texts become classics for their impact upon their audience, readers, intended or not. A certain expected form is usually developed in modeling texts like these that are placed in the canon, texts that are the most significant to literary history. However, the poetry of Charles Bukowski which has a widespread following, is not considered canonical. Charles Bukowski's fearlessness and honesty about vulgar topics has cast him out of the canon, but simultaneously has created a type of cult following based on his "otherness." Bukowski's work has become more unique from not being a part of the poetic canon, forcing interested readers to seek him out personally rather than being a canonical author.

The canon refers to categorizing that is "not only based on technical and stylistic skills, but on a consideration of the writer and his or her work within a far larger context and more expansive set of criteria" (Smith 2012). What criteria the writing is judged by is always changing based on generational trends and the texts that are being produced around the same time. A text itself is assigned value because it is "never considered solely based on its own merit, but is measured against other works that have preceded it" (Smith 2012). However, in terms of Bukowski's work, there are no other works that it can be compared to. He is addressing subjects in honest ways that have not been done before, which finds most at a loss as to where to place him. The importance of the canon is that it is universally accepted; the literary community *must* mutually agree on the value and significance of the text, as well as being scholarly supported.

To understand how texts are placed within or without the canon, there must be a general understanding of what the literary canon entails. Per this type of definition of the canon, one that

insists a divergence from the norm has more literary value, it should benefit poets like Charles Bukowski. However, because of Bukowski's narrow and typecast following, full of people on society's outskirts, his work is technically not received as canon. His work cannot be compared to works that preceded him because his level of vulgarity and honesty was not something that the canon had much experience with. In this way, Bukowski's himself and his writing gets "othered", or treated as something too strangely away from the grain to be valuable.

However, according to the New Yorker, "the sense of not being part of the mainstream, at least as the Norton anthology and most other authorities define it, is integral to Bukowski's appeal" (Kirsch 2005). Bukowski's work was fresh and new and that should have been enough to provide him canonical space, but his subject matter and late start in writing did not help matters. Even Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr., originally born Heinrich Karl in Germany ("Charles Bukowski: American Writer" 2017), did not hold literary endeavors as a priority. Based on the circumstances of his birth and the conditions of his childhood, simply seeing beyond his youth seemed difficult to do.

Charles Bukowski's childhood background, like most prolific writers, is heavily steeped in abuses and fretful change. He received poor treatment in the home as well as in school, which stunted his social skills. Reaching adulthood without these abilities meant turning somewhere else to communicate how he felt with others. Writing poetry was able to give him that outlet, and used it to express his harshness. His vulgar topics form a kind of connection to his childhood experiences, beginning with the circumstances into which he was born as well as his teenage and adult life.

The product of an affair between his father, who was an American sergeant occupying Germany, and Katherina, “the German sister of a friend”, they quickly forced a marriage a month before Charles’s due date (“Biography of Charles Bukowski”). After the war, Bukowski’s father struggled for monetary success and they were forced to move from Germany to the United States, finding home in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1923 (“Biography of Charles Bukowski”), where his parents began calling him Charles instead of Heinrich to seem more Anglican (*Charles Bukowski Biography*). Eventually they found themselves in Los Angeles, where even into the 1930s, Charles’ father “was often unemployed” and “was frequently abusive, both physically and mentally, beating his son for the smallest imagined offence” (“Biography of Charles Bukowski”). Due to the overbearing nature of his father at home, Charles was personally “shy and socially withdrawn”, which was a partial contributor to his outcast nature. He also developed “an extreme case of acne” as a teenager, which led to facial deformities that became part of the ridicule cast by other children, as well as his “German accent” and stylized “clothing his parents made him wear” (“Biography of Charles Bukowski”).

With an uneventful high school career, taking up “chronic alcoholism” in the process, he continued on to Los Angeles City College for only two years “before quitting at the start of World War II” (“Biography of Charles Bukowski”). He gets away to New York to write, but is arrested by the FBI for suspected draft evasion. After over a month in several types of police holds, he is properly tested for entrance into the military. However, he failed the psychological aspect of the physical, and is thus labeled “Selective Service Classification of 4-F”. This indicated that he was not suited to serve (“Biography of Charles Bukowski”).

Charles Bukowski only turned to writing seriously as a last ditch effort after an alcohol and drug-fueled binge that lasted for ten years (“Charles Bukowski: American Writer” 2017), a habit that first branded him a ‘dirty old man’. In publishing his first lengthy story, “Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip”, at the age of twenty-four (*Charles Bukowski*) which ruminated on his previous failed attempts to be published, he was turned on to the idea of writing as an actual profession. The circumstances of his first published story, a story about being barred from the chance to work his way into the literary canon, seemed only fitting to be the first one of merit published. This also showed him that writing about his personal experiences honestly worked best to be published. In the long journey to publishing, however, his work did not come without cost. Over time, he “worked a wide range of jobs” like “dishwasher, truck driver. . . parking lot attendant, elevator operator” (*Charles Bukowski*) to finance the publishings.

Even after having a second story published as well, ‘20 Tanks from Kasseldown’, he still felt that he was not receiving adequate success from printed works. These previous attempts at writing on the small scale were not readily accepted by anyone, and his notes of rejection beyond these works quickly add up. He began with short stories like “Aftermath” and “20 Tanks”, but found his most success with his poetry. Several volumes began to be organized and published, transitioning more into poetry, but not by anyone of note. Because of this under the radar approach to entering the literary world, readers who were looking for fresh, raw poetry needed to dig a little deeper. In doing this, they would find Bukowski. Bukowski’s appeal was that he was not affiliated and was instead an independent author without ties.

This loner status gave him the creative freedom to write about his life and his experiences in straightforwardly vulgar ways that no one else had before, creating a new type of poetry. In an

interview, another poet, A.D. Winans, cited Bukowski's own description of his place in the literary world as "My contribution was to loosen and simplify poetry, to make it more humane" (Winans 2017). In making a fresh and unique genre, Bukowski's work complies with Smith's understanding of literary canon. However, at this time, he is only considered a "cult author" ("Charles Bukowski: American Writer") and not taken seriously as a writer or a poet, which keeps him from being admitted to the canon.

Bukowski also faced discouragement from both his parents when his writing progressed. Both his mother and father commented that "the public didn't want to read the kind of material he wrote" (Malone 6). In response to early works that he submitted to literary magazines and other sources, he was met with rejection over harsh topics and characters that seemingly "had no meaning" (Malone 5-6). Because of this repetitive rejection, from his parents and in the literary world, he turned to appreciating the "seamy side of life" and adjusted his writing to fit the "people like him who weren't afraid to walk down the dark side of the street and take the consequences" (Malone 6). Bukowski wanted to project his experiences in his environment to others, not in the hopes that others could relate to him, but so that people like his parents could see these topics were raw and real for some. In this way, he was creating very audience-specific work, which would divulge from the understanding that canonical work need be "universally accepted."

His poems, although they did discuss themes like love, loss, and other typical literary motifs, refused to confront them in a conventional way. Most of them were several pages long, taking the reader through a narrative story that he is telling about his experiences and conquests. Bukowski utilized his actual life experiences as narrative, which were written around the cleverly

named character Henry Chinaski (“Charles Bukowski”). He wrote about these experiences as blatantly as possible, using verbal and visual vulgarities that were not proper in classic literature. By discussing topics other poets would not touch, like sex, drugs, and suicide, he developed his own unique brand of writing.

As Aubrey Malone notes in her book *The Hunchback of East Hollywood: A Biography of Charles Bukowski*, “it wasn’t that he pushed back the frontiers as simply ignored them” and that this approach left one wondering “what *is* a poem?” (Malone 8). This comes much from the identity and persona of Charles Bukowski himself. A man with vices like smoking and drinking to excess, he was not a very welcome character. His hair was always long and slicked back, giving him the appearance of an unkempt homeless man. His scraggly beard and ‘dad bod’ pouch only added to his unpleasantness, even when chancing to smile with his funhouse mirror teeth.

If being physically unappealing wasn’t enough, his vulgar writing and language fit into his ‘dirty’ look as well. Using swear words whenever possible, never avoiding topics unfit for discussion, such as bowel movements and graphic sex acts, and readily making commentary on what he understood as the stupidity of others, Bukowski was not the friendly type. He presented himself as a type of grandpa figure, but one a child would usually beg his or her mother not to ever see. His writing does nothing to hide the type of person he appears to be, making lewd assessments about women's’ bodies like in “the shower” and actively participating in objectifying them as he does in “the girl on the bus stop bench”. These women he interacts with are defined as the epitome of youth, while he is in the throws of his late fifties or older usually.

He does not care about what others think and it appears nothing could happen to change that notion as he makes grouchy observations of the world, making him personify the 'dirty old man' image. Once this image is established, Bukowski offers nothing to indicate that he is unhappy with the identity, or more accurately, that he even pays attention to those giving him an identity. Because of the late start to his writing career compared to other authors, he has participated in the aged adage of having seen and done more than most. This concept presents his experiences in a sage-like way, being the conqueror of 'pussy' even with advanced age under his belt. However, by a late age and with many published works behind him, Bukowski was not unaware of the conflict of canon surrounding his work.

He seems to address it directly in his poem "cicada" from the *Slouching Toward Nirvana* collection, calling the audience to witness his strange craft in action. Uncharacteristically short for Bukowski, taking up only a half-page of text, "cicada"'s length ties to how little room and care Bukowski has for the canon. The purpose of "cicada" is to mock the canon and to propose that it does not actually take real talent at all to be a part of it. Bukowski is shocked that the editors of poems haven't "caught on yet" (Bukowski 57) to the blatant rip off of the system. He is using the poem to explain what "writers" do, that they "love to use the word 'cicada' in a poem. It makes them believe that they are they, that they have done it" (Bukowski 57).

It is significant, however, that he uses the word "writers" instead of poets, which may be him trying to create an us and them separation between authors of novels and poets like himself in terms of skill and valued ability. He recognizes that no matter what one does, especially using unique and strange sounding words and concepts in his own poems, "well, that means that this poem will get published. See? It works" (Bukowski 57). Written in 1992, two years before his



death in March of 1994 from Leukemia (Bukowski.net 2017), he had vast published literary experience to stake his claim on. Bukowski describes using ‘cicada’ as a way to “milk the game” with editors, meaning that he has formed his own expectations of what will fit within the canon of his work to be published. Even though Charles Bukowski is aware of what it takes to get into the canon, he is uninterested and feels that it would be more of a curse than a blessing.

Another poem of his within *Slouching Toward Nirvana* that addresses the placement of an author in history, appropriately titled “the curse”, explains how other authors and creative persons before he began writing were trapped in their art. This occurred for them once they became pigeonholed into a specific genre or audience expectation. His chosen title of “the curse” infers something that is inescapable, that all who fit the criteria of the poem experience it and its effects. In the beginning of the poem, he laments the downfall of many significant authors that would be considered canonical for literary works, such as Tolstoy, Henry Miller, and Hemingway, all for their fame to have “eaten people alive” and “killed them long before their time”. Bukowski recounts how authors physically died, like Hemingway’s psychiatric problems and later suicide as well as van Gogh’s “drown[ing]” (Bukowski 147). Several others experienced more of a literary and creative death, like Miller who was driven “to stop writing books and turn instead to tirelessly writing love letters to women who only wanted to fuck” and the “hounded. . . relentlessly like wild dogs” Ezra Pound and Knut Hamsun (Bukowski 147).

This poem stands as an argument to avoid the literary canon, as receiving fame from being in it seems to only bring misfortune and suffering. While not all of the authors he references had tragic deaths, they each fell out of significance for one reason or another. Their fame damaged some aspect of their life, whether it was their personal relationships or caused

mental anguish. Even after their many literary accolades to place them in the canon, it did not come to benefit them personally. He surmises that “we are hardly ever as strong as that which we create” (Bukowski 147), suggesting that the heightened success of a work leading to becoming part of the canon can overwhelm and, thus, overtake the “humanly fragile” (Bukowski 147) author.

This view of the canon could serve as a contributing factor to Bukowski preferring to stay out of it. In fact, Bukowski took topics that were uncomfortable and out of the box, like sex, adultery, and suicide, and speaks them plainly as if they were everyday events. He wrote about topics that mattered to him, ones that he had personalized experience and credibility to write about, and was purposefully ignorant of any other opinion. He did not care if he was in the canon or not; it was his followers that pushed for him to get there. He shows his dedication to true and honest experience in one of his most visually graphic poems in another of his anthologies *The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems, 1951-1993*, “the shower”, which intensely sexualizes one of his experiences of sharing a shower with a woman. The opening line, “we like to shower afterwards” (Bukowski 82) hints to the reader that sex occurred in the environment outside of the text.

Based on the language of the poem, words like “always” and their personal preferences, “I like the water hotter than she”, tells the reader that this is not their first interaction. The act of showering leads to the most graphic part of the poem, where Bukowski uses unabashed slang to describe his own and the woman’s genitalia (Bukowski 82). He explains their closeness in vulgar ways, as his “cock [was] in the cheeks of her ass” and how he “linger[s] perhaps longer than necessary” (Bukowski 82), but the illusion of their closeness only exists within the sheltered

space of the shower. He notices that, when they are in the shower together, “her face is always soft and peaceful” (Bukowski 82), especially while she is touching him. A new environment is created when “I then get out” and the two must face each other in a new way, so that “being together solves most of it, in fact, solves all of it”, like a type of calm before the storm (Bukowski 82-83). He chalks up this particular experience with this particular woman as being “the history of woman and man” which is “different for each/better and worse for each” (Bukowski 83), indicating how a man and woman would separately view what they did in the shower.

He directly names the woman in the poem, Linda, and calls to her to “when you take it away/ do it slowly and easily/ make it as if I were dying in my sleep instead of in/ my life, amen” (Bukowski 83), indicating that even this hotly charged sexual experience wasn’t enough to fulfill him and deep down, he is lonely. The harsh language used to describe the mutual soaping in the shower is within typical Bukowski fashion, with vulgarity and abrasiveness being part of his personal style, but the ending to the poem suggests a glance into his personal psyche. He takes his mind “past the memories of pain and defeat and unhappiness” (Bukowski 83) when he thinks of Linda because for him, the separation between them after the act is just as valuable as the act itself. He wants all parts of life, the happy and the sad, and only when both are present, “it’s splendid enough to remember” (Bukowski 83). The environment of the shower allows him to be “feeling the good times of love’s miracle” (Bukowski 82), but everything quickly switches when he has to fumble through conversation with Linda.

Their relationship to each other is reduced and they become like strangers with one another, despite the intimate acts they’ve repeatedly shared in the past. He seems to be at a

crossroads with his relationship to Linda, since they are not a couple but still repeatedly engage in sex and other genitally-focused activities. It seems that he is suggesting that the interaction that occurs between their genitals, sex or the washing of each other, is the only way they can form a connection. At the end of the poem, he is silently pleading with her to make a decision about their relationship and giving her an ultimatum: make their relationship more serious or stop seeing each other altogether. Bukowski, looking at the intimacy of his own emotions and the consequences of sex paired with the vulgar language to describe it, creates a window for the reader to look into an experience that has never been seen before.

Sex itself is usually a private and intimate act and the aftermath of which is the same way. However, Bukowski's poem allows the reader to see what happens after sex is finished when sex is all that two people do to be connected to one another, something that is not usually addressed within the canon. With examining this part of sex, Bukowski is reflecting what he feels the lesson is about sex and sexual acts. Lessons of literature is what Albert Cook is concerned with in his work of examination. In his text *The Canon of Poetry and the Wisdom of Poetry*, he would review this poem of Bukowski's for the literary canon based upon what wisdom the poem imparts.

He believes the wisdom should be "itself gradual" (Cook 322), which is demonstrated in "the shower" after the transitional point of the poem "I then get out" (Bukowski 82) when Bukowski analyzes his relationship with Linda. Cook has imagined his own criteria for examining texts for the canon in that "in the ideal situation for judging poems, they should finally be conceived as partaking in and communicating a wisdom encoded through the "beauty" of the work" (Cook 322). Cook's understanding of "beauty" can be found in the intimate act that

“the shower” is describing, especially as different parts of the woman’s body like “the breasts. . . the belly, the neck. . .” (Bukowski 82) are all painstakingly mentioned to create a descriptive and imaginative visual flow. These features follow the curves and angles of a woman’s body that the speaker in the poem is finding to be beautiful, and the deliberate nature of the poem creates the “beauty” that Cook is referencing. The subject of “the shower” is Bukowski telling the truth about what he experiences, something Cook would describe from Heidegger as “a laying-bare of a whole human situation” (Cook 323).

Bukowski’s poem demonstrates that he as a poet is in the “brightening” phase, “the main phenomena in canonization” (Cook 324) that occurs when a poem is adherent to the changing world around the poem. In the chapter “Red Death Sunset Blood Gory Gals” from the novel by Howard Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, he explains the background as to how “the shower” came to be written. “The shower” was personally influenced for Bukowski by a failed relationship with a woman named Linda King, but was also meant to lament “all the lost loves” (Sounes 187). Bukowski followed a type of fetishization for women named Linda, adding Linda Lee to the list as well which he wrote about mostly in his poetry compilation *Women* (Sounes 169). Linda Lee, however, was his last Linda as they married in 1985 and remained so until he died (“Charles Bukowski Biography”). Bukowski’s “the shower” goes against criticism by his other lovers that the “tone” of his poems was that it was “like he was above and beyond all feelings. . . He could be quite cruel and spare himself beautifully” (Sounes 187) in that he demonstrates a showing of vulnerability in “the shower” and “lays bare” his truth about how he felt when he and Linda’s relationship reached an impasse.

His complete focus on her body and the routine of the event in the poem indicates that he had not thought that their tryst would really ever end, which demonstrates how he felt when Linda King left him because “she was finished with Bukowski” after dating another man (Sounes 187). The fallout of a relationship, a type of love and loss story, is inherently canonical in that the subject itself is the central part of many popular works, especially of the authors Bukowski mentions in other poems like Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound. Like in most cases with Bukowski, it is *how* he deals with the uncomfortable parts of normal experiences that sets him apart from other authors. By addressing the unusual situation he and Linda found themselves in during “the shower”, he is confronting what other authors cover in flowery romantic language or avoid entirely. He is suggesting that while they were in the shower, even he was fooled by the physicality of it to know what they really are.

“The shower” serves as a type of dream world where men and women get along and both are pleased with each other, more so physically than emotionally. However, even when the subjects of “the shower” are already physically naked, he presents them at an emotionally naked point as well. Something Bukowski does extraordinarily well in his poetry is to draw out the flesh and blood of a character, even when the character is representative of his actual self. He is willing to admit that he, despite the routine nature of what he does with Linda, still does not have an answer about what their relationship is and what it should become. Based on Bukowski’s character presentation, the reader’s only choice is to see the person for who they truly are.

The same occurs in the speaker’s secret sizing up of Linda and her behavior during and after the shower. The clue of how Linda “gets out [of the shower] first” during this particular encounter instead of her other act of “sometimes singing while I stay in” (Bukowski 82) shows

that she is wanting to be away from him. Further, she hides herself in a towel (Bukowski 82) to keep him from being able to touch her like he did in the shower. The cues that Linda gives to him are the main reason that the atmosphere between them changes, and he is forced to consider if this particular interaction with her will be reminiscent of all others that men and women have. It is almost as if he is not truly concerned with whether or not Linda is still interested in him, but that if she isn't, he hopes that they will try to make it the best they can anyway.

In this way, he demonstrates how he is still reeling from the breakup from the real Linda outside of the text but also how the inability to connect with another person is a vivid, uncomfortable place to be in. From this experience with Linda in “the shower”, Bukowski’s goal is to take back the personal power in a sexual encounter in a woman in another one of his poems in *The Pleasures*, “somebody.”

Emotionally, Bukowski is still reeling in this poem, as he is living with “the sad blue blues” (Bukowski 261). A woman recognizes him and sits down beside him, asking “are you really Charles Bukowski?” (Bukowski 261) as she is clearly in awe of him like his cult following is. Based on how he treats the woman in the poem, she could be representative of his opinion of those, his followers, that believe he should be considered part of the canon. He is more focused on himself and his feelings than how he could be portraying himself to the woman as well as how he is blatantly brushing her off.

The way she plops down next to him and asks him a dreamy question makes her seem like a bit of a childish character, a young girl meeting her childhood hero. Of course, in most cases of childhood heroes, they are usually not what the child thought they were going to be. When she says his name, he wants to “forget that” because “I do not feel good” (Bukowski 261),

meaning he does not want to be associated even with his own identity. He does not want to focus on what or who he is but instead wants to focus on what he does when he “got the sad sads [and] all I want to do is fuck you” (Bukowski 261). Bukowski wants to engage in sex for sex’s sake; no emotions attached and only raw action.

His legacy in the canon may just be that he has created, in the literary world, new ways to engage with and engage in sex. He is emotionally numb to himself, wanting to escape the reality of being who he is, but she doesn’t realize it as “she laughed. . . she thought I was being clever” (Bukowski 261). She’s not recognizing that what he does and says is so outrageous, but instead finding it a clever quirk of a person like him. It is similar to the response to the shocking nature of all of Bukowski’s writing, like the reader could not believe someone would chance to say something so forward and blunt. He is content in “somebody” to be abashedly himself, just to see how someone else would react.

In this poem, almost as if it is a coping mechanism, he again studies a woman’s body in another poem and has a multifaceted experience from this. He “looked up her long slim legs of heaven” (Bukowski 261), examining her physical exterior as he did to the other woman in “the shower”. However, when viewing this woman, he notes her insides too. He sees “her liver and her quivering intestine” (Bukowski 261), ugly parts of her that can draw his attention away from looking at his own interior thoughts and being. For this type of ugliness, he also sees her as a type of saving grace, a “Christ” figure found “in there” that can distract him from his problems, the “long lines of starvation within me” (Bukowski 261).

She becomes a type of object, usable without personhood, when he “walked over and grabbed her on the couch [and] ripped her dress up around her face” (Bukowski 261). He enters a



type of animalistic mode, noticing that “I didn’t care/ rape or the end of the earth/ one more time/ to be there/ anywhere/ real” (Bukowski 261) and using the woman’s body as a vessel for feeling. His actions he notes that are representative of rape are done for personal gain, for him to be “Charles somebody” (Bukowski 262). The act of sex in the poem is only based around the agent of sex, his penis, and the barrier to the sex he wants, her panties. He gets “her panties. . . on the floor” and only when “my cock went in/ my cock my god my cock went in” (Bukowski 262) did he feel any gratification or identity.

In his taking advantage of the woman in the poem, we never get her name but the poem ends with the reader, and Bukowski himself, knowing his. The reader gets the sense that the identity of the woman is not essential; that she will always remember their tryst but he will just chalk it up with all of the others. In contrast to “the shower”, the sexual act described in “somebody” is more violent in nature, demonstrating a type of predatory nature to Bukowski and his approaches to sex only for personal gratification.

Bukowski reprises his role of predator in “the girl on the bus stop bench” from *Love is a Dog From Hell*, chronicling his poetry from 1974 to 1977. Bukowski is driving “in the left lane going east on Sunset” when he spots the “Italian or Indian or Greek” girl “with her legs crossed reading a paperback” (Bukowski 220), following his obsession with the legs of females because they lead to the “cunt” he finds so coveted in “the shower” from *The Pleasures* (Bukowski 82). He is watching her intently for her short skirt, for the rare moments when “a wind would lift her skirt” while he sat at a stoplight to show her “perfect immaculate legs” that he “stared and kept staring” at (Bukowski 220). Bukowski fixation escalates to a level that “it had never happened quite like. . .before”, which pushes him to commit an act of indecency in public. He “drove

around the block and parked in the supermarket lot directly across from her”, wearing his “dark shades” to hide his feeling of “a schoolboy in his first excitement” (Bukowski 220). However, the reality is that he is *not* a schoolboy but fifty-seven years old when the poem is written in 1977.

Bukowski’s act of mere lusting reaches a new level of perversity when after “the wind flipped her skirt high along her thighs”, he “began rubbing” (Bukowski 221) himself to the sight of her body. The act of his public masturbation comes with an unsettling description, how he “climaxed” and “smelled my sperm” and “felt it wet against my shorts and pants” (Bukowski 221). However, he feels that he can justify his actions after “an ugly white bus” comes and the “took her away” (Bukowski 221) from his line of sight. He tells himself that “I’m a peep-freak but at least I didn’t expose myself” (Bukowski 221), feeling consolation in the idea that he only committed a minor offense of the comical ‘peeping Tom’ instead of becoming a branded ‘flasher’. Bukowski even goes so far as to participate in victim blaming, citing the girl as the reason he had to act like he did. He has to begrudgingly admit that he is a “peep-freak” but asks questions of the girl and her attire.

He wonders “why do they do that? Why do they look like that?” (Bukowski 221) about attractive women, like their looks are present to subdue men just ‘minding their own business’. He asks “why do they let the wind do that?”, suggesting that the girl purposely controlled the weather to show bare skin, trapping him in a sexual decision to touch himself to a stranger. Bukowski is subscribing to his ‘dirty old man’ aesthetic that has been prescribed to him based on the vulgarity of his poetry, but even his perverted actions do not cast readers away. In the poem, he points out that he is not the worst of the worst, but merely someone who cannot help the way

that he is. He calls attention to what has made him popular in the first place: saying things and telling stories that no one else, even if they experienced it too, is willing to tell. Bukowski will call out the ugly and the unnatural anywhere it exists, even if it is within himself.

In the theme of violence, in both a sexual and physical nature, Bukowski's poem "get the nose" featured in *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck* becomes even more sinister. The poem explains how he and another assailant, Mickey, taught a man a lesson about "working realism" (Bukowski 43) by committing egregious acts of violence against him and his family. No connection is made in the poem linking the speaker and the man being tortured besides how they randomly "snatched him from his cab" on their journey to teach him that "any man must be ready for anything" (Bukowski 43). Bukowski and Mickey are taking on an educational role, attempting to teach by violence and intimidation, similar to Bukowski's gratification methods in "somebody". In "get the nose", they equate "love" with "eventual pain", "victory" with "eventual defeat", and "grace" with "eventual slovenliness", explaining that everything good in life comes with a debilitating consequence.

They first begin by verbally attacking the man, calling him a "motherfuck" and ordering him to "get up off your crazy knees" so the speaker can "belt" him "down" (Bukowski 43). The speaker even threatens the man directly, saying "I'll kill you!" when he won't "stop crying. god damn" (Bukowski 43). He runs through the laundry list of what they've done to this man, explaining how "we dumped your car into the sea and raped your daughter", whom the poem later expresses is only twelve (Bukowski 43). They tell him how they "destroyed his home, his car" and "burned his wife with gasoline" while they mock him in the process, noting the way "his eyes" are "begging for mercy" after Mickey has helped the speaker "hold his head up" for

him to “break his nose with this pipe” (Bukowski 43). However, all of these malicious acts are to show him that “there’s no way out...you see, you understand?” and makes a larger commentary on how death and misfortune are primed for everyone to experience.

The speaker reminds him that “death is every second”, that there are infinite chances for one to be faced with death, and how it is manifest in everyday things, like “the calendar”, “little girls”, and “buttons on your shirt” (Bukowski 43). This type of message brings in another level of violence, forcing the man to feel psychologically tortured. Through this violent interaction with the “cabby”, who manages to keep his “balls” because it would cause “too much bleeding” (Bukowski 43), Bukowski is pointing to ugly realities in society that seem without reason coated in an equally ugly and senseless altercation. Taking a difficult truth and bringing it to life is Bukowski’s specialty, something that gives him the uniqueness for the canon. His message in “get the nose” is that bad things happen every day to all kinds of people, and there’s nothing that prevents you from being next, “didn’t you know?” (Bukowski 43). This opinion of doom and gloom about the world around him is represented again in another of Bukowski’s poems, “making it”.

Following the lesson taught to the cabby in “get the nose”, “making it” from *Slouching Toward Nirvana* imposes some advice to the reader that perhaps the cabby should have taken. “making it” is all about what one must do to get through all of the world’s ugliness, what one’s instructions are. “making it” suggests that people are ‘phoning it in’ or putting on a false face simply for the day to day, and that this action is necessary for survival. The poem instructs the reader to “ignore all possible concepts and possibilities” to “just make it, babe” (Bukowski 20), to do what needs to be done no matter what that means for each individual person. People are

meant to “make it: a house a car”, finding themselves basic needs including “a belly full of beans” and working within their means.

People should “fuck and if you can’t fuck/ copulate” (Bukowski 20), giving in to animalistic behaviors or engaging in sex for the wholesome, childbearing reasons as long as they participate at all. It is important to “make money but don’t work too hard” and “don’t smoke too much but drink enough to relax” (Bukowski 20), enjoying small semblances of luxury without overindulgence. One should also “stay off the streets” (Bukowski 20), a suggestion to avoid crime and bad influences. His advice altogether is not wholly unreasonable or not how the average person would think. However, the last lines of the poem suggest that this type of life mentioned throughout the poem is too fragile and unrealistic to achieve.

He instructs his readers to “wipe your ass real good” and “use a lot of toilet paper” for the sake of avoiding “bad manners” for “let[ting] people know you shit or could smell like it if you weren’t careful” (Bukowski 20), suggesting that one should enjoy life, but not *too* much. This channels the idea of the ‘dirty old man’, referencing unspeakable elements of life like defecating without shame. This part of the poem gives the message that you can work, but not “too hard” and you can’t smoke, but you can drink “enough to relax”; one must always balance on the border of an overindulgence. Bukowski’s poem “making it” is about hiding how one really acts for the interest of social niceties, something he has ritualistically avoided in his life and in his poetry. This poem suggests that the message from society is to hide the excess, to participate in vices only to the extent that it is commonly acceptable. “making it” subverses everything other poets, and the canon, have told Bukowski his poetry has to be: just on the edge, never crossing the line all the way.

However, he grows to challenge the line, reaching entirely over it in most of his work. For his boldness, for his disregard for careful boundaries, readers feel like they are in on a secret about the facts of life that other people that don't bother with Bukowski do not know. The lewd topics of the poems made the canon entirely reticent to accept him. Aggressive language and off kilter topics would not be accepted by all who appreciate literature. In fact, to some, those characteristics may lead them to not consider his work 'literature' at all.

The push for Bukowski to be more widely available was entirely a posthumous effort, with Bukowski not having much regard for the opinion of others while he was alive and writing. This opinion is clear in his last public poetry reading at the Sweetwater Inn in Redondo Beach, California, on March 30th of 1980 (Jihms1, "Bukowski - The Last Reading"). In the recording of the reading, he delays the start of the reading by laboriously taking things out of his pockets, tiredly grunting, blowing his nose, and taking off his coat (Jihms1, "Bukowski - The Last Reading"). His age is evident in his behavior and his tired voice. He addresses the audience aggressively, seeming shocked when someone in the audience shakes his hand when he comes to the stage and calls out to someone speaking inaudibly in the audience, asking "what was that, motherfucker?" (Jihms1, "Bukowski - The Last Reading"). He prefaces his reading by explaining how the reading will proceed and why he intends for it to go in such a way. He explains that he "will not rejoin with the audience", become close with them, nor they with him, and that they should find themselves under the description of "ladies and gentleman of culture" (Jihms1, "Bukowski - The Last Reading").

He spends time discussing his habit of participating in horserace betting, reasoning with the audience his strategy while he pours himself a hefty glass of wine on stage, promising that "I

will soon start to read poetry. . . I might as well start about now” (Jihmns1, “Bukowski - The Last Reading”). Even after this, he takes several drags of his cigarette, only getting out the title of the poem he’ll read after he belches from the wine. His hesitation suggests his typical unwillingness to do public readings, seeming to be annoyed with the effort of every movement and word. He knows what the audience came to the reading for and delivers simply for that reason, not out of any personal desire to share his work with others. Fitting his ‘dirty old man’ persona, he plays into his vices and is uninterested in the joys and choruses of youth or what they may want him to “rejoin” for. Charles Bukowski wrote for himself from his viewpoint, not concerned with how something that directly affected him could do anything to or for other people reading his work.

Once he realized this, that readers were amused with what he was writing, even though to him it was just *life*, he simply continued business as usual. Bukowski’s writing meant nothing particularly special to him, but everything to his few readers. His work makes bold and uncomfortable statements, but not on purpose. It was his “cult” following that determined that his work was worthy to read, not him. When being presented with Bukowski’s work, the canon has no place to put him. The canon determines literary significance within the time period a literary work was produced in, and what its lasting impact is imagined to be. When the work being examined is presented in a type of dirty setting of a moral underbelly, then it is not considered literarily significant.

The work of Charles Bukowski, by being bold and subverting ‘safe’ topics of conversation, is making a statement challenging the canon for an honesty that has not been achieved before. Because of the uniqueness of his work, for what it addresses and what emotions

it explains and produces, Bukowski is creating a new realism. Based on his publishing success, albeit posthumously, Charles Bukowski has also achieved the literary prowess to be considered popular by most standards. Largely published, even in multiple languages and countries, would be representative of literary work that has made a significant impact on the literary world and its readers. Due to Bukowski's topics, though, and his limited effort in appealing to the greater public, the canon shunned him in favor of authors more willing to adhere to societal standards.

When Bukowski expressed in his lifetime that he was writing just to write, using his experiences and no other outside devices, he placed himself in a type of isolation that did not use the flowery language and effects that serve to be traditional and consistently well-liked. He only appealed to people who had no one appealing to them either. He was popular among outcasts and social pariahs, distancing himself from the seriousness and appeal of the canon. What he wrote about was vulgar and who he was based on his personal poetry was vulgar. Charles Bukowski's subject matter and flippant attitude to what that subject matter was kept a lock on the gates to the literary canon, and that's how he, and his readers, liked it.



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