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Varieties of Masculinity in Charles Bukowski's Short Stories

Bachelor's project in Foreign Languages - Specialization in English

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I want to be free, to express myself. Man up. I want to have meaningful, emotional relationships with my brothers. Man up. I want to be weak sometimes. Man up. I want to be strong in a way that isn’t about physical power or dominance. Man up. I want to talk to my son about something other than sports. Man up. I want to be who I am. Man up.

(Kyle “Guante” Tran Myhre, ‘10 Responses to the Phrase “Man Up”’, in *A Love Song, A Death Rattle, A Battle Cry*, Button Poetry, 2016)

This paper is a literature review on three short stories by Charles Bukowski from his collections *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, *South of No North* and *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, interpreted via masculinity studies and methods of close reading. Drawing from previous work in literary masculinities and Kaufman’s theory on the triad of men’s violence after David Charlson, the author argues three cases where Bukowski’s characters depart from traditional ideals of masculinity. This is displayed in the primary texts through the male characters’ self-awareness of toxic masculinity, and sometimes results in breaking away from its structures. Limited to an examination of three short stories, this paper is a narrow but representative sample of variants of masculinity in Bukowski’s short-form prose.

Keywords: toxic masculinity, violence, literary masculinities

1. Introduction

Literary masculinities are yet an underrepresented category in the field of gender studies (Lea & Schoene). Described by Lea and Schoene as a “late bloomer” in the context of men’s studies, it is likely that this oversight will be corrected in the coming years (319). In the meantime, this paper is the author’s contribution to an interesting and important body of works which may well become a priceless resource in understanding real-life masculinities as well. It was important that this paper

cover a writer whose work will not be widely read and analysed – not to be unique for the sake of uniqueness, but because the author feels that Bukowski, at long last, deserves academic attention.

Charles Bukowski is renowned as one of America's most prolific authors, but despite this recognition, additionally ranks among the most misunderstood. Owing in part to an anti-social nature and general rejection of society, academics marked Bukowski as an outsider. The few critics who read his work were overwhelmingly negative, labelling him as "sexist", "vulgar" and "a misanthropist", among others (Charlson 69). There are elements of truth to much of the criticism about his style, but Bukowski was not sexist. This paper undertakes the task of demonstrating through close reading of three short stories that, on the contrary, Bukowski's masculinities fight against the moulds of ideal masculinity, possess self-awareness of their predicament, and sometimes succeed in subverting those narrow gender roles.

2. Methodology

With gender and masculinity studies as the theoretical starting point, this essay examines three short stories, "A 0.45 to Pay the Rent" (1983), "Bop Bop Against That Curtain" (1973) and an untitled short story from the collection *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (henceforth referred to by its opening line "[T]he summers are longer") (1969), this paper compares concepts of traditional "ideal" masculinity to reveal ways in which Bukowski's male characters often subvert these expectations. The framework for traditional masculinity is found in gender studies literature, namely in "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence" by Kaufman and "Gendering Men: Re-Visions of Violence as a Test of Manhood in American Literature" by Armengol. Kaufman addresses the origins of the violence inherent in normative masculinity; Armengol's article is an introduction to literary masculinities, providing an overview of American literary masculinity as well as applications of the fledgling theory.

The short stories reviewed were not chosen for any specific quality: the author feels as though any story in the three collections (*Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, *South of No North* and *Tales of Ordinary Madness*) could have been analysed to draw similar conclusions. This paper is interested in ways in which Bukowski's masculinities diverge from socially normative ones; though the length and nature of this paper limits the number of stories to three, most short stories

in the collections seemed to feature subversive masculinities, though not in the same ways as the stories chosen for close-reading.

3. Gender and masculinity

While a close reading of the primary material alone might provide enough insight into Bukowski's gender presentations, combining it with theory from the field of masculinity studies lends further credibility to claims of its subversive nature. Bukowski has been previously analysed through the lens of gender theory – namely, David Charlson devoted an entire chapter of his dissertation on Bukowski to masculinity and violence, utilising Kaufman's theory of the triad of men's violence (Charlson 1995; Kaufman 1987). Overall, however, just as Bukowski suffers academic neglect¹, studies in literary masculinities remain “generally unexplored in academia” (Armengol 78).

Much has been written on the topic of masculinity in the last few decades to establish key assumptions for researchers to work with, negotiated through adaptations on feminist literary analysis (Armengol 78-79). Wherever gender is concerned, its formation is worth discussing. The prevailing view among gender theorists is that gender is performative: created through inhabiting a gender role within society and separate from biology; gender is ultimately a social construct rather than a corporeal landmark (Armengol 75-76, 78; Knights 1). This distinction – which informs this thesis as well – is relevant not least because of the power it lends to narratives and cultural productions; presentations of gender which are either adopted or rejected by society. Ben Knights dresses this particularly well:

[M]asculine identities and (stereo)typically male ways of being and acting are constantly being reinforced and re-enacted through social practices of communication among which narratives both oral and written, in speech, in films and on paper, figure prominently. (17)

The second working assumption of this paper is that, through analysing fictional gender representations, it is possible to find relevant clues into how real life masculinities (or, elsewhere, femininities) are constructed (Armengol 78).

On the constructions of masculinity and violence in American literature, Josep Armengol states, “in most American adventure stories, masculinity remains inseparable from violence”, and

quotes gender theorist Michael Kimmel to drive home the point in simple terms: “male socialization is socialization to the legitimacy of violence” (81). Bukowski’s short stories do not deal in adventure of the traditional kind, but violence is ever-present: verbal abuse, physical violence, self-destruction, risky behaviour, contact sports and warfare. Through his short-form prose, Bukowski demonstrates his understanding of the forms of hurt to which men subject themselves and others, especially women; the stories become first-hand witness accounts of the dark side of the quest for masculinity.

Bukowski never celebrates or even legitimises the trials he – as the subject of much of his semi-autobiographical work – and other men go through. Despite his (partly) self-cultured reputation as a chauvinistic “dirty old man”, Bukowski had no reason to glorify the ultimately futile strife for the “ideal” masculinity: having been abused first by his tough-guy father, then by his peers in adolescence, and finally by working-class society, Bukowski wrote masculinities which, on careful inspection, are incredibly self-aware and critical, even “quasi-feminist” (Charlson 14, 127). Three examples follow.

4. Varieties of subversive masculinity in Bukowski’s short stories

4.1. “A 0.45 to Pay the Rent”

“A 0.45 to Pay the Rent” is the opening story to Bukowski’s 1983 short story collection *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. The primary interest of the story lies in the duality of its male protagonist, Duke, who is a loving father by day and an outlaw by night. Contrasting the softness shown around his 4-year-old daughter, Lala, and the toughness his criminal dealings necessitate to provide for her, Duke is a contradiction of the most positive aspects of masculinity at his best and a cautionary tale of toxic masculinity at his worst.

It is no coincidence that the very first line opens with Duke’s characterisation through Lala: “Duke had this daughter, Lala, they named her”, Bukowski writes, underlining the significance of daughter to father. Already in the first paragraph the reader learns how Lala reins in Duke’s worst impulses: once opposed to having children out of fear, Duke adores Lala and even imagines a telepathic connection between them (Bukowski, *Tales* 1). From the very beginning, Lala seems to

bring out the best in Duke – she is a symbol for all that is tender and patient and genuine inside him.

Bukowski makes this divide between traditional hard masculinity and Duke’s ability to reject it even more obvious with the roleplay between Lala and Duke: Lala takes on the role of mother and Duke the baby, stepping further away from a place of manly authority (3). The same roleplay scene in the car includes one of the most acutely socially critical exchanges in *Tales*, a brief introduction to toxic masculinity in all but name:

“baby, why do people try to hit us with their cars?”²

“well, mama, it’s because they are unhappy and unhappy people like to hurt things.”

“aren’t there any happy people?”

“there are many people who pretend that they are happy.”

“why?”

“because they are ashamed and frightened and don’t have the guts to admit it.”

“are you frightened?”

“I only have the guts to admit it to *you* ...” (3)

Masculinity studies have often and early pointed to emotional repression as the source of violence, described almost comically by Kaufman as men becoming “pressure cookers” (12). Bukowski need not explicitly draw the connection between masculinity, hurting people and bottling up one’s feelings. Mama-Lala and Baby-Duke’s conversation foreshadows the rest of the story: even Duke’s self-awareness cannot prevent his own pent-up emotions from boiling over moments later.

The duality of Duke’s existence is immediately presented to the reader as Duke’s wife, Mag, discusses his nocturnal criminality, expressing fear and worry, a mirror of Duke from moments before. It is the mention of his work, the fear it induces in him, both for his own life and what his death might mean for his daughter, that aggravates him to the point of becoming verbally abusive and unreasonable, even domineering, all signs of previous softness gone. This interaction with Mag has nothing positive about it, and after Duke is done (and Mag has fled to the kitchen as ordered), the sight and sound has instilled in Lala such a sense of estrangement from her father that she asks him if she should call him daddy or Duke (5). “Daddy” is safe and familiar, “Duke” is formal and distanced – his cursing and raving have harmed Duke’s relationship with his daughter, but he still forgets himself, making a crude joke at Lala and further annoying Mag.

In contrast, Mag's "I LOVE [sic] you, Duke" is what calms Duke down, or rather, tires him: he is disarmed by genuine emotion, the direct antithesis to his repression-borne violence and rage (5). In a similar vein, after kissing Lala goodbye, he is nearly overcome with emotion as he thinks about her sweetness. It appears almost as though Duke is unequipped to fight, process or contain positive emotion without an uncomfortable amount of labour – labour which he has little to no time for in his life, exemplified in his pushing away Lala from his mind, and hurrying to grab his gun and head to work.

Although Duke's outburst seems almost unavoidable, something all men must fall victim to, Bukowski will not reward the displays of machismo and power involved. Duke's wife will not reward him with dinner. Lala cannot recognise her soft-spoken, loving father in what she overhears. Traditional masculinity, when weaponised in this manner, is portrayed as something utterly undesirable, and this does not appear accidental on Bukowski's part.

4.2. "Bop Bop Against That Curtain"

"Bop Bop Against That Curtain" catalogues the everyday life of three teenaged boys during the Great Depression as they wrestle with what it means – or what it takes – to be a man. The setting is intimately familiar to Bukowski from his own youth: born in 1920, his adolescence, too, coincided with "Franky" Roosevelt and the depression. Against the backdrop of boyhood in the thirties, Bukowski explores the concept of cross-generational trauma by contrasting portrayals of fathers and sons, power and impotence.

A divide is presented between the three boys and their respective, unemployed fathers. Though this is never explicitly stated in the text, the three boys must be too young to be expected to work. Despite this, their circumstances appear to have thrust them into early adulthood, interspersed with continuous physical violence and participation in adult activities like going to the burlesque and smoking. Nonetheless, their fathers' joblessness is a cause of constant concern and aggravation for the boys. They understand working is a responsibility for their fathers as the heads of the family, and this is currently a responsibility in which theirs are failing. The narrator's description reflects this: the fathers are practically banished to their front porches, "jobless and impotent", effeminate and cowering and tethered by domestic concerns like electricity bills

(Bukowski, *South of No North* 22). They will only glance at the boys' senseless demonstrations of violence down the street – either entirely distanced from traditional displays of manhood, or perhaps longing for it so much they fear one look might compel them to run away and reclaim their lost masculinity.

The boys, who are always moving, always brave and always tough, look down on this brand of unmanliness – after all, to be passive is to be feminine, and to be feminine is to be powerless (Kaufman 6). However, as much as the narrator and friends find their fathers reprehensible, their own quest for masculinity on the streets and the burlesque house is only possible because they are not, by definition, yet men. Their fathers' spirits are crushed under their responsibilities because they are a man's job to shoulder. Whatever their manhood may look like, however un-masculine, they are still men, and the narrator, Baldy and Jimmy with their relative carelessness and narrow concepts of masculinity, are not. Bukowski is making a subtle statement about how maleness does not equate to (traditional) masculinity, and vice versa.

Bukowski describes the daily activity of the three boys as typical of those in their socio-economic situation, revolving around toxic masculinity and faux toughness. Six days out of seven, the boys spend the day playing tackle football and fighting (17-18). On Sundays, they head to the Burbank burlesque: Sundays, according to the narrator, are their “quiet, easy day”, and consequently, it is the only day the boys catch a break from the boxing matches on the asphalt (19). This would not ring terribly subversive were it not for the way Bukowski chose to address these things in the narration, e.g. on fighting, the main character explains: “Skin rips, bones bruise, there's blood, but you get up like nothing was wrong”, and “I guess it was because we pretended to be so tough and never asked for mercy” (18-19). Even through a first-person narrative, Bukowski's opinion on ridiculous male posturing comes through. His characters are introspective enough to recognise their self-perpetuated toxic masculinity and the harm it causes, but never self-aware enough to break these habits.

The story opens with a scene where the three boys are peeping on a couple about to have a sex in a notable display of male entitlement and objectification. This turns out to be thematically significant later when the narrator, Baldy and Jimmy finally visit the burlesque. Sundays – with their strolls up and down Main Street, the hotdogs, and the pinball and every number at the burlesque – are set up as a counter-point to their brutal weekdays. Firstly, it is the only day of the week the three can truly be boys: they wander pointlessly, play and laugh. Secondly, Sundays are

the only time they explicitly see women other than their mothers, and this seems particularly significant for the narrator: “we were in love with the strippers at the Burbank”, he explains at the beginning, though considering this is prefaced with an account of the trio looking for a peepshow, one could easily disagree (17). The sentiment repeats later, however:

I was in love with Rosalie. I often thought of writing her and telling her how great she was but somehow I never got around to it. (21)

There is a certain naivety involved in being in love with a stripper, but for the narrator, the feeling is likely more profound than a superficial crush – something which cannot be said for his two friends. The narrator’s home is loveless, and his close friendships are founded on mutual violence and male competition, so it is no surprise all his unreturned and unexpressed feelings would be directed toward a beautiful female (overt in her femininity, a counter-point to the overt masculinity of the boys) who is unlikely to reject them, albeit due to the nature of her vocation.

The opening paragraph of the story, however, foreshadows the end of the narrator’s Sunday escapes. He is repulsed by the attitude of male entitlement he witnesses from his best friend, Baldy, irrevocably damaging the sense of innocent fun he previously felt. After Baldy crudely propositions one of the regular strippers, the other two boys confront him. “Well, she gets up and shakes it, she gets up in front of them and shakes it!” Baldy protests, but in an uncharacteristically level-headed fashion, is rebutted with “She’s just trying to make a living” from the narrator and Jimmy (22).

Baldy’s rant, reminiscent of the modern “she’s asking for it” argument, was shut down with rare grace – rare for the thirties, the time of publication, and the twenty-first century³ – but the damage is done. The narrator “begins to lose interest in those Sundays” soon after the incident, no doubt because of the taint of male entitlement and objectification of women on what used to be his only positive, non-violent space (22). He realises the other men are not really “in love” with the girls on stage, not in the way he is. He realises there is no escaping competitive masculinity – not yet, not for him, anyway.

4.3. “The Summers are longer”

The third and final Bukowski short story under examination, published in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* without a title, challenges normative male heterosexuality. Featuring confessional inner monologue and uninhibited, open admiration of male beauty by another man, this story is told from the first-person perspective of Bukowski himself. In signature Bukowskian fashion, flashes of self-awareness and norm subversion are countered by the main character's inability to act on his criticisms: he cannot tell his friends that they are beautiful or that he feels elated among them or speak up against the homophobic statements from one of his friends, Jack.

In the middle of an otherwise positive story, the narrator also regresses back to a defensive state: "the people will always betray you. / never trust the people" (Bukowski, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* 21). This is a mirror for the response to the anxiety of living in a world dominated by toxic masculinity, which Kaufman describes in "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence": "all other men are my potential humiliators, my enemies, my competitors" (10). The story is a negotiation of Bukowski's natural (expression) and learned (repression) impulses.

Bukowski draws attention away from the setting by contesting the very reality of it: "the canal looks strange, very strange" (19) / "what the hell? is it a dream?" (23) / "I sleep. I sleep in comradeship" (25), thus pointing to the transcendental as the things that matter.

As demonstrated by the two previously discussed short stories, Bukowski has a tendency of repeating what is important and foreshadowing events. Jack's homophobic comments and slurs do not make sense in the general context of Bukowski's work, but they serve to counterbalance the homoromantic sentiments of the narrator:

I laugh. [Jack] is comfortable and he's human. every man is afraid of being a queer. I get a little tired of it. maybe we should all become queers and relax. (20)

the door opens and there is the Bird. I look twice. I can't see whether it is a woman or a man. the face is the distilled essence opium of untouched beauty. it's a man. the motions are man. I know it but I also know that he can catch hell and ultimate brutality every time he hits the streets. (22)

There are several other instances like this where Bukowski brings the reader's attention to Bird's (androgynous) beauty, and others where he relates to Jack on an emotional level. "Jack likes me coming on. he's been carrying my soul and he's tired", he writes, putting his relationship with Jack considerably above the rest of his drinking buddies that day (23). Despite the homophobic dialogue and the learned resistance to the comfort of positive homosociality, the Bukowski who is

contemplating drowning himself in the Venice canals is changed, through vulnerable and beautiful moments among his friends, two of whom are male, into someone content, someone safe: “the sea will not drown me and neither will they. ... may all God’s children come to this” (25). Bukowski is unafraid to show a break from the mould where traditional masculinity is concerned and reject the stubborn repression of homoerotic love⁴ through an autobiographical story.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to exhibit a less-considered aspect of Charles Bukowski’s prose: his presentations of masculinity. Working off a triad of assumptions where

- 1) gender is a social construct continuously mediated through societal norms,
- 2) masculinity and violence have a long and inseparable history in the American literary tradition, and
- 3) the construction of fictional masculinities may provide important insight into the construction of real life masculinities,

this paper presents a reading of three short stories by Bukowski to show how he acknowledges, combats yet is still hopelessly grounded by the traditional (violent) form of masculinity.

“A 0.45 to Pay the Rent” depicts a father torn between his impulses to be tender and malleable for his daughter, and his criminal occupation which forces him to commit acts of violence and shut off his emotions to fulfil a traditionally masculine role. In “Bop Bop Against That Curtain”, the young narrator goes through the motions of violence and constantly aspires to live up to “real” manhood while working through his negative emotions pertaining to his powerless father. He finds a reprieve from the brutal male socialisation in his “love” at the burlesque, but eventually discovers that this, too, is just another platform for toxic masculinity. Finally, in “The summers are longer” Bukowski portrays non-violent male companionship, even male romance, as a thing of beauty and healing, never legitimising the homophobic dialogue of the character Jack.

This paper utilises the growing field of literary masculinities to review a sample of Charles Bukowski’s work in the context of traditional (toxic) masculinity. It has been acknowledged within gender studies that fictional gender constructions provide meaningful insight into the real life which they imitate; likewise, societal norms are in constant dialogue with the culture (and cultural

productions) around us (Armengol 78). Bukowski's works were chosen for their relatively unknown nature which allowed for an analysis uninformed by previous work on the subject, as well as giving credit to one of America's most prolific authors.

Despite his sexist reputation as a "dirty old man", Bukowski's masculinities repeatedly defy traditional masculinity by being self-aware of the perils of toxic masculinity and attempting to correct their behaviour. Sometimes they succeed. Bukowski took great care in writing subtly subversive masculinities which asked hard, uncomfortable questions about the prevailing gender norms.

Several authors counsel against selecting works from Bukowski to construct a thesis (Cooke 2; Encke 17), but it is the author's firm belief that the arguments outlined here about the gender themes in Bukowski's work can be found across his prose. The sample size of stories was limited by the thesis length, but this should not weaken the argument presented.

There are, however, some real limitations to this work beside the length. This paper features primary works from the year 1969 to 1987, as well as secondary literature published mainly before the twenty-first century. While this concern is not so pressing for the gender studies portion itself, ideas of masculinity, as well as their portrayals, have not been stagnant since the sixties. It is possible that, by analysing works dated over thirty years back, one may not find results applicable to current day masculinity. Common sense dictates that normative masculinity seems quite similar today, but it cannot be disputed that some nuances are bound to be lost in translation.

Many more works on Bukowski's masculinities are still waiting to be written, as are general works and theory on literary masculinities and their application to real-world gender construction. There are interesting parallels to be drawn between Bukowski and Beatnik masculinity which did not fit within the frame of this paper. This work focuses only on the varieties of masculinity found in Bukowski's short-form prose, but a similar treatment could (and should) be administered to his femininities, perhaps to investigate whether those, too, were subversive. This, and further work on Bukowski's masculinities, should be a topic of a longer work where a wider body of work may be analysed in a single dissertation.

Notes

1. Charlson (14-15) and Leinonen (2014, 1) in particular raise this point, but it is evident from the sparseness of academic work to be found on Bukowski that his works do not enjoy widespread academic popularity.
2. All the direct quotes from Bukowski are presented in their original published form: without capitalisation, and occasionally with incorrect grammar.
3. Lea, Daniel and Schoene, Berthold. "Introduction to the Special Section on Literary Masculinities". *Men and Masculinities*, 2002.
4. Kaufman addresses the repression of homosexuality on pages 10-11.

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