

The Act of Aggression in Charles Bukowski's *The Bluebird*

Asst. Lect. Huda H. Jassim

Al-Qadisiyah University-College of Education/Department of English

Hudah.Jassim@qu.edu.iq

Abstract:

The present study aims at shedding the light on Charles Bukowski's poem "Bluebird" through which Bukowski (1920-1994) manifests his aggression and disappointment of the modern age. The study examines the way Bukowski turns the sweet tender image of the bird into a lifeless voice penetrating under the tremendous impact of modern age changes and the absence social justice.

Keywords: Charles Bukowski, The Bluebird, Aggression.

الأداء العدوانى فى قصيدة الطائر الأزرق ل جازلز بوكوفسكى

م.م. هدى هادى جاسم\اللغة الانكليزية\الأدب

الملخص:

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى تسليط الضوء على قصيدة الطائر الأزرق ل جازلز بوكوفسكى (١٩٢٠-١٩٩٤) والتي من خلالها يوضح الشاعر مفهوم العدوانية وخيبة الأمل من العصر الحديث. كذلك تختبر الدراسة كيفية تحويل صورة الطائر الرقيقة والجميلة الى صوت فاقد للحياة يتسلل تحت التأثير الهائل لتغيرات العصر الحديث وغياب العدالة الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : العدوانية ، جازلز بوكوفسكى، قصيدة الطائر الأزرق.

1. Charles Bukowski (1920-1994) : Introduction

Among the most well-known poets in the American post-modern movement is Charles Bukowski (1920 -1994). The poet gained great reputation of being upset and extremely rebellious to the different social, political and humanistic levels of life in American low class society at his time. Due to family mistreatment and emotional deprivation that he lacked in his childhood, Bukowski grew on an aggressive mood and hesitated mentality which led to his somber tone in most of his works. Bukowski original name was Henry Charles Bukowski or Heinrich Karl Bukowski born in Andernach, Germany on 16, August 1920 to an American soldier and a German woman and he was their only son. Bukowski mentioned how he was treated bitterly by his father who followed the strict way of bringing up his son and used to rebuke him for whatever reasons. However, this bad treatment resulted in various up normal satirical modes of writing which reflected the ugly early years that Bukowski lived. This fact crystalized the way he depicted the unwelcomed conditioned which he received in his adolescence and made it clear in his poetry and short stories. Bukowski turned to be an alcoholic from his teenage till the rest of his life and this showed his view of degradation and dehumanization. He adopted the isolated style of criticizing the corrupted society which mistreated the poor working class. Bukowski's anger reinforced the revolutionary voice of aggression and dissatisfaction which covered most of his poems. The family institution represented the corner stone that formed his upset style and abusive manner of addressing the global changes of the world at his time. Themes like death, poverty, meaninglessness, alcoholism, depression and nonsense reality were the primary topics of his works. "Bukowski's works deal with themes of desolation, death, absurdities of life, drinking, sex, gambling, and music. As an outsider, he lives in social exclusion and writes about "struggle, woe and misfit" (Seddeek and Ehsan, 2018: 54-70). Bukowski, in addition, became too obsessed with taboo subject because of the bad memories of his childhood and his difficult youth years when writing tended to be his medium of expressing inner unexplained refusal for the injustice that he suffered a lot. The beginnings were also miserable moments for he searched multiple jobs and obtained the opportunity to be very close to people, the common working class who struggled the simplest rights to live. Jani Korhonen (2006: 1) declared that "...Bukowski had little that he could call his own in his earlier years and was accustomed to being evicted from apartments when he did not manage to pay the rent. He got used to park benches and people from the lower levels of society; these were the people that acknowledged him while others did not. He was a man who lived a stormy life and

was always in trouble with either his father, with women, landlords, the law or with himself...”.

Controversial subjects like sex and women hostility gained a wide range and importance in Bukowski’s writings. The view towards women might be only an example of the attitude towards all people around him. He experienced feelings like hatred, aggression, unwelcome more than love and acceptance. The lack of understanding or the hidden needs for warmth and respect could be considered clearly due to the lack of family relations that he mostly wanted from his childhood. Nevertheless, one should consider that during his better times when he became famous he supported the Women Liberation Movement during the 1960s. “Many of the radical figures within the Women’s Liberation Movement were active in the same underground papers as Bukowski and this of course led to an argument regarding values. However, Bukowski was substantially supportive and preferred female artists.” (Korhonen, 10). At that time, Bukowski was married to Barbara Frye, a magazine editor who was an active female representative. Moreover, he was active in exchanges of letters with many female artists, writers and editors. This, of course, was a moment of an obvious change in his early views about feminism.

In the literary criticism of American post-modern poets, Bukowski was to some extent considered very attentive or more psychological to the life and conditions of the working class. His opinions caused less attention to his works from the public. That is why most of the fame he gained and success of his publications came lately in the final years of his life. Consequently, most critics view Bukowski as a writer who had a critical and suspicious ideas about the American hard capital society. The subjects of his poems obviously show Bukowski as a “champion” who frankly pointed out to the problems and the sufferings of the low class. “Opinion on the significance of his work remains sharply divided and his extensive output draws skepticism as well as sharp critique”. (Brandl, 2018: 9). He stayed very close to the working class in order to enrich his poetry with real and lived pictures of that society, especially when he made the situations of their life to be the major concern of his writings. One could easily notice that Bukowski insisted on shedding the light on the simplest details of life which normally reflect the on-going process of working, playing, sleeping, getting out and even drinking or eating. Bukowski was very accurate to describe every small action that people lived. These descriptions, definitely, were hard, difficult, monotonous, mundane, and perfectly dirty. Most of his words carried the hopeless tone of unidentified future that represented a mess. The topics that he offered and the pictures that he frequently mentioned in his writing

were empty of the colorful shining look towards the universe. This might represent the overall aim of giving a real self-experienced picture about the whole disappointing notion of life at that time. (Brandl, 10-11).

Psychologically, Bukowski was deliberately conscious to express his inner thoughts and intentions in his poetry. His confessional voice represented whatever one could declare about the whole external impact of social and humanistic ethics which he mostly cared for. The image of the angry tough figure was heavily portrayed in Bukowski's poetry. His purpose was not to make social reforms but to show the hardships of the common condition of the street. The sensitive tongue of his writings were primarily hidden under the senseless intrusive voice in his poems. (Freitas and Correia, 2015: 51)

In addition, Bukowski's reputation spread all over the world and many of his publications were translated to various languages like the Brazilian and Portuguese. He lived in Los Angeles and formed a career and fame of international appreciation. His writings gained wide popularity for their intense criticism of political and social gender distinction. He was often referred to as the poet who had the "down to earth" view of life. (Achami, 2021:33). However, many references to women topics and gender descriptions brought multiple attitudes to Bukowski's writings from different writers, poets, scholars and critics from both gender classes. Thus readers recognized how he treated female characters differently in his works, for example he represented the "controversial" (Ibid) female in his novels whereas his poems contained the perfect successful embodiments of women characters. This acceptance for the view of women writers led the public to re-consider and re-appreciate Bukowski as a successful writer of the age.

And because Bukowski was one of the prominent writers of the post-modern American poetry, he received more attention from different sides for his attitude of alienation. Most of the protagonists of his poems were anti-heroes, they represented the conflicted unsettled personalities who searched for better world. They were rebellious and against the rapid changes or movements of the American grown society. In other words, Bukowski's focused the feedback that the post-modern development carried for those poor working class people. His anti-hero attempted to share the unsatisfied tension of the age which he saw and found in the suffering of the common class. (Prieto, 2020: 25). Bukowski concentrated on describing the American society in Los Angeles with absurd, mundane, hopeless and violent voice. He preferred the self-exploring way and the personal experience instead of the sentimental way of faking reality. His language was direct and to some extent anti-

social with a sense of anger or agitation which mirrored his mentality. Bukowski was also conscious to discuss topics of sexuality, drunkenness and violence, that is why he was criticized for being “misogynist in nature”. (Kuyath, 2019: 25)

From a broader scope, one might consider how the opinions and writings of Bukowski influenced other contemporary poets who followed the “transgressive thrill” that Bukowski adopted. Mandy Beaumont in her *THE IDEA OF WOMEN: Representations of power in the work of Charles Bukowski*. referred to the impact of Bukowski’s writing on her poetry at the early beginnings of her poetic career. She declared, “...I first discovered Charles Bukowski and his writing when I was 25... As a young woman who drank too much, fucked too much and spent many an hour locked away from the world, writers of transgressive work appealed to me.” (Beaumont,2014: 1)

Contemporary poets like Beaumont and others found out that the poetry of Bukowski was a major field to discuss the normal condition of the American society after the first and second world wars. They expressed the complete depression, poverty and destruction in the light of what was mentioned in Bukowski’s poetry for the sake of pure realism and precise description of everyday life. The years between 1920s and 1940s characterized the conflict psyche and the struggle to go on in the widespread corruption and injustice. Relatively, Bukowski lived terrible years in Los Angeles and his memories contained pictures of the hard life of the poor working class people with whom he spent most of days. His topics inspired other fellow writers to depict the uselessness of low class life and the hardships which people faced at that time under the effect of the Great Depression. During that time, Bukowski did not forget the most miserable moments when getting eat was a big dilemma and most people died of famine. His poems documented the difficult details when he suffered to be alive under those situations and having the chance to eat and drink was regarded a sort of luck. (Priyanshu, 2022: 75)

Such events led to a consciously angry or aggressive personality that Bukowski had and resulted in more precise manifestations of life. As he declared “We were the way we were, and we didn’t want to be anything else. We all came from Depression families and most of us were ill fed” (qtd. In Priyanshu, 2022: 75).

However, Bukowski was not only well-known for his aggressive mode of writing but for representing the ugly or dirty realism which he was adopted. Bukowski’s novels and poems contained characters who reflected his own personality. They were depicted as his ego. He chose characters of very narrow and

desperate mode to illustrate his idea. He, moreover, put the characters in the same events and circumstances which he encountered to make his message more real and accepted. Trabajio de Grado (2023: 14) described the meaning in a better way when he commented:

“...The first novel he published was *The Post Office* (1971), it tells the life of a man who lives in Los Angeles and works at a Post Office. If we read a biography of Charles Bukowski, we will know that he worked in the post office of Los Angeles for many years... Charles Bukowski had in the real life a love affair with Lidia King, who was a writer like him. Similarly, in the novel *Women*, the character of Henri Chinaski has a love affair with Lidia Vance”

This suggested that Bukowski followed an autobiographical style which addressed him as a human. He attempted to make readers more conscious to life experiences which were too hard on him. Of course, this style got the readers attraction and confidence in addition to reliability and precision of narrating the details of a story. Such type of writing also gained the readers' entertainment because of the satirical, ironic, and realistic manner. Then, it was necessary for Bukowski to send a message that life might be injustice and has no nobility. His characters lived a meaningless life which showed big misery out of poverty, unluckiness and purposelessness. What really mattered for Bukowski that readers should believe in his characters and consider them as mirrors for themselves.

Nevertheless, various interpretations on Bukowski's writings were written by different scholars. They believed that Bukowski has certain problems which he indirectly referred to them by the characters he wrote. For example, he was a heavy drinker and they did not know why he turned to alcoholism in most of his life years. He presented characters who embodied his extreme hidden unidentified nature of drinking. In his novel *Post Office* (1971), Bukowski reflected his condition as alcoholic in the character of Henry Chinaski who also was an alcoholic writer and ended his life without making an achievement. This was an example of some sort of failure that Bukowski himself encountered in his life and put it as a crystallization of whatever suffering and conflict he experienced. (16)

As a matter of fact, Bukowski's embodiment of the character of Henry Chinaski obviously refers to his belief of life as a kind of injustice in which human lost the simplest rights of life. His attempts came as a response to the global disillusionment of that age in which low class people encountered the desperate hopeless future.

2. "The Bluebird" (1992)

This negative view of the world could be seen in Bukowski's poem "The Bluebird" (1992), from Bukowski's anthology *The Last Night of the Earth Poems*, which will be an example for the idea of transgressive act and the pessimistic hidden intentions which Bukowski adopted. In this poem, however, discussed the notion of life in which humans are trapped in a meaningless world deprived from the right to express themselves. Out of this prison like figuration, the hidden voice of Bukowski moved away all over the world to show the ultimately rebellious tongue which he attempted to declare. Even the word "Blue" used in the poem's title critically to investigate uniqueness and distinction for the poet's style which comes after 1960s and has its own independent touch. The poem described the social dilemma and the difficult times Man encountered in life. Moreover, the poem talked about the miserable conditions humans endure to overcome the harsh challenges of the socially corrupted external world.

Culturally, the bluebird image symbolized the idea of tenderness, beauty, hope and the extremely living voice pleasure. These meanings represented the missing emotions that Bukowski needed. The song of the bluebird was heard at dawn and the sunrise, but Bukowski changed it to a voice of sun set to illuminate hopelessness. Ehsan (2018:59) refereed to the image of "The Bluebird" as a matter of cultural reference.

"The bluebird is an American songbird that is native to North America where it has been revered by people and many indigenous cultures for centuries. ... Generally, it is the symbol of "cheerfulness, happiness, prosperity, hearth and home, good health, new births and the renewal of springtime... Bluebirds usually sing just before dawn and before the sun rises. This directly refers to Bukowski's symbolism of the bluebird as he lets the bird sing only when the sun is down"

The first part of the poem revealed the indirect intention of Bukowski of letting the voice of the bluebird to be unseen and undiscovered carrying the emotions and wishes of him.

there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too tough for him,
I say, stay in there, I'm not going

to let anybody see

you. (qtd. In Charles Bukowski. 2004. Poem Hunter. Com. The world's Poetry Archive. www. Poem Hunter.com. the world Poetry Archive. P. 21.)

The lines above identified the “tough” nature of Bukowski when he speaks to the bluebird. He intended to imprison the free voice of the inner psyche of humans and the prevention of the voice of the bird was only an evidence for doing so. He insisted of making the voice of the personal hidden needs unable to be heard by others. Such view might be regarded as declaration from the side of Bukowski that the special emotional matters of the heart should never be clear to all. In this sense he justified the way the bluebird became a symbol for the voice of those forbidden senses that humans were deprived from at a specific time. (Ehsan, 59)

there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I pour whiskey on him and inhale
cigarette smoke
and the whores and the bartenders
and the grocery clerks
never know that
he's
in there. (Poem Hunter.com, 21)

The second part of the poem prolonged the meaning of depression when he mentioned his aim not to make the voice of the bird to be heard by anyone including whoever able to hear it like “the whores”, “the bartenders” and “the grocery clerks”. Moreover, one could possibly understand the purpose of mentioning the decreasing the value of happiness into meaninglessness and lifeless sense. This directly emphasized the terrible status of helplessness and dissatisfaction that human beings suffered at Bukowski’s time. (Brandl, 5-6) Again he ended the poem elucidating the idea of keeping the voice of the bird unseen by others.

there's a bluebird in my heart that .
wants to get out.

but I'm too tough for him,
I say,
stay down, do you want to mess.
me up?
you want to screw up the.
works?
you want to blow my book sales in .
Europe?
here's a bluebird in my heart that.
wants to get out. (Poem Hunter, 2004:21)
but I'm too clever, I only let him out.
at night sometimes.
when everybody's asleep..
I say, I know that you're there,
so don't be .
sad. (21)

In the lines above, in addition, Bukowski opened the way for addressing the bird. He told the bird to stay and never to make a violation. The invitation from the side of the poet to free the bird's voice came only at night when all were a sleep and none heard. Part of this insistence sprang from the poet's conscious which neglected all sense of beauty related to the bird. The bird's voice was inside and it was heard at night when all were sleeping. This might also interpret the notion of escape and reluctance which Bukowski preferred.

Contrastingly, Bukowski's negative opinion proved some sort of ugly unwelcoming reality of human's life at the center. The blue color added to the sad, hopeless and frustrated conditions of the coming future. He symbolized the bluebird with the alternative empty values of human life and thus his concept of a bluebird was only reference to a kind of cold trapped passions inside him.

(<https://beamingnotes.com/2017/07/31/summary-analysis-bluebird-charles-bukowski/>)

then I put him back,
but he's singing a little
in there, I haven't quite let him
Die
and we sleep together like
That
with our
secret pact
and it's nice enough to
make a man
weep, but I don't
weep, do
you?
(21)

The final part of the poem, aimlessly, justified the whole meaning of end which the poem had. The rhetorical question ended the poem and left an influence of emotional unity. The end of the poem examined the possibility of the bird to make man or the poet himself to cry. "I haven't quite let him die" this showed the confused tension of Bukowski, since he did not let the bird die but prevented him from singing a lot. "weep" also illuminated the extremely imprisoned sense of sorrow and decay. The impact of suffering and injustice was the major reason which created the negative lifeless impression for Bukowski. However, the address to the bird mixed the emotional and the aggressive passions. From one side, Bukowski appeared sensitive towards the bird in that he did not let him die and refused to let the bird sing freely from the other hand. (<https://beamingnotes.com/2017/07/31/summary-analysis-bluebird-charles-bukowski/>)

Actually various readings contributed to the different interpretations of the poem, one of the was Ehsan (2018) which could be accepted and appreciated. This opinion suggested that the major purpose of Bukowski's The Bluebird was the emphasis on the devastation and deterioration humans reached during the time of Bukowski. The impossibility of perfect American society and the escape of harsh reality were the prominent reasons why humans lost their belief in better opportunities of life for the low class particularly. In this case, Bukowski found out that the best time to express one's inner secret passions was the night when all were asleep and he was free to imagination.

Bukowski's image of the bluebird could be described as a mirror which reflected his suffering beginning from his early years till the last years of his life. Not only this poem, but most of his writings and characters of his works advocated his act of transgression. The bluebird's voice appeared at night in order not to be heard by the terrible world of corruption just like Bukowski's pure side which was forbidden from the beautiful spontaneous activities of the outer world.

Conclusion

The Bluebird talked about Bukowski's personal relationship to the external world. He used the symbol of the bluebird to express the ultimate change the world reached at his own time. The description of the voice of the bird as trapped and un heard was only a way of releasing his suppressed emotions and ideas. He chose the image of the bluebird deliberately for its important value in American society, especially when the bird represented a symbol for beauty, life and peace. Thus Bukowski changed this wonderful sense of the bird into some sort of decay and somber tone when he let the bird sing only at darkness.

What is worth mentioning, Bukowski was attentive to explain his act of aggression towards the whole world when he prevented the bird from singing freely. He spoke to him only when people asleep as a sign of manifesting his great anger, dissatisfaction and rebellion against the social, political, religious and personal factors which influenced the life of low class people. The poem, therefore, was one example of Bukowski's frequent rejection of his age. It showed his attempt to escape the tremendous alternations of American society at his time which affected the working class.

The negative attitude towards the outer world was the aim of Bukowski's writings. Whether in poetry, novels and short stories, Bukowski focused primarily on describing the ugly desperate reality of American society at his time.

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