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**DOCTORAL THESIS
SUMMARY**

*The Weight of Little Things: Centralizing
the Margins in Dirty Realism*

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Keywords:

**Dirty Realism, Postmodernism, Bukowski,
Carver, outcast, marginalized characters,
reader-response, love, autobiographical**

Purpose and Research Background

The present dissertation owes to the author's conviction that Dirty Realism is a literary movement that deserves more recognition from readers, scholars and writers. The scarce references to the topic have set the premises for extensive research, meant to consolidate its relevance in the global literary canon and generate more interest. This dissertation's aim has been to formulate a postmodernist aesthetic, along with a definition of Dirty Realism, as a result of a broad research on the emergence of the literary movement and on the interpretation of both the narrative and lyrical texts belonging to two representative figures of Dirty Realism, respectively, Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver.

Extrapolating, the doctoral thesis also attempts to fill in an existing critical gap and to potentially contribute to the popularity of both the two writers and implicitly, Dirty Realism. The research aims to occupy its own hermeneutical niche, by choosing representative writings of the two selected authors and linking them to the literary movement under discussion, to facilitate a clearer understanding of its particularities and development.

Dirty Realism began as a term coined by Bill Bufford in the United States of America in 1983 in the *Granta* literary magazine and was meant to capture the inconspicuous aspects of life and classes of society. Despite steadily, but surely gaining more attention and popularity among readers and critics, due to its realistic, yet relatable “everyday life” subjects and themes, the research done on the present topic has proved to be far from exhaustive even up to nowadays, an aspect which has set the grounds for possible new contributions in this sense.

The title of the present doctoral dissertation, *The Weight of Little Things: Centralizing the Margins in Dirty Realism*, has been selected with the purpose of emphasizing the role of mundane details in a literary tradition focused on the importance of great ideas, themes and heroic characters. The “Little Things”, ranging from regular objects, familiar surroundings to ordinary habits of characters who do not necessarily have any special traits, are depicted as having a particular connotative weight within the texts. Therefore, the present doctoral dissertation strived to demonstrate the profoundness lying beyond an apparent triviality. Moreover, centralizing the margins is intended as a metaphor for the process via which marginalized communities, whether social, economic, or

cultural, are treated as the quintessence of the texts, either narrative or lyrical. Thus, the approached main themes concern especially the immediate world, with its daily, real-life habits and interactions, alternating from love/sexuality to violence, addictions, abuse, poverty, and taboos.

Methodology and objectives

In terms of the theoretical framework of the doctoral thesis, the discourse is built with the support of historical criticism, Postmodernism, the American Dream concept, the Transactional Reading Response Theory and the biographical / autobiographical literary criticism. As seen throughout the dissertation, the first chapter is not the only chapter that contains theoretical considerations. Most of the other chapters have an introductory theoretical part, contributing to the overall content. The methods used to support the case studies that this thesis is advancing are mainly the apanage of qualitative research: comparative analysis, thematic, content and dialogue analysis, stylistic analysis, applied to the prose and poetry of Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver.

To formulate a definition of Dirty Realism, it was necessary for the author of the thesis to formulate the proposed postmodernist aesthetic first, which represented her foundation in defining this literary movement. As shown, the postmodernist aesthetic that the present doctoral thesis employed as a frame for Dirty Realism relies on a contrasting, but complementary dynamic, resulting from minimizing the (American) Greatness in relation to maximizing the “Little Things”, and on the writing techniques and themes which have been analyzed and considered as specific aesthetic elements. To articulate a postmodernist aesthetic, the present dissertation considered four main objectives. The first objective was to identify Dirty Realism’s relation to Postmodernism, while the second one was to set the role of outcasts in nowadays’ literature by referring to the characters disputed in Charles Bukowski’s prose. The third goal was to illustrate the tension between presence and absence by analyzing the disruption in language stability and the cognitive and affective empathy challenges to reader-response in Raymond Carver’s prose. The fourth and last objective was to determine the autobiographical character of dirty realist texts by analyzing the topic of love in the poetry of both Bukowski and Carver.

Structure

Therefore, the resulting structure of the paper comprises four chapters, each revolving around Dirty Realism, the main concept focused upon in the current dissertation. Each chapter is designed to cover as many aspects as possible that could be relevant for Dirty Realism, from different forms of literature (prose and poetry) to different narrative writing types (novels and short stories). While some chapters emphasized the characters more, others concentrate on the employed narrative perspectives or on the literary themes / topics tackled by the analyzed writings. The reason behind this choice of alternating focus resided in the author's desire to offer a comprehensive and unitary image of Dirty Realism. In this way, the dissertation foregrounds the necessity to reveal the literary diversity of the movement and to justify its complexity.

As already above mentioned, the main objective of the first theoretical chapter has been to identify Dirty Realism's relation to Postmodernism. In doing so, a critical and historical overview of the concept has been included within the dissertation, contributing to consolidating the existing, scarce references related to Dirty Realism through different parallels made with other literary movements.

The first chapter has been organized in significant subchapters linked to the coinage and evolution of the term Dirty Realism and to the historical development of the movement, its aesthetics and influences, from Naturalism to Postmodernism. The critical and historical incursion had the purpose of providing the necessary information and arguments, for a better understanding of Dirty Realism and for a correct application of its characteristics in the in-depth textual analyses present in the subsequent chapters.

A short presentation of other literary movements or trends similar to Dirty Realism has been provided, revealing Naturalism as a possible predecessor, and Grunge literature as a potential successor of Dirty Realism. It is in this chapter that the author managed to propose a postmodernist aesthetic for Dirty Realism and to prove that the objectives set for the dissertation can be treated as postmodernist aesthetic elements.

Throughout the theoretical chapter, a connection to Postmodernism has also been discussed, which has helped the author to determine that Dirty Realism is an extension of Postmodernism. Therefore, it was concluded that Dirty Realism is a realist literary movement with a twist that rebels against its tradition, but that evolves and adapts to contemporary norms.

The main objective of the second chapter has been to analyze and determine the role of outcasts in dirty realist texts, implicitly, in Charles Bukowski's novels, *Factotum* (1975), *Post Office* (1971) and in the story collection *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1969). In this chapter, the theoretical focal point has relied on emphasizing the relevance of the American Dream concept for the American society and its connections to Americanism and American exceptionalism. The American Dream concept has been correlated with Bukowski's prose and with Dirty Realism, by portraying in an applied manner, using textual analysis, the jobless outcast in *Factotum*, the poor outcast in *Post Office* and the alcoholic outcast in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1969).

The outcast characters determine the minimization of American Greatness and, implicitly, of the American Dream, given the fact that there is nothing heroic or idealistic in being part of a marginalized group. Thus, the second chapter of the present dissertation has demonstrated that minimizing American Greatness aided its purpose of serving the proposed postmodernist aesthetic for Dirty Realism.

Throughout the third chapter, the emphasis fell on Carver's writing technique of maximizing the little things

which are part of the ordinary and which could sustain a connotative and profound weight in dirty realist texts. The little things that the author envisaged for this chapter ranged from regular objects to details in the behavior and dialogue of the characters presented in the short stories. The research focused on the tension between presence and absence in Carver's writings caused by the disruption in language stability and by the cognitive and affective empathy challenges to reader-response. A distinctive role has been attributed to Ernest Hemmingway's "theory of omission". From a theoretical stance, the author integrated the transactional reader-response theory articulated by Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser and resorted to psychology to an extent for a better comprehension of cognitive and affective empathy.

As identified, Carver manages to balance his narrative omissions with the detailed descriptions of his characters' gestures, objects and surroundings. The narrative and plot details that Carver intentionally omits in his texts increase the tension of his writings, proving in this way, the effect of Hemmingway's Iceberg Theory. The little things surface as dirty realist primers, whether considering simple objects, to the character's reactions or to the places where they find themselves. The quotidian

elements generate reactions, preparing the readers for the hidden layers of Carver's writings. The indirect proportion between omissions and details outline his indeterminate textual layer that the implied readers are invited to fill in through a transactional reading response. According to the author's findings, Carver cognitively and affectively challenges the readers with his manipulation of the narrative perspective and disruption in language stability, which make the characters generate emotion and the readers sympathize or emphasize with them, either cognitively or affectively, depending on the mindset and background of each reader. Thus, the third chapter of the present dissertation has demonstrated that maximizing the "Little Things" also supported its purpose of serving the proposed postmodernist aesthetic for Dirty Realism.

The fourth chapter has revolved around the theme of love in dirty realist poetry in order to counterbalance the previous chapters, where prose constituted the main focal point. The poetry volumes selected in this sense have been: *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1977) by Charles Bukowski, *On Love* (2016) by Charles Bukowski (Edited by Abel Debritto) and *Ultramarine* (1986) by Raymond Carver. The subchapters dedicated to Eros, Philia, Storge and Agape have been incorporated with the purpose of offering

an extensive coverage of the theme of love in dirty realist poems. Furthermore, the writing techniques and concepts employed by Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski in their poems have been emphasized, along with the autobiographical tone of the texts. Similarities and differences between Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver's writing styles have surfaced, as a result of the textual analysis of their poems.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the four chapters have succeeded in offering a comprehensive analysis, which has allowed the author of the thesis to answer her research questions: Why is the link to Postmodernism significant for the present research?; Why is the discussion over minimizing the (American) Greatness versus maximizing the "Little Things" relevant for the dissertation?; What writing techniques / themes are employed by dirty realists?;

The postmodernist aesthetic has been proposed and demonstrated within her thesis by revealing how the outcast characters, the disruption in language stability, the cognitive and affective empathy challenges and the autobiographical tone of Charles Bukowski and Raymond

Carver's texts are postmodernist and by applying them in the case studies. Hence, Raymond Carver reverses Charles Bukowski's minimization of the (American) greatness, by maximizing the little things surrounding the marginalized characters. Therefore, as a result of the author's research, it has been defined that Dirty Realism is a literary movement with realist origins and a postmodernist aesthetic, which relies on a contrasting dynamic between the minimization of greatness versus the maximization of the daily, little things. The dirty realist characters are mainly outcasts, whereas the dirty realist themes can range from violence, abuse, death, alienation to love. Dirty realist texts have a strong autobiographical tone and the writing techniques convey complex texts and profound meanings, despite their apparent triviality.