

## Bukowski's "the bluebird": stylistic analysis driving the cinematic vision

### 1. "the bluebird"

Courtney and Jasmine made a creative multimodal interpretation of Charles Bukowski's poem 'the bluebird', using an iPhone and editing in the free app, iMovie, on laptops. Here is the poem:

#### the bluebird<sup>1</sup>

##### STANZA A

1. there's a bluebird in my heart that
2. wants to get out
3. but I'm too tough for him,
4. I say, stay in there, I'm not going
5. to let anybody see
6. you.

##### STANZA B

7. there's a bluebird in my heart that
8. wants to get out
9. but I pour whiskey on him and inhale
10. cigarette smoke
11. and the whores and the bartenders
12. and the grocery clerks
13. never know that
14. he's
15. in there.

##### STANZA C

16. there's a bluebird in my heart that
17. wants to get out
18. but I'm too tough for him,
19. I say,
20. stay down, do you want to mess
21. me up?
22. you want to screw up the
23. works?
24. you want to blow my book sales in
25. Europe?

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<sup>1</sup> Bukowski, C. (2010) *Charles Bukowski, The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems, 1951-1993* (edited by John Martin), Canongate: Edinburgh.

## STANZA D

26. there's a bluebird in my heart that  
 27. wants to get out  
 28. but I'm too clever, I only let him out  
 29. at night sometimes  
 30. when everybody's asleep.  
 31. I say, I know that you're there,  
 32. so don't be  
 33. sad.

## STANZA E

34. then I put him back,  
 35. but he's singing a little  
 36. in there, I haven't quite let him  
 37. die  
 38. and we sleep together like  
 39. that  
 40. with our  
 41. secret pact  
 42. and it's nice enough to  
 43. make a man  
 44. weep, but I don't  
 45. weep, do  
 46. you?

In Bukowski's poem, the persona uses the bluebird as a metaphor for a hidden part of their personality whose release would make life difficult. Courtney and Jasmine created a multimodal narrative where the poem's persona is a young man whose bluebird is his concealed homosexuality. Please watch the film<sup>2</sup>:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD7GCJyWCGU>

Section 2 highlights how personal pronoun analysis motivates shot designs in the film.

## 2. How personal pronouns in “the bluebird” correspond to shot choices

### 2.1 Personal pronouns

The persona is ambivalent about their bluebird. Consider, Stanza A, for instance:

I'm not going to let anybody see you. (lines 4-6)

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<sup>2</sup> I have been granted permission to link to their publicly available film.

but I'm too tough for *him*, (line 3)

On the one hand, the persona talks to their bluebird directly through the second person 'you'. On the other hand, using the third person 'he/him', they keep it distant, as though the bluebird were absent. Another important personal pronoun is the first-person subject pronoun "I" – associated with the poem's persona. The relative quantities of first, second, and third-person personal pronouns vary across each stanza. As shown below, these relative amounts can be used to motivate different shot choices for each stanza.

## 2.2 Stanza A

1. there's a bluebird in my heart that
2. wants to get out
3. but I'm too tough for *him*,
4. I say, stay in there, I'm not going
5. to let anybody see
6. you.

In Stanza A, there is one "you" (line 6) and one "him" (line 3). There are three instances of "I" (lines 3 and 4). With first-person predominating, the character appears in charge of their bluebird. Correspondingly, the young man dominates the camera shots from top to bottom, suggesting he is in control (Fig.1).

**There is a foregrounded tension between use of 2<sup>nd</sup> person ("you") & 3<sup>rd</sup> person ("he" / "him") in how the persona discusses their "bluebird"**

### Stanza A: "I" x3; "you" x1; "him" x1

"I" (x3) predominates over "you" (x1); he is in charge of his bluebird. The character dominates the bathroom shots. The camera angle gives the character power by being below his eye level.



but I'm too tough for him (line 3)



He doesn't use towel to dry face – is all well with his relationship with the bluebird?

Fig.1 Shot design in Stanza A corresponding to stylistic analysis

The character does not dry his face; the towel is oddly still hanging on the door. Moreover, he seems not only to be splashing water on his face, but also bringing his palms together in contemplation at line 3, 'but I'm too tough for him'. Troubled perhaps? These are early clues that the relationship with his bluebird is fraught.

### 2.3 Stanza B

We come to Stanza B.

7. there's a bluebird in my heart that
8. wants to get out
9. but I pour whiskey on *him* and inhale
10. cigarette smoke
11. and the whores and the bartenders
12. and the grocery clerks
13. never know that
14. *he's*
15. in there.

In Stanza B, there are two third-person pronouns ("him" and "he", lines 9/14) and no second-person pronouns. Third-person thus predominates over second person. This motivates the idea that the man is still able to keep the bluebird distant and thus his homosexuality hidden. This is realised in his text message. He is about to tell his mother about his bluebird and then thinks better of it, deleting the message (Fig.2).

### Stanza B: "I" x1; "you" x0; "he/him" x2;

**3<sup>rd</sup> person (x2)** distancing of bluebird predominates over **2<sup>nd</sup> person (x0)** direct acknowledgement of bluebird

→ he is able to quash idea of telling his mum about the bluebird in the text message.



1<sup>st</sup> person predominates (x1) over 2<sup>nd</sup> person (x0). He is still in control of bluebird. However, 1<sup>st</sup> person instances have declined from Stanza A (x3 → x1). While still in control, he is less powerfully so.



Unlike Stanza A, he doesn't dominate first image; camera angle is above character suggesting less power. While the second image suggests he is back in control, the buildings in the background dominate him in the third image, suggesting power to suppress his bluebird is weakening.

Fig.2 Shot design in Stanza B corresponding to stylistic analysis

In Stanza A, 'I' features three times but only once in Stanza B. This decrease motivates a diminishing ability to keep the bluebird at bay, reflected in the position of the man in the bar (Fig.2). He no longer occupies the whole frame as in the bathroom shots accompanying Stanza A. Moreover, the camera is above him. (There is a cinematic convention that shots from above denote a character's powerlessness). While in the second bar image of Fig.2, he rises and occupies the frame, in the final image the background buildings dominate him, suggesting weakening ability to suppress his bluebird.

### 2.4 Stanza C

- 16. there's a bluebird in my heart that
- 17. wants to get out
- 18. but I'm too tough for *him*,
- 19. I say,
- 20. stay down, do you want to mess
- 21. me up?
- 22. you want to screw up the
- 23. works?
- 24. you want to blow my book sales in
- 25. Europe?

In Stanza C, there are *three* instances of second person "you", but only *one* third person "him". The young man has lost his power to distance the bluebird. He is having to

### Stanza C: "I" x2; "you" x 3; "him" x1



2<sup>nd</sup> person (x3) predominates over 1<sup>st</sup> person (x2). He is losing control. Camera is above character, reflecting decrease in power.

Window behind head is half-exposed. What he suppressed (at "back of mind") is escaping.



'but I'm too tough for him' (line 3).

STANZA 1

IMAGE  
PARALLELISM




'but I'm too tough for him' (line 18).

STANZA 3

Do + 'you want to'? (x 3)  
(lines 20, 22, 24).

Only repetition of a three-word expression in poem.

This warrants emotional and physical intensity of Stanza 3 shots

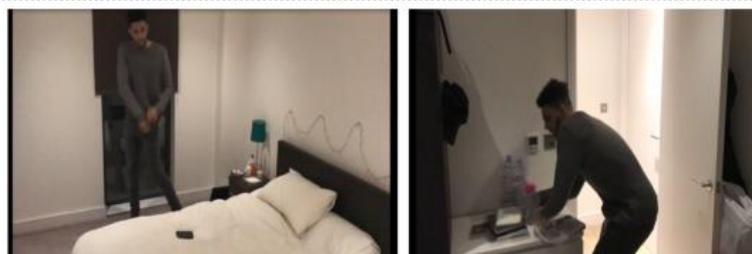


Fig.3 Shot design in Stanza C corresponding to stylistic analysis

acknowledge it directly. Moreover, unlike Stanzas A and B, there are more instances of 'you' (x3) than "I" (x2), further reflecting the persona's loss of power over the bluebird. Emulating this, the camera position above the actor is higher than in Stanza B. Courtney and Jasmine's background design hints too of psychological change. The half-exposed window is directly behind his head, suggesting what has been kept at the back of his mind is emerging (Fig.3).

Line 18 - 'but I'm too tough for him' - is the same as line 3 in Stanza A. This motivates repetition of imagery accompanying the first 'but I'm too tough for him'. Recall from Fig.1 that line 3 syncs with the man bringing hands over his mouth while washing. At and around line 18, he also brings hands over his mouth, though this time in despair. Retrospectively, the image associated with Stanza A's line 3 (Fig.1) also indicates emotional trouble - not just splashing water on his face.

Stanza C is the only stanza in which questioning is repeated three times - "do you want to?" - with "do" ellipted in second and third instances. That this questioning of the bluebird parallelism occurs only in this stanza warrants increasing the character's emotional intensity here. Reflecting frustration with shrinking sway over his bluebird, the man throws his mobile phone onto the bed, violently sweeping objects from the table. Note also that the previous instance of 'you' - the bluebird - is an object pronoun ('I'm not going to let anybody see you', Stanza A, line 6). In contrast, all instances of 'you' in Stanza C are subject pronouns. This further drives on screen the abating of dominance over his bluebird.

## 2.5 Stanza D

7. there's a bluebird in my heart that
8. wants to get out
9. but I'm too clever, I only let *him* out
10. at night sometimes
11. when everybody's asleep.
12. I say, I know that you're there,
13. so don't be
14. sad.

In Stanza D, with "I" (x4) predominating over "you" (x1), the young man is back in control. Reflecting these relative pronoun quantities, the character once again dominates shots from top to bottom (Fig.4), leaving an impression that the bluebird is released on his terms. Note too the large uncovered well-lit windows contrasting with the half-covered window in Stanza C. Courtney and Jasmine develop the window device from Stanza C, evoking the bluebird's complete release, reinforced by the bluebird being outside.

The scene where the persona meets his bluebird includes the opening lines of Stanza E:

34. then I put him back,
35. but he's singing a little
36. in there, I haven't quite let him
37. die

## Stanza D: 'I' x4; 'you' x1; 'him' x1;



1<sup>st</sup> person (x4) predominates over 2<sup>nd</sup> person (x1).

Character back in control, letting the bluebird out on his own terms.

Reflecting the pronoun quantities, the character dominates shots again from top to bottom.

The switch back to predominance of "I" over "you" is again reflected in lack of violence and palpable emotion.

Stanza D develops the window device from Stanza C.

Use of large uncovered and well-lit windows suggests release of bluebird as does shooting outside.

The film blends Stanzas D & E

This is motivated by structural deviation within the poem. Unlike all the other stanzas,

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

is absent from the start of Stanza 5.

Fig.4 Shot design in Stanza D corresponding to stylistic analysis

Interestingly, these deviate from the pattern established in Stanzas A-D which begin with:

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

Deviational absence of these two lines from Stanza E's start motivates blending Stanza D and Stanza E in the film.

### 2.6 Stanza E

34. then I put *him* back,
35. **but** *he's* singing a little
36. in there, I haven't quite let *him*
37. die
38. and **we** sleep together like
39. that
40. with our
41. secret pact
42. and it's nice enough to
43. make a man
44. weep, **but** I don't
45. weep, do
46. you?

## Stanza E: "I" x3 & "we" x1; "you" x1; "he/him" x3;

Predominance of 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns (x4) over 2<sup>nd</sup> person (x1), as well as of 3<sup>rd</sup> person (x3) over 2<sup>nd</sup> person (x1), suggests that the character is able to once again suppress his bluebird. But further deviation of Stanza 5 from the rest of the poem suggests all is not what it seems...

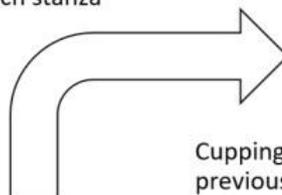
Stanzas A-D: "but I..."

3<sup>rd</sup> line of each stanza

Stanza E: "but he's..."

2<sup>nd</sup> line

"weep, but I..." 11<sup>th</sup> line



Cupping of hands on face links to previous images suggesting despair. As in Stanza A, he doesn't dry his face.

This **INTERNAL DEVIATION** creates a tension with the idea communicated that suppression of the bluebird is straightforward ("then I put him back", line 34; "we sleep together like that with our secret pact", lines 38-41)

The door is open suggesting the bluebird can't be contained. He will have to battle his bluebird again.



Film links "do you?" (Stanza E, lines 45-46) to the emotional trouble, in Stanza C of the film, associated with repetition of "do you?"



When the voice-over utters "do you?", his half smile changes to no smile. He is still emotionally troubled.



Fig.5 Shot design in Stanza E corresponding to stylistic analysis

In final Stanza E, just like Stanza D, there are more instances of first-person pronouns (x4) than second-person pronouns (x1). The persona continues to be in charge of the bluebird, suppressing his true sexuality once more ("then I put him back", line 34). The video returns to the opening bathroom scene with the man in front of the mirror. Again, in line with the preponderance of first over second-person pronouns, the man dominates camera shots from top to bottom. There is no sign of the bluebird in the bathroom. Reflecting too the greater instance of third person (x3) over second-person pronouns (x1), the bluebird has been successfully distanced and suppressed.

But has it? There are other deviations in Stanza E from the rest of the poem, which can be used to motivate cinematic ideas. In all of Stanzas A-D, "but I" begins the 3<sup>rd</sup> line but not in Stanza E. There *is* an instance of "but I" in Stanza E though it occurs in the 11<sup>th</sup> line (line 44), and it does not begin the line - 'weep' does. Unlike Stanzas A-D, there is another instance of "but+personal pronoun" in Stanza E. Not "But I" though. Instead, it is "but he", occurring in the 2<sup>nd</sup> line of Stanza E (line 35). These internal deviations from the established "but I" pattern across Stanzas A-D suggest that things are not so harmonious below the surface in Stanza E and thus that the persona's suppression of his bluebird is not so effective. This is reflected in the film: we see again the young man looking at himself in the mirror using his hands to cover his face while washing (Fig.5), which 'mirrors' the earlier emotional trouble from suppressing his bluebird (Fig.1). Again, he does not dry his face. And the bathroom door is open, suggesting the bluebird cannot be completely contained.

The final two lines of the poem "do you?" (lines 45-46) are ambiguous. Is the poem's persona speaking to the bluebird or the reader? This ambiguity is augmented in the video. Kindred with the poem, it is ambiguous whether the man is speaking to the bluebird or, since

he looks at the camera, to the viewer. Courtney and Jasmine's film suggests another possibility, a cinematic one unavailable on print-based reading. Since he is looking in the mirror, is he addressing *himself* with "do you?" ? Furthermore, the "do you?" of Stanza E parallels the three uses of "do you?" in Stanza C where the man's emotionally troubled state was most intense. A remnant of this emotional volatility is transferred to the videoing of Stanza E via this parallelism. When the voice-over utters "do you?", the character's half smile alters to no smile. He is still troubled, implying he will battle his homosexuality bluebird again rather than completely accept it.