

Reality and its Aftermath: Nell Dunn revisits *Up the Junction* (1963) and *Poor Cow* (1967)¹

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Nell Dunn's *The Muse* (2020) is a biographical book in which the British author presents for the first time the life of Josie, the woman who inspired most of Dunn's writings during the 1960s. In light of the information provided in *The Muse*, the aim of this article is to explore the presence of biographical content in two of Nell Dunn's early works: *Up the Junction* (1963) and *Poor Cow* (1967). Utilising textual analysis and historical criticism, this comparative study will assess the degree to which realism operates in Dunn's depiction of working-class women in her fiction of this period. In order to do so, the main topics of both novels will be considered along with other formal aspects such as the use of language of her characters. Later, all these elements will be compared with the content of *The Muse*, especially with genuine Josie's letters and notes from the 1960s included in the volume. The similarities between these two books and the real events presented in *The Muse* will be useful in determining the presence of realism in Dunn's early works.

Keywords: Modern and Contemporary Literature; Biographical Literature; Nell Dunn; British Literature; 1960s.

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1. Nell Dunn, an observer of the 1960s

Novelist and playwright Nell Dunn was born in London in 1936, at a moment when the British status quo was on the verge of a crisis due to unprecedented events such as the abdication of King Edward VIII². The turbulence of these times seemed to anticipate a will to break with tradition, one that would accompany her throughout her life. Despite being raised in Chelsea and coming from a very privileged background, on marrying Jeremy Sandford³ in 1959, she moved from one of the most affluent areas of London to Battersea, in South London. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Battersea was a working-class area, where the effects of the war were still very much present, in both its war-damaged buildings and its poor living conditions: “homes were mostly nineteenth-century workers’ cottages and, tiny as these are, they were mostly in multiple occupation” (Brayfield 2021, 19). This was one of the reasons why the couple decided to live there, having shown an early interest in depicting the realities of London other than the glamorous, affluent one into which they had been born. As Sandford himself noted, while most of Battersea’s young people wanted to go to the fashionable King’s Road, he and Dunn “were going in the opposite direction”, namely a more impoverished area (qtd. in Savage 2015, 469). The portrayal of the very different lives of working-class and rich people would become one of the most frequent topics in Dunn’s writing throughout her career, as can be seen, for instance, in the play *I want* (1972), co-written with Adrian Henri.

Her stay in Battersea was indeed key to the development of her literary career. Many of the experiences she had in this borough figure in her fiction –from working at the local sweet factory to meeting Josie, a close friend who would shape the archetype of working-class woman of the sixties depicted in most of Dunn’s stories. Indeed, in addition to social class, gender is one of the most prominent topics in her work, something which has led writers such as Ali Smith to claim that Dunn pioneered in reflecting certain “complications of the female self” (2018b). Among these issues, abortion turns out to be a recurrent one. This is widely observed in one of the works analysed, *Up the Junction* (1963), as some scholars note the presence of realistic details when dealing with this topic:

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- 2 In 1936 the UK was also suffering the consequences of the 1930s Great Depression or the “Great Slump”. Moreover, in less than 3 years the country would be taking part in World War II.
 - 3 Born in 1930, Sandford was a writer known for his work for the BBC during the 1960s, especially for his television plays, documentaries and radio programmes focussing on social problems. Sandford and Dunn were married from 1957 to 1979.

Nell Dunn's *Up the Junction* (1963)—now at least with some antecedents—pushed the limits further, placing abortion at the imaginative center of their novels and thus forcing the reader to engage with the woman's experience, while working within a predominantly realist genre that did not spare harsh details. (Minogue and Palmer 2006, 2)

A desire to narrate the experiences of women in a genuine and realistic way was closely related to changes seen in the country (and beyond) at the time, not least the rise of second wave feminism. In a recent interview, she has observed that being politically committed was in fact an unintentional consequence of her primary aim: to narrate the real experiences of women as she witnessed them (Fisher 2021).

The sixties were a period of profound transformation in terms of women's rights. In the UK these years coincided with the first government of Harold Wilson (1964-1970). In less than six years, many reforms were enacted, including the legislation of divorce, equal pay for women and abortion. Moreover, the government implemented other measures on human rights, such as the abolition of the death penalty, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and legislation against racism. These changes were in tune with the transformations that British society was undergoing, something anticipated by many artists, including Nell Dunn, who had already addressed in her work problems such as those resulting from the prohibition of abortion.

Although the issue remained controversial in the country, The Abortion Act was eventually passed in 1967. Despite the opposition of a sizeable minority of the population—according to a survey conducted in 1969, more than 26% of the population⁴—Dunn showed in her stories that these measures seemed extremely urgent. To this end, her writings depict abortion, amongst other problems faced by women in this decade and through her portrayal of them, Nell Dunn would come to be seen as one of the woman writers in the sixties who were “prescient in imagining a new, diverse society and foreshadowing the idea of the urban family” (Brayfield 2021, 7).

In addition to these topics, modernity and consumerism also figure in her depiction of the reality of the time, reflecting the changes that the country was undergoing. Most of Dunn's heroines are teenagers or very young women, a

4 The survey was published in *New Society* and revealed that the least favoured changes occurred in the decade were the “easier laws for homosexuality, divorce, abortion etc.” (26%), “immigration of coloured people” (23%) and “student unrest” (23%) (qtd. in Sandbrook 2007, 199).

group that would play a vital role in the 1960s, in that the figure of the teenager blossomed as a “new actor” in the cultural and consumer spheres (Marwick 2012, 57). In the case of Dunn, these trends in consumerism are explored not through affluent characters, but rather through young working-class people who, despite sometimes living lives of squalor, nevertheless embrace highly consumerist habits.

In these years, the documentary style was becoming popular in both film and literature, especially from the mid-sixties onwards, when the country abandoned some of its prior optimism and saw itself on the verge of the devaluation of sterling and the economic problems that this would bring. Indeed, in 1966, Dunn’s partner, Sandford, wrote the script for the television play *Cathy Come Home*, which explores the high degree of poverty in the country, narrating the experiences of a young woman who, after becoming pregnant, finds herself homeless. This story, as with many others dealing with similar social issues, found support from the BBC with series such as *The Wednesday Play*, where many works by both Dunn and Sandford were adapted and broadcast. Sydney Newman, Head of BBC Drama at the time, would later note that at this time it was common to see content which condemned the “casualties” of the welfare state: “*The Wednesday Play* had begun to explore the borderline between fiction and documentary . . . extending the scope of drama by taking it out to the streets—away from the artificial studio” (qtd. in Newman 2017, 292).

Despite this realistic approach, the socio-political impact of Dunn’s stories has often been overlooked. It has been noted that, until the mid-sixties, few women operated within the community of writers, and despite there were exceptions, including Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing, they were recipient of misogynistic and paternalistic treatment from their male counterparts. Murdoch herself stated that she had almost nothing in common with the Movement, the male-predominant literary group to which she was considered to belong⁵ (Sinfield 2007, 92). In the case of Dunn, despite dealing with highly political topics, often related to class, many left-wing male writers rejected her narratives of the female experience, considering them “frivolous and not political” (Rowbotham 2000, 74). Despite such beliefs as well as the author’s own reluctance to be considered political, her production and the authenticity in her writings did have a social

5 Similarly, Margaret Drabble considers Nell Dunn “an affiliated member of the non-existent school of Angry Young Men” (ix). Drabble compares Dunn with the authors of this other male-predominant group since their productions share many features in common. In fact, in her own words, *Up the Junction* (1963) and *Poor Cow* (1967) “had a *succès de scandale*, and were praised and attacked for their energy, candour and realism” (ix). These last features were frequent in the novels and Kitchen Sink Drama written by the Angry Young Men authors.

impact. She narrated the changes in the lives of normal, everyday women at a time of considerable social upheaval in terms of women's rights, and the popularity of her work helped to shed a positive light on these issues. For instance, and as we will discuss below, the popularity of the television adaptation of *Up the Junction* in 1965, based on real events, had a significant impact on the public opinion of abortion, something which would be instrumental in its legalisation in 1967.

Authenticity, then, plays a key role in Dunn's writing, which is generally inspired by real events that she witnessed after moving to Battersea, and especially after having met Josie, a vital inspiration for most of her stories, as explored in *The Muse* (2020). Hence, the first work to be addressed in the present study will be *Up the Junction*, written following the author's arrival to Battersea.

2. Representation of women in Dunn's work in the 1960s

2.1. Working-class women in *Up the Junction* (1963)

In the early 1960s, Dunn began to publish her early works in the *New Statesman*. These included the short stories that would subsequently be collected in *Up the Junction* (1963), her first published book. In writing these stories, she was inspired by the narration of urban life seen in the BBC documentary *Morning in the Streets* (1959) by Dennis Mitchell, who, having been invited by Dunn to discuss his writing, encouraged her to write about her experiences in Clapham Junction, an area of Battersea. The resulting book has been described as “a tale of class division and youth culture in the ‘swinging London’ of the 1960s as a young Chelsea socialite crosses the river to see how the other half live and love in run-down Battersea” (McLean 2021). Consequently, Dunn's narration in these short stories represents an alternative version of the swinging sixties, describing how the period was experienced by the working-class women of this area. In this depiction, elements based on what Dunn witnessed in her stay there would abound, especially those relating to Josie.

Up the Junction consists of 16 connected short stories, most of them about a group of young women in Battersea: Sylvie, Rube and an unnamed narrator. In terms of its structure, it has recently garnered praise from Ali Smith, who states that it is “a book whose radically open structure allows it to be a collection of short fiction and a different kind of novel both at once, as well as a work that nods, but very lightly, to autobiography and documentary observation” (Smith 2018a, IV). Most of the stories are narrated in the first person by a character who shares several similarities with Dunn's own life: she is not originally from Battersea but, rather, a more affluent neighbourhood, and she is married and

works in a sweet factory. Despite sharing these elements with Dunn, all the female characters are also inspired by other women from Battersea, especially Josie. Most of the stories depict the lives of these young women, dealing with activities such as nightclubbing, walking through the neighbourhood, shopping, and having conversations with other women while working in the factory. In the stories, Dunn places special emphasis on portraying the cultural atmosphere, transcribing the women's particular way of speaking and introducing references to popular culture such as song lyrics, something very common in her subsequent writing. She also depicts some of the problems still affecting working-class areas, such as poverty and run-down neighbourhoods. This can be seen, for example, in the fourth story, "The Deserted House", when the narrator goes home with Dave, an ex-borstal boy that she has met in a pub in a previous story. Dave's street is described as "a chaos of grass and rubble to a row of deserted houses" which have been declared unfit for habitation (Dunn 2013, 32). This event is itself highly autobiographical. In the preface of an edition of *Up the Junction* published in 2013, Dunn wrote that whereas her arrival to Battersea was marked by meeting Josie, her departure was due to the fact that her "house was declared unfit for human habitation" by a sanitary inspector (x).

The lives of the narrator's other friends from Battersea will also be inspired by Josie, and in this respect, it is important to consider certain details about Sylvie and Rube. The former married her husband, Ted, when she was sixteen, and despite their unsatisfactory relationship, they remained legally together. Indeed, since prior to the Divorce Reform Act of 1969, these situations were common. This reform made divorce more accessible as "it removed the concept of 'matrimonial offences' and hence the idea of divorce as a remedy for the innocent against the guilty" (UK Parliament 2022). Therefore, in these stories, Ted is hardly mentioned, and more prominence is given to Sylvie's other boyfriends, especially one called Ray. Further evidence of the subsequent problems in women's lives due to this legal situation is seen in the fifth story, "Dinner Hour", where an old woman tells the girls that she was unable to remarry because she did not have the death certificate of her husband, who had abandoned her years earlier. Returning to the case of Sylvie, the main confrontation she has with Ted occurs in the seventh story, "Wedding Day", which takes place on the day of the wedding anniversary of Princess Margaret, with all pubs opening late to celebrate. That night, Ted finds Sylvie, who has gone out with the narrator, and accuses her of having had an abortion. When they begin to fight, Sylvie's mother, who happens to be there too, defends her daughter until the police arrive. Afterwards, as they go home, they have the following dialogue:

“It was nothing, Inspector. Come on, we’re just on our way home!”
What are you doing in yer night-dress, Mother?
The Inspector grins after us as we troop up the warm road.
‘Never mind, Sylvie.’
Sylvie pushes her blonde hair back behind her ear. “Keep never minding,
it’s only fer life.”

(Dunn 2013, 56)

We should note here that, although the relationship between Sylvie and her mother seems distant—both women are surprised to find each other there—the fact that mother and daughter socialise in the same pub without knowing it illustrates the sense of independence that the women depicted in these stories have. Nevertheless, we might also mention that sometimes Dunn illustrates their freedom with a degree of ambiguity, in that whilst enjoying themselves, both Sylvie and her mother, and indeed other characters in the stories, reveal themselves to be racist and homophobic; in certain passages there is even misogyny expressed by the women, as we will discuss below.

While topics such as divorce and women’s freedom would be dealt with in the collection through the character of Sylvie, it is the experiences of Rube that introduce the theme of abortion. In the ninth story, “Bang on the Common”, Rube discovers that she is pregnant, and is advised to have a backstreet abortion. However, Rube becomes very ill due to the treatment that she requires prior to the process, and eventually, her baby dies after having been born⁶. This event, along with Sylvie’s fight in the pub, marks the beginning of a series of dramatic events in the lives of the women, including the death of Rube’s boyfriend Terry following an accident. Moreover, in the twelfth story, “The Trial”, Dave is arrested and found guilty of robbery; the girls, especially the narrator, who still loves him, subsequently visit him in prison.

In addition to describing the lives of the main characters of these stories, we must also note that, apart from a depiction of their experiences, *Up the Junction* provides a broader portrayal of the mentality of working-class British people during the sixties. This can be seen in the assumed Americanisation of British

6 Although it is mentioned that “the baby was born alive, five months old” and “it moved, it breathed, its heart beat”, when the ambulance arrived, only Rube is taken and they “left behind the baby”, who is treated by Sylvie as a stillbirth and she gets rid of it (75). Scholars like Minogue and Palmer also identify this pattern in another of Dunn’s stories, “Sunday Morning”, mentioned in the pages below. With actions like this, Dunn’s characters seem to transmit a message: “the implication is that it is better dead” (Minogue and Palmer 2006, 12).

life, for instance, in the fifteenth story, “The Tally Man”, where the description of the environment offers a mixture of the British post-war atmosphere and the influence of American culture:

Evening and the girls wear cotton dresses showing teenage knees and loll against the off-licences eating fish and chips as we go by. The dogs snuff the de-housed rats in the latest demolished terraces. He drops me off. On the corner a group of jean-boys are gathered round bicycles and scooters hoisting Coca-Cola bottles to their lips, and all the chimneys of Battersea are reaching to the sky and puffing mauve clouds into the cloudless summer evening (129).

Moreover, another notable feature of the characters in these stories is their awareness of being class-conditioned. This is seen, for instance, in the conversation between the narrator and Dave when he is in prison. He says that he is not surprised to find himself there, as he had been in a borstal earlier in life and that “Borstal’s all right-sort of university for them what can’t afford Oxford” (104).

In the same way that Dunn was concerned with representing working-class women’s experiences, she also paid attention to other marginalised identities. Nevertheless, with the aim of offering a realistic portrayal of society, some of the stories involve passages which feel overtly racist, sexist and homophobic to our contemporary ear. We can see this especially in the behaviour of Sylvie and her mother, who, in dissonance with her own claims of freedom, mock any boy in the pub who does not fit the classic idea of masculinity. In the story “Wash Out” they also stereotype queer people, teasing them and calling them “mentally disturbed” (83).

Other stories—some of them apparently unconnected with the lives of the main characters—introduce an element of ambiguity as to the actual freedom of women in the sixties. Among these stories, the reader is presented with depictions of the experiences of women at different ages, especially old women, as they face difficult economic situations, these the consequences of failed marriages, plus the stigma and lack of a place in society at the time for spinsters, as seen in the passing of the main character of “Death of an Old Scrubber”. In contrast to this, yet maintaining the overall message of how women face a fixed fate, the final story in the collection, “The Children”, introduces a ten-year-old girl who reflects on adult life. She mentions that she enjoys playing with her friends and pretending that they are ‘mothers and fathers’ who are married and have a baby (133). The fact that many of these women are marked by a kind of determinism, powerless as they are to choose a different life, compromises any previously expressed notion of freedom, and is starkly illustrated in “The Clipjoint”. In

this story, one of the few in which Sylvie, Rube and the narrator do not appear, a group of women invite consumers to pay the entrance fee to the club where they work, promising them a show which in fact does not exist. Once inside, most of these women are urged by the paying customers to have sex with them. Although the women have no alternative—they mention that they have children and are in difficult economic situations—the story ends with one of the girls saying to a new girl: “The great thing in this life is you can choose—to do or not to do—if you get my meaning—at least we’re free!” (67).

It is important to note that apart from being working-class, this group includes women from different origins, significant in that the rest of the stories feature British women. And although the reality of life for foreign women and how they are treated is hinted at in many of the stories, it is most addressed in the sixth story. “Sunday Morning” deals with Moira, a black woman who is pregnant without being aware of it: “I didn’t really know what he was at—I never got no pleasure out of it. I didn’t know I was carrying till I was five months. I couldn’t believe—I kept thinking it would pass off” (43). She is treated in a paternalistic way by the matron, who says that “you Coloured girls should be grateful to be here at all with what goes on out in Africa” (43). Meanwhile, two of Moira’s friends, Sonia and Marion, talk about their own experiences of abortion. In fact, Sonia mentions that her father had asked a chemist for a remedy used during the war, which although dangerous would help her to get rid of her pregnancy (46). With this, Dunn presents for the first time the issue of backstreet abortions, a longstanding problem which had also affected previous generations. Eventually, Moira gives birth, and she is told that the baby is dead. The next day the police arrive, and following this Moira cannot be found, suggesting that perhaps she has been arrested for having an abortion. This story, like the one in which Rube has an abortion, offers a crude narration of the state of women’s sexuality. This contrasts with the stories which depict the main characters nightclubbing and having fun. We might recall in this regard the period in which these stories were written:

oral contraception was not legally available until 1961. Abortion was illegal, but was nevertheless widely carried out and often fatal for the mother, as two of the ten stories in Nell Dunn’s *Up the Junction* reveal. In a lecture given in 1963, the chair of the Family Planning Association, Margaret Pyke, estimated the number of illegal abortions in Britain at almost 110,000 a year (Brayfield 2021, 2).

Also of note is that, despite being legally available since 1961, the pill remained difficult to obtain for many women, in that they had to show that they were married or about to get married in order to be prescribed it. It was not in fact

until 1967 that the National Health System, in parallel with the new laws on abortion, introduced a system of family planning under which “contraceptives were to be widely available and were to be free for the poorest families” (Wilson 2017, 69). In *Up the Junction*, although contraceptives were used by many of the women in these stories, access to contraception, plus the lack of understanding that some of the characters show in terms of how to use it, often led to unwanted pregnancies, and thus to the frequent use of backstreet abortions in Battersea, as Dunn describes.

The passages addressing this problem were given extra prominence in the script for the television adaption of *Up the Junction*, directed by Ken Loach and released by the BBC in 1965. Despite the fact that the film “prompted a then record 400 complaints for its unvarnished portrayal of the lives of three young working-class women in south London, including bad language, sexual promiscuity—and abortion”, Tony Garnett, who worked with Dunn on the adaptation, claimed that its broadcast played a vital role in changing public attitudes to abortion and its legislation in 1967, since many people had suffered the consequences of the poor conditions of backstreet abortions; indeed, Garnett himself had lost his mother in this way (Deans and Brown, 2021). Nevertheless, once again it is important to see how Dunn sought to keep the story merely descriptive, without any political reflections, and that she was reluctant to include what turned out to be one of the most dramatic scenes of the film, in which a doctor recounts the number of women who suffered the dire consequences of backstreet abortions at the time. As Dunn herself claimed: “it’s a common enough fate of working-class characters in films, or indeed any kind of art: someone usually wants to draw a lesson from you” (Dunn qtd. in Coatman 2021). Margaret Drabble pointed out the purity of Dunn’s intentions, noting that “her reports of life in South London are not ‘worked up’ or politically motivated: they are simple, apparently artless, sympathetic, participatory” (Drabble 1988, ix). In fact, in 2020, journalist Ralph McLean observed how the most impactful content of Dunn’s work was softened to a surprising degree in the following adaptation, directed by Peter Collinson and released in 1968 (McLean 2021). This would again indicate her intention to merely describe reality without any judgement or exaggeration, something which will be useful below in identifying any biographical parallelisms with *The Muse*.

In *Up the Junction*, the main characters are young girls who live in a changing world and struggle to avoid ending up living like their mothers, often failing in this due to the many challenges they face. Following on from this, Dunn’s first novel, released five years later, depicts the life of a young working-class woman and mother.

2.2. *Motherhood, Marriage, and Sexuality in Poor Cow* (1967)

Poor Cow (1967) was the first novel published by Nell Dunn. *Poor Cow* focuses closely on the real figure of Josie, and thus similarities between the life of Josie and the novel will be quite explicit. In fact, Dunn claimed that the novel presents “what happened to her, and also what happened to me” (Dunn 1988, ix). Indeed, the sense of authenticity in the novel was so prominent that many reviewers praised this aspect of the work following its publication in 1967. A review in *The New Stateman*, for example, noted that *Poor Cow* was a “vividly authentic observation of society” (Morgan 1967, 584). Nevertheless, certain situations described were seen as so extreme that some critics believed that they were exaggerations of the real events depicted:

The pathos of Joy’s situation is real enough; the only trouble is that we are reminded of it too often, and of her good-heartedness and soft nature, and the extremely strong feeling of a rigged story or parable sits rather uneasily with the documentary brilliance of, for example, the long series of illiterate love-letters she sends Dave in prison. (585)

Nevertheless, when we turn to *The Muse*, below, we will see how these particular features of the story and setting, which some critics at the time claimed must have been fictional, were indeed very present in Josie’s life. And with regard to the letters mentioned, we might note that, as in *Up the Junction*, Dunn attempts to recreate the patterns of speech, and in this case, the writing of working-class people in Battersea. In a recent interview, Dunn mentioned that when observing the people living in the area, she also paid attention to their use of language, and sought to assimilate this in her writing (Fisher 2021).⁷

The plot of *Poor Cow* opens with a 22-year-old woman named Joy wandering through a street in London with her son, Jonny. From this point of departure, readers can infer that she is not proud of her life. As soon as her son is presented, she wonders “what did I go and get landed with him for, I used to be a smart girl?” (Dunn 1988, 10). Readers then learn that Joy’s husband, Tom, is in prison for robbery, and as a consequence, Joy must find a job in order to raise her son alone. Despite facing several misfortunes, it was noted by reviewers that Joy, as

7 This is another feature celebrated by reviewers in 1967. Edwin Morgan, writing in *The New Stateman*, noted that “praise must be given to the many felicities of uneducated dialogue and the exact evocation of places and objects which Miss Dunn has mastered” (1967, 584). Moreover, the authenticity in Dunn’s use of language is especially observed when it is compared with Josie’s genuine letters from the 1960s collected in *The Muse* (2020). See section 3.

her name suggests, is able to maintain hope and enthusiasm for a wide range of things in her life, such as motherhood, fashion, consumerism and, above all, her own sexuality. Indeed, Margaret Drabble observed that *Poor Cow* was “one of the first post-*Chatterley* books to speak out, to treat women’s sexuality as though it were entirely natural, as natural as man’s” (Drabble 1988, xii). With Tom in prison, Joy falls in love with Dave, one of Tom’s criminal partners who, later in the novel, also finds himself in prison. Through the 13 chapters of the novel, Joy’s situation fluctuates between dramatic events and her own dreams of a better life, which help to keep her optimistic. In order to survive, she has a variety of jobs, starting as a model and eventually being introduced into prostitution. Through this journey, her personality becomes more complex, which the reader can infer from her reflections on how she enjoys all these simultaneous lives: she is happy in motherhood, she loves Tom, but also Dave, and at the same time she seems to be aware of the contradiction of feeling comfortable with her eventual job as a prostitute, claiming as she does to have loved all her other lovers.

The narration of these inner monologues, which seek to emulate working-class speech, and also in her writing of letters, serves to enhance the sense of realism in each of these versions of Joy, something Drabble described as “a self-edited version of Joy’s character” in each situation (xiii). Indeed, from these passages, the reader is afforded access to Joy’s mentality. There are moments when she claims that she “feel[s] a proper mum” and “great” since she is worried about raising Jonny in a “broken home” (Dunn 1988, 46). Nevertheless, she also claims that “I can’t bear the thought of all these women in the flats around me—all doing the same things” and that Dave “wants me to be like a nun but I’m not a nun I don’t feel like a nun” (64). These elements in the behaviour of Joy, her way of experiencing motherhood, and the letters to her lovers, share many features with the real life of Dunn’s friend and muse, Josie. Moreover, during the story, significant female characters appear, such as Joy’s Auntie Emm, and Beryl, her drinking partner in the pub who introduced her to the world of prostitution. Both characters protect Joy at certain points in the book and encourage her to be independent. At the same time, they offer readers an insight into the lives of different kinds of women at the time. For instance, Beryl shares her concerns about backstreet abortions, explaining to Joy that abortion exists in different social classes but for working-class people it is more dangerous: “I’ve heard it said there’s as many abortions among that sort of person as there is among us—though they don’t use the same methods” (93).

Apart from these elements, consumerism also figures prominently over the course of Joy’s evolution, feeding as it does her optimism and her hopes for social progress. She is determined to achieve the dream of the swinging sixties, and believes that being a model and buying expensive clothes will draw her away from her own social class and thus will bring her happiness. She even claims that

she wants to change her way of speaking and writing to sound smarter, and she takes lessons to this end. Her progress here can be seen in the letters she writes to Dave. In early ones, she writes that she is learning “aleycustion lesson, how to walk propelye and some other thing anyway its sounds mad, but it will do me good. Oh Dave I going to realy try, your see my letters will sound right, and I’ll talk all possh ha ha” (55). Later she says “I definitely don’t want to stay in my own class, I want to go up in the world—I want a position—I’m going to classes on how to speak properly” (98).

Elizabeth Wilson identifies these features as typical of the decade, noting how many women from poor or lower middle-class families tried to imitate the role of privileged women, generally without success (Wilson 2017, 182). The message that consumerism was associated with happiness and style was a dominant notion at the time, and in the novel it can be seen how Joy, although not in a favourable economic state, spends more money than she has. Katy Shaw has observed how people in this period were “hungry for the improved lifestyle available to the working classes but suspicious of a new desire among them for consumer goods” (Shaw 2018, 122). She also notes how the extreme consumerism of the decade contributed to a superficial blurring of the boundaries between the middle and upper classes, but that this remained unlikely for the working classes: “Consumer culture can provide a way out, this implies, but car ownership is, for Joy and other working-class women, likely to remain a daydream” (122). Hence, by purchasing wigs and expensive clothes, Joy merely makes her precarious financial situation worse. However, despite the fact that she remains optimistic, the novel closes with the disappearance of Jonny. Although he is eventually found, this event may lead readers to ask whether such social and economic circumstances constitute an appropriate place for a young child. Moreover, temporarily losing Jonny seems to lead to a change in Joy. She comes to realise that her dreams are unreal, as the final lines of the novel with Jonny and her suggest:

“Why are you laughing, Mum?” he said. And she thought then that all that really mattered was that the child should be all right and that they should be together. “Oh gawd, what a state I’m in,” she said, as, hand in hand, they walked back down the deserted road. To think when I was a kid I planned to conquer the world and if anyone saw me now they’d say. “She’s had a rough night, poor cow.” (Dunn 1988, 140-141)

Nevertheless, considering the reluctance of the author to be moralistic and political, such an ending may imply that situations of this kind were indeed part of the lives of those that she came to know during her stay in Battersea.

As it occurs in *Up the Junction*, the absence of either an implicit or explicit judgement by the author may enhance the idea that she is providing a faithful representation of reality. In fact, scholars claim that thanks to this, “it is possible for them [the characters] sometimes to be playful, even comic, in their language and in their modes of representation in a way that can carry readers far beyond the stark specifics of realism⁸” (Minogue and Palmer 2006, 3). Moreover, when dealing with the use of language it is also mentioned that “the formal qualities of narrative, dialogue, and structure work strongly in favor of capturing the liveliness and celebration, and contribute to the lack of judgment she aimed for [...] the free play of language, including the representation of accent, and the lack of an authorial commentary, makes this more like a drama than a novel” (13). Therefore, apart from the similarities in the events described in Dunn’s production, the use of language will be another vital aspect to be considered when comparing the content of the books under study with the biographical testimonies delivered in *The Muse*.

For both the use of language and content of these literary productions, writers such as Ali Smith have praised the sense of realism in Nell Dunn’s writings. In her own words, it is vital to consider “its subject matter, its sexual frankness and its marked unsentimentality, its refusal to provide any fake narrative payoff and its revelation of working-class power” (Smith 2018a, iv)

Following the above consideration of *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow*, both written during the 1960s, the following section will deal with *The Muse*, a volume published almost six decades later, in which the author claims to reveal—as the title suggests—the biographical inspiration for the great part of the writing produced during her literary career.

3. Josie and Nell Dunn: Biographical content presented in *The Muse* (2020)

In *The Muse* (2020), Nell Dunn shares for the first time a detailed narration of the experiences which inspired her literary production. The volume is devoted to Dunn’s friend Josie, with the writer claiming that “my relationship with Josie was deeply connected with my work as a writer” (Dunn 2020, 1).

8 This impartiality is also noted by Minogue and Palmer when dealing with realism in Dunn’s depiction of backstreet abortion. In order to do so, they highlight the description provided of the abortionists who help the main characters to get rid of their pregnancy. For instance, Winny, the abortionist Rube visits in *Up the Junction* is described as an alcoholic woman who is more interested in Rube’s money than in her health (Dunn 2013, 71-73). It is for this reason that they state that “Dunn’s democratic world is not quite forgiving enough to forgive the abortionist; but here again, perhaps, she simply reflects reality” (Minogue and Palmer 2006, 14).

This book, which begins with William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 78" in which a muse is invoked, provides a fit introduction to *The Muse*, a collage composed of narrations, letters, and photographs of the relationship between the author and Josie. The chapters deal with the events from the women's initial meeting in Battersea in 1960 to the present time, and readers can appreciate not just the views of the author, but also the genuine way of writing and speaking of Josie herself, since her letters are also included. While less than a third of the book is set in the sixties, Dunn also offers some reminiscences about their experiences together in the rest of the volume. Nevertheless, many of the similarities between reality and Dunn's fiction will be found in the early chapters.

In general, it can be observed that these parallelisms lie especially in the names of characters, in their personal experiences—some more subtle and anecdotal and others crucial in their lives—and also in the attitudes with which these characters face such situations.

In the first chapter, "Meeting Josie", just two and a half pages in length, Dunn introduces her friend. Despite the brevity, these lines present several similarities with the experiences described in her early books. First of all, we learn that the women met for the first time after Princess Margaret's wedding, something which recalls the story "Wedding Anniversary" in *Up the Junction*, in which Sylvie and the narrator go to a party in a pub. As in *Up the Junction*, where it is noted that "the pubs are open till midnight because Princess Margaret got married today" (Dunn 2013, 55), in *The Muse* Dunn recalls that she met Josie at "a party night after Princess Margaret's wedding with the pubs open till late" (2020, 4). Despite the fact that in the short story the celebration is for a wedding anniversary rather than the wedding itself, the situations are clearly comparable. Moreover, in *Up the Junction*, it is at this point that Sylvie's mother is presented as one of the attendees at the party. Similarly, in *The Muse* Josie's mother has an active role in her anecdotes, in that she and her daughter worked together as waitresses, something which will be similar to Joy's experiences working in the pub in *Poor Cow*.

As mentioned in the previous section, it is in "Wedding Anniversary" from *Up the Junction* where the strongest confrontation occurs between Sylvie and her husband, Ted. The relationship between Sylvie and Ted is clearly a reflection of Josie's relationship with her husband, Ray. In both *The Muse* and *Up the Junction*, the couples married very young, and despite remaining legally together, they do not have a positive relationship. Although for Josie there will not be situations as violent as the one depicted at the party in *Up the Junction*, Josie's husband is described as "a bully and a tough man" (4). Their lack of a true relationship can be seen when Dunn describes Josie's travels with her lovers, leaving Ted and her son at home in Battersea. It is also worth mentioning that despite having

different names—Ray and Ted—there is also a character called Ray among Sylvie’s lovers in the second story of the collection, “Up the Junction”.

Turning to *Poor Cow*, we can observe how the events in the book and Joy’s personality share many features with those described in Dunn’s notes from 1966 included in *The Muse*. Some of these similarities are anecdotal, such as the fact that, as mentioned above, Dunn tended to quote lyrics of songs in her work and in *Poor Cow* most of these are Ben E. King’s songs, most prominently “Stand by Me”, a song which in *The Muse* is said to be Josie’s favourite and the one she used to sing with Dunn. Nevertheless, in the case of *Poor Cow*, the most significant similarity is that Joy’s husband is sent to prison, as was Josie’s husband Ray. This connection is also explored to a minor extent at the end of *Up the Junction*, when the relationship between the narrator and Dave ends when he is arrested for robbery. Also, Dunn notes in *The Muse* that Josie’s husband had been in a Borstal while she was pregnant (7), mirroring the life of her character Dave, also a borstal boy.

Dunn highlights in her notes that from this point onwards Josie began to have many lovers, whose names and personalities are reminiscent of the male characters in *Up the Junction*. For instance, one of Josie’s lovers was named Dave, the same name as the narrator’s boyfriend in the stories of this book. The description of Josie’s life at that time, including a difficult economic situation and being forced to raise her son alone, clearly recalls the life of Joy in *Poor Cow*. This can be observed in her description of the precarious conditions in which Josie and her son Joey lived: “How the room in Finborough Road had bed bugs in the mattress and cockroaches under the wallpaper. She and the baby were covered in bites. How she went down to the Cleansing Station and was painted all over with black tar to shoo off the bugs. How she had to make the dinner in a Fray Bentos tin” (Dunn 2020, 7-8).

In addition to finding themselves in similar situations, Joy and Josie also have the same attitude when facing challenges. In the notes from Dunn’s personal journal written in 1966—the year she wrote *Poor Cow*—it can be seen how Dunn described Josie as prone to being optimistic and a daydreamer. An example of this can be found in a transcribed conversation with Dunn. In the same year, after having met a man, she told Dunn: “It was just the way he said it and he touched my hair, said Josie. I do fancy him! And I’m going to have him. Do you reckon I’ll ever be happy? Do you reckon I’ll ever get what I want?” (9). This attitude is also observed in her written letters, collected in the volume. Here, her way of speaking and reflecting her thoughts also recall Joy’s letters and the stream of consciousness in her narrations:

Josie again! I've got me rollers in me hair, a long nightgown, long pink socks, the top of a pair of pyjamas and he still wants to screw me! Fancying men - it's what keeps me going - someone comes into the bar and his moustache catches your eye. You get a flutter even before you've touched them and it's like some magnet drawing you together. You fancy him and then he sees you and he fancies you and you're drinking lager and not feeling the strain - then he touches you - then he touches you quite casual like and that's it. You know you've got to have him if it kills you. I need different men to satisfy my different moods. (13)

In these letters and notes from the 1960s, readers can also find descriptions of some of Josie's friends, who are reminiscent of other characters in *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow*. Among these we might note Joan, also a barmaid and Josie's friend, who seems to find her fictional equivalent in Beryl in *Poor Cow*. Another friend of Josie, one with a similar role as Beryl too, is Olive. She is described as "Josie's great friend" who, like Joy's partner in *Poor Cow*, worked as a prostitute in Battersea (16).

The final material from the 1960s provided in *The Muse* is a letter in which it is revealed that Josie has suddenly moved to Australia after falling in love with a man. Despite the fact that the rest of *The Muse* deals with the years after the writing of *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow*, it is striking to observe that even in the rest of the letters, notes and memories narrated by Dunn, it is common to observe similar situations to those that we have seen in Dunn's fiction. For instance, Josie's lover in Australia seems to be in a better financial situation and, like Joy in *Poor Cow*, Josie tells Dunn that she is studying in order to move up the social ladder:

Do you no Nell I wish I had educated my self now. I had the chance but never bothered. It would of come in handy now. I always did feel inferior aboat that, still who noe's I might start reading now and educate myself, every day passes you learn some think new. Who would ever think I would end up here, did you?
(23)

Despite these later points of similarity, it is the period from 1960 to 1969—in which *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow* were written—that seems to have been fundamental for Dunn's career. In fact, in 1980 she mentioned that she used to reread Josie's early letters to find inspiration, especially in the process of writing her first play, *Steaming* (1981):

I was discovering I really could write in Josie's language. I knew how she thought and how she spoke. Her letters brought her to me and I could tune in and imagine her chatting to one of the other characters in the play. I could hear her cheerful voice. See her lively presence. I knew she was a long way away but she was here too. Cheering me up. Making me laugh. Chasing away the blues.
(48)

4. Conclusions

The similarities between both Nell Dunn's *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow* with regard to *The Muse* illustrate that many elements which inspired Dunn's work produced in the 1960s are based on real experiences, something which prior to the publication of *The Muse* was merely suggested or supposed. This analysis, then, has been useful in confirming the true extent of the realism of these fictional texts. The fact that most of the characters, situations and attitudes therein were real provides not just a sense of authenticity, but also allows us to reconsider these books as genuine testimonies of the period. Moreover, we have seen how these experiences have remained as a source of inspiration in the author's later writing.

Among the most recurrent similarities are those relating to women's sexuality, Josie's boyfriends, the way she experiences motherhood in conditions marked by her class, and the desire she has for freedom and independence, reflecting the desires of women of different ages. Nevertheless, if similarities abound, the absences are also very noticeable. In *The Muse* abortion is not even mentioned, despite being so prominent in Dunn's fiction, something which is coupled with the fact that the events in *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow* are more descriptive. Therefore, although dealing with the same topics, certain elements in Dunn's work—for instance, the poor relationship between Ted and Sylvie and between Ray and Josie—are more dramatic. On the contrary, in *The Muse* these situations are merely suggested or indeed omitted entirely.

This is very significant, in that both books were written on the cusp of unprecedented changes in women's rights, including equal pay, abortion and improvements in divorce legislation. In fact, as described in the respective sections above, the publication of these books constituted a key element in the birth of a new gender consciousness in the country⁹. That said, it is particularly striking, given that these books were written in the 1960s—a moment far removed from

9 In Ali Smith's words, "the impact of Dunn's writing is one of the reasons the abortion laws shifted and changed" (2018a, X).

today's feminist concerns¹⁰—have so many features in common and exhibit a clear commitment to controversial issues, despite the author's reluctance to deal directly with such issues. On the contrary, the treatment of many of these issues and experiences are truncated or even omitted entirely in *The Muse*. Whereas it was during the 1960s that Dunn and Josie lived in Battersea, and that those years continued to serve as one of the author's main sources of inspiration for the remainder of her career, this part of *The Muse* occupies less than a third of the book.

There may be several reasons for this. First, we might bear in mind that it is a biographical book, and it may thus be problematic to narrate in great detail the controversial and difficult real events that inspired *Up the Junction*, especially those dealing with people who are still alive. Also, it might have been felt by the author to be unnecessary to repeat the same stories she had so thoroughly covered in her fiction: for example, although Josie's experience of motherhood in a problematic economic situation is mentioned briefly in *The Muse*, this was identical to that of Joy's in *Poor Cow*. Indeed, considering the author's insistence on remaining close to reality and faithfully narrating what she witnessed over the course of her career, this second reason may be more accurate.

Features such as the optimism found in Joy's letters, which was seen to be an exaggeration by some reviewers in 1960, in fact prove to be an accurate reproduction of the tone of Josie's letters. Therefore, despite the brevity of this section in *The Muse*, the fact that Dunn includes genuine manuscripts and visual testimonies of these experiences reinforces the idea of authenticity in the events narrated in *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow*.

10 Nell Dunn's early publications were released in the first years of the second wave feminism (1960s -1980s) anticipating, in turn, many changes in women's rights which occurred in the course of the 1960s. Even key landmarks such as changes concerning divorce and abortion occurred at the end of the decade, some years after the publication of Dunn's works like *Up the Junction* (1963), *Poor Cow* (1967) or her collection of interviews *Talking to Women* (1965). Margaret Drabble remarks on Dunn's ability to describe these problems and depict an alternative way of living for women: "these were the early days of the new wave of Women's Liberation, and there, up the junction, Nell Dunn felt she had discovered a world where women did not depend on male patronage, where they went their own ways, sexually and financially, where there was plenty of work, so much work that they could afford to be cheeky, rebellious, loud-mouthed" (Drabble 1988, x).

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