

## Charles Bukowski – America's Poet of the South

Jaroslław Kuyath

University of Opole, Poland

### Abstract

One of the most expressive trends in American culture of the 1950s and 1960s, manifested by the treatment of travel as a motive of life in both the mental and creative spheres, can be confidently attributed to the Beat generation. Their consumption lifestyle, crazy undertakings, love and moral fights, in which they entered without any moderation, led them to living problems and, consequently, to being lost. This generation almost automatically brings to mind the portrait of young, vulnerable Americans, rebellious and lost, oppressed and radical, wanting freedom and falling into trouble. The myth of the Beat generation is one of the most distinct myths of American culture of the twentieth century. We know very little about Beat in Poland. Admittedly, there have been several studies concerning the literary output of Beat writers, but they do not fully reflect the complexity of the phenomenon and contexts in which they were shaped. We are constantly looking at them in terms of mythologized rebellion. Associated with beat, Charles Bukowski is the best example of a person whose work was inspired by his own experiences related to sex, alcohol, poverty and human weaknesses.

**Keywords:** Bukowski, America's South, Beat Generation

### Introduction

Bukowski was born on August 16, 1920 in Andernach, Germany, and the family moved to Los Angeles when he was two years old. Bukowski endured a brutal, unhappy childhood. Rejected by girls due to his acute acne and often severely beaten by his disciplinarian father and other peers, Bukowski first discovered alcohol at the age of thirteen. For most of his literary career, Bukowski drank heavily, writing that: "I have a feeling that drinking is a form of suicide where you're allowed to return to life and begin all over the next day. It's like killing yourself, and then you're reborn. I guess I've lived about ten or fifteen thousand lives by now." The abuse Bukowski endured from his father, along with the isolation and extreme self-consciousness concerning his appearance, directly influenced Bukowski as a writer. Although he wrote in a language full of profanity, his work captures sensitivity and a deep understanding of human nature. Bukowski himself was known for his life full of scandals, so his protagonist is a man living on the margins of society, skeptical of people, and at the same time looking for closeness with them.

Bukowski's style can be sensed at a distance, from the first paragraph. It is not only original, but also unmanageable. His texts are short, concise and at the same time captivating and fun. Bukowski enjoyed a sound reputation as a prolific underground writer who explored the dissolute underbelly of skid-row America—specifically the Los Angeles lower-classes—in both fiction and poetry. Bukowski's short fiction concentrates on uncontrite drinking and generally anti-social behavior, employing a scatological idiom which serves to mock academe and animate his idiosyncratic style and ideology, while also contributing to Bukowski's often harsh critical reception. Bukowski is praised for imbuing his stories and characters with an empathetic humanity and self-deprecating, absurdist black-comedy, avoiding maudlin sentimentality, and instead relying on experience, direct language, and imagination to balance his writing. Bukowski's work helped give rise to the "dirty realism" prominent in literature of the 1970s and 80s, most famously in the short fiction of Raymond Carver. Bukowski is known for depicting violent and sexual imagery in his hard-edged prose. This graphic usage has led some critics to dismiss Bukowski's work as superficial and misogynist in nature; yet others contend that Bukowski merely satirizes this macho stance through his employment of sex, drunkenness, and violence as primary plot devices. Bukowski seldom commented on his own work, as most of his readers know that virtually all the novels, short stories, and poems are thinly veiled approximations of his actual life. Indeed, his highly acclaimed novel *Ham on Rye* (1982) is not only his autobiography but also an American portrait of the artist as a young man. This is a story about the author's childhood and youth, presenting

a sensitive boy who, despite poverty, an autocratic father and the pressure of conformist environment, fights against obstacles in order to follow his own way of life.

Literary critics find his work difficult to interpret because it so closely resembles the actual day-to-day routine of an unapologetic, hard-drinking, womanizing gambler who loves playing the horses and brawling in barrooms. His work records the despairing lifestyles of the poor and infamous in Los Angeles in unrelenting detail. In Hollywood, his alter ego, Henry Chinaski, announces himself as "a historian of drink" who has no peer and wryly adds that he has outlived his drinking companions principally because he "never gets out of bed before noon".

Charles Bukowski in his novel *Women*, devoted nearly three hundred pages to descriptions of encounters with numerous women, who used their power to deprive men of not only common sense but also self-preservation instinct. He would take any risks in order to achieve carnal intercourses with a woman, spending his time in bars. *Post Office* is a very interesting novel in Bukowski's literary output. It is a dramatic proof of the fact that we are not always able to make own decisions in our life and we not always can do what we like. *Post Office* dramatically criticizes all those who worked several or more years, doing a job, which they sincerely hated. Charles Bukowski makes us realise that life is neither colourful nor pleasant, as we are frequently told by films, television or press. However, he adds fun and joy, which can be experienced against all odds. The world presented in *Post Office* is not grey. The novel is full of life thanks to the descriptions of days wasted on sorting out parcels. Another working day is full of frivolous jokes and life slowly goes on. The novel is sometimes closer to reportage than fiction.

The great French playwright and novelist Jean Genet called Bukowski "the best poet in America," words of high praise from an artist who rarely commented on another poet's work and is considered the archetypal "underground" writer of the twentieth century. Bukowski's themes are the same in most all of his poetry, novels, and short stories: violence, despair, poverty, hopelessness, alcoholism, suicide, madness, and how alcohol, sex, gambling, and, most important, writing can intermittently relieve the agony of these lives of dramatic desperation. Bukowski owed allegiance to no one for the success of his work except the persistent integrity of the small presses that first published his work and especially Black Sparrow Press. The only literary assistance he ever received was from the books he read in his local public library. What motivated Bukowski's commitment to the life of the imagination was his unflinching realization that without it, his life would be as meaningless and absurd as the rest of the trapped creatures he writes about. Wallace Stevens, one of the most important poets of the twentieth century, defined the imagination as the "violence within that protects us from the violence without." There is little doubt that Bukowski viewed its function in exactly the same terms, yet in an even more profoundly personal way. He survived on the mean streets of Los Angeles, after all, not (as did Stevens) in the comfortable safety of the office of vice president of one of the United States' largest insurance companies. Critics often compare Bukowski to several of the so-called Beat writers (such as Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg) but fail to mention that Bukowski's is a working-class background. He never had the opportunity to attend such prestigious universities as Columbia or Harvard, as did the other three writers. A number of his public school friends' fathers committed suicide during the Depression, while many others drank themselves into early graves. Though Kerouac emerged from a working-class New England background, he attended Columbia University on a football scholarship, while Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs came out of college-educated families with traditions of reading and culture. Though Bukowski is frequently compared to Henry Miller in his graphic depiction of drinking and sexual freedom, one never feels that Bukowski is in any way romanticizing that lifestyle. Miller's characters could, if they chose, move on to an economically more rewarding life and, because of their intelligence, charm, or sexual prowess, find any number of amorous partners in countless cafés of the Latin Quarter of Paris during the 1930's.

One of the more compelling poems from what is perhaps Bukowski's best-known collection of poetry, *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses over the Hills*, concerns the plight of a poor man who discovers his beloved wife's infidelities and proceeds to castrate himself in her horrified presence, flushing his testicles down the toilet yet continuing to drink his wine while holding a bloody towel between his legs with a look of utter indifference on his face. The ruling passions of the poor, the ugly, and the hopeless are, in Bukowski's view, much more significant to them than those of the wealthy are to them, simply because they are all that the poor have. In one of Bukowski's finest collections of poems, "It Catches My Heart in Its Hands," he presents a world in which the young are "fenced in/ stabbed and shaven/ taught words/ propped up/ to die"—an existence in which "you and I ain't living well! enough." In a poem titled "The Tragedy of the Leaves," he talks about the necessity for laughter in spite of depressing circumstances:

what was needed now was a good comedian, ancient style, a jester with jokes upon absurd pain; pain is absurd because

it exists, nothing more;. . . . .and I walk into the dark hall where the landlady stood execrating and final, sending me to hell waving her fat sweaty arms and screaming for rent because the world has failed us both. (page???)

There is also in these lines an empathetic quality of the poet as spokesman for all members of his tribe of down-and-outers, the losers in this world. The cadences are reminiscent of a bardic voice. One could certainly view Bukowski as the bard for his people in the poorer sections of Los Angeles where he originated. Bards have traditionally been viewed as the voices of their people but always of people in a very specific physical locale. Allen Ginsberg and William Blake project bardic voices and attempt to reconnect their readers to the truth of their own experiences. Bukowski's bardic voice, like that of William Carlos Williams, functions in a much more specific geographical place using the energies of the local, depleted though they may be, to generate utterance.

Bukowski is a phenomenon. He has established himself as a writer with a consistent and insistent style based on what he projects as his "personality," the result of hard, intense living. He sees himself as what he appears to be—a tough, old, funky, ugly, macho, cynical bastard, with just an occasional hint of compassion, usually reserved for himself:

I keep searching the streets for that  
    blood-wine battleship she drives  
    with a weak battery, and the doors  
    hanging from broken hinges  
I drive around the streets  
    an inch away from weeping,  
ashamed of my sentimentality and possible love.  
    a confused old man driving in the rain  
    wondering where the good luck went.

Despite what some criticize as prose in Bukowski's poetry, there is in much of his work a poetic sensibility that, though arrogantly smart-ass and self-protective as well as self-promotional, is also sometimes poignant, emotionally revealing. If you read his stories and poems, you get the impression that he is not a human being. It is a lonely beast that screams out of despair that suffers, waiting for love but defined differently. Which one must help but no one knows how. This is what connects all his works. Loneliness and unbelievable pain. He is probably the only American writer whose books have been available in bookstores in Poland for over twenty years.

He is among the United States' South best-known existential writers and, many would claim, the most influential and imitated American poet. Bukowski was heavily addicted to alcohol, however this has not impaired his health. He died of leukaemia at the age of 73 in California. The epitaph on his grave says: „Don't try." His wife, Linda Lee Bukowski, claims that its meaning is: „If you spend your whole time trying, then all you do is try. So do not try. Just do it..."