

**Life on the Margins:
The Autobiographical Fiction of Charles Bukowski**

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Charles Bukowski devoted his writing career to turning his own life into poetry and prose. In poems and stories about his experiences as one of the working poor in post war America, and in those depicting his experiences as a writer of the American underground, Bukowski represents himself as both a literary and social outsider.

Bukowski expresses an alternative literary aesthetic through his fictional persona, Henry Chinaski, who struggles to overcome his suffering in a world he finds absurd, and who embarks on a quest for freedom in his youth to which he remains committed all his life.

This thesis examines Charles Bukowski's autobiographical fiction with a specific emphasis on five novels and one collection of short stories. In the novels, *Post Office* (1970), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982) and *Hollywood* (1989), and in a number of short stories in the collection *Hot Water Music* (1983), Bukowski explores different periods of Chinaski's life with a dark humour, revealing links between Chinaski's struggle with the absurd and those aspects comprising Bukowski's alternative aesthetic. The thesis focuses on such aspects of Bukowski's art as the uncommercial nature of his publishing history, his strong emphasis on literary simplicity, the appearance of the grotesque and Bukowski's obsession with non-conformity, drinking and sex. These aspects illuminate the distinctive nature of Bukowski's art and its purpose, which is the transformation of an ordinary life into literature.

This thesis argues that Bukowski illuminates possibilities that exist for individuals to create an identity for themselves through aesthetic self-expression. The thesis traces the development of Chinaski's non-conformist personality from *Ham on Rye*, based on Bukowski's youth in Los Angeles during the Depression, to *Hollywood*, Bukowski's ironic portrayal of Chinaski's brush with the commercial film industry. Through meeting the many challenges he faced throughout his life with defiance, honesty and an irreverent sense of humour, Bukowski invites readers to identify with his alternative world view. The thesis argues this particular aspect of his writing constitutes his most valuable contribution to twentieth century American fiction.

INTRODUCTION

In a letter to his publisher John Martin in November 1987, Charles Bukowski writes,

when you come in from the factory with your hands and your body and your mind ripped, hours and days stolen from you, you can become very aware of a false line, of a fake thought, of a literary con game. It hurt to read the famous writers of my day, I felt that they were soft and fake...that they had never felt the flame.

(Letters Vol 3, 1999: 95).

Bukowski often wrote in letters of his desire to read anything which matched the raw intensity of his life experiences, and he sought to express the absurdity of his troubled life through his writing. Bukowski's poetry and prose communicated a simple, and sometimes crass and cynical literary aesthetic that replaced beauty with a hardened realism which not only provided a thematic and stylistic focus in his writing, but ultimately impacted on the direction his own life took.

Bukowski wrote about his own life in stories and poems so that both himself and his readers might better comprehend the nature of his alternative views about both mainstream American society and the creative profession. Such views explain his lifelong quest for freedom and awareness of absurdity in the world. Bukowski also sought to communicate that he himself had 'felt the flame,' having struggled for much of his life to come to terms with everyday life in post war American society. He set about portraying his experiences with a hardened, uncompromising tone in order to rage against writing that was 'soft and fake'. Bukowski decided at an early age that his various experiences growing up in the depression years, working in factories, drinking in bars and sleeping in rooming houses, would be suitable subject matter for his poetry and prose. These experiences, once turned into fiction, would negate the soft fakery of the literary canon as Bukowski perceived it, and the collective submissiveness of mainstream American society in accepting cultural mediocrity. Bukowski hoped his writing would animate his readers to identify with his alternative view of the world.

This thesis will explore various aspects of Bukowski's writing that comprise a distinctive literary aesthetic in five of his six published novels and one collection of short stories, each concerned with the artist creating art from everyday life. Bukowski's autobiographical fiction opened up literary possibilities for turning one's ordinary life

into a literary form that could be both compelling and entertaining. A consistent theme running through much of Bukowski's writing is the struggle of an ordinary individual to overcome his suffering in a world he finds absurd. The nature of this struggle is revealed through a number of key, recurring characteristics explored in greater detail throughout this thesis, for therein lies an explanation for the unusual nature of his particular aesthetic. Bukowski's uncommercial publishing history, his emphasis on writing autobiographical fiction, the development of a distinctive persona in the writing, the consistent expression of a view of the world as absurd, the deliberate avoidance of literary complexity in the writing, the appearance of the literary grotesque, the recurring emphasis on drinking and sex, Bukowski's obsession with non-conformity, and the demystification of the creative act comprise Bukowski's aesthetic as it is manifested in each of the five autobiographical novels and in quite a number of short stories. Such an aesthetic justifies Bukowski's reputation as the author of an alternative literature that, in an often crude and confrontational manner, records a central character's quest for freedom.

Bukowski created a literary persona named Henry Chinaski as a vessel for expressing his alternative view of the world, to a large extent concerned with commenting on the role of the artist in society, the stultifying dullness and conformity of the 'day-job,' the comic dimensions of sexual relationships, the often unpleasant realities of poverty and chronic drunkenness, and the constant struggle of the alienated individual to assert his non-conformist identity. Through Henry Chinaski, Bukowski is able to attempt to reveal the absurdity of the world with an element of distance and without succumbing to despair. Because Bukowski's novels often articulate a conception of suffering, Chinaski becomes a literary creation through which the burden of Bukowski's own experiences can be shared. Although each of Bukowski's autobiographical novels can be distinguished through a respective focus on a particular period of Chinaski's life, there are nevertheless recurring aspects which assist the reader in identifying the work as a Bukowski novel – an individual work of the imagination with a specific aesthetic purpose that is based on the lived experiences of the author.

Bukowski's writing is shaped by particular events in Chinaski's life upon which the writer chose to focus, the horribly comical manner in which these events are portrayed, and the conclusions that Chinaski draws from the absurd situations in which

Bukowski places him. Because of Bukowski's commitment to simplicity in theme and style, the essential nature of Chinaski's personality as it is portrayed in the writing, is reasonably uncomplicated. As a youth, Chinaski embarks on a quest for freedom through self expression (the theme of Bukowski's fourth novel *Ham on Rye*) to which he remains committed throughout his life, regardless of his personal circumstances which, as we shall see, change considerably over time. Chinaski's unwavering dedication to this quest suggests Bukowski's appeal to readers. In particular, Chinaski's consistent expression of non-conformity is appealing to the reader who similarly believes that such conventions in mainstream society as the 'day-job' and consumerism, are socially constructed devices through which expressions of individual freedom are hindered.

But the very fact that Bukowski's novels, poems and stories exist at all, courtesy of the tireless work of John Martin from Black Sparrow Press, tells us that Bukowski's quest for freedom took him beyond expressing such concerns as a conversation topic with friends or scribbling thoughts in a diary stuffed away in a bottom drawer. Instead, Bukowski chose to arrange his experiences in an aesthetic form that communicated the anti-establishment views of Henry Chinaski in a forceful, yet humorous manner, which ironically culminated in a certain degree of critical acceptance and financial reward for the writer, depicted in the later novel *Hollywood*.

Any discussion of Bukowski's literary aesthetic must firstly accept that his fiction was indeed based on his own life experiences. Although a body of writing has been devoted to theoretical discussion of the various strains and possibilities that exist in autobiographical writing and its various associations with literature, our discussion is rather focused on the contribution of the autobiographical aspect of Bukowski's writing to a broader discussion of Bukowski's singular aesthetic, and the formation and development of the central figure in his writing, Henry Chinaski. Therefore, the thesis will discuss in further detail in the opening chapter, aspects of Bukowski's life that found their way into his literature. The thesis then goes on to look at those recurring characteristics in the writing which illuminate Bukowski's aesthetic. These include the function of the literary absurd and grotesque in shaping Henry Chinaski's view of the world, the ongoing nature Chinaski's quest for freedom through his development as a writer and drinker, and Bukowski's willingness to reveal Chinaski's flaws and vulnerabilities, particularly in his personal relationships.

Such factors are revealed in Bukowski's five autobiographical novels, which will be examined along with one collection of short fiction in the order in which they were published. Bukowski's first three novels *Post Office*, *Factotum* and *Women*, which were published in the 1970s, illuminate aspects of Henry Chinaski's personality in his adult years first introduced in earlier stories from the 1960s. Each of these novels is characterised by a stylistic simplicity which suggests Bukowski's intent to communicate his themes in such a way as to be easily absorbed by the reader. The novels also contain crude, and sometimes confronting sentiments expressed by Chinaski as he becomes increasingly more self-assertive. Bukowski then goes on to explore the origins of Chinaski's persona in *Ham on Rye* and the odd turns Chinaski's life took in the novel *Hollywood* and the collection of short stories *Hot Water Music*, which were published in the 1980s, and which reveal a more reflective Bukowski as he attempts to broaden his readers' understanding of Chinaski's hardened personality shaped by unusual life experiences.

In *Hollywood*, Chinaski is depicted at the height of his literary success, but the response of the elder Chinaski to the often absurd machinations of the commercial film industry is largely shaped by experiences in his youth that are recalled in the narrative. Each of the five novels share similar themes, but the distinctiveness of each is determined by changing circumstances in Chinaski's life where Bukowski has selected particular experiences to emphasise and accentuate, and link to the harmonious balance that Bukowski continually strikes between reality and imagination.

Although Chinaski is not necessarily a likeable character, his appeal lies in his dedicated willingness to express alternative views about his experience of the world regardless of the consequences. He thus sets out to illuminate, and then to defy the absurd and the grotesque through writing and drinking. It could also be argued that Chinaski's perpetually sardonic attitude, in spite of his suffering, is the source of humour in Bukowski's writing. Henry Chinaski's life, like that of his creator, comprises interlocking personality traits and experiences. The development of Bukowski's literary aesthetic reflected in Chinaski's persona is illuminated in those experiences from Bukowski's own life upon which he reflected time and time again in letters, stories, poems and novels and interviews. A close reading of the novels and a number of short stories reveals how Chinaski's experiences came to embody Bukowski's literary

aesthetic.

We will begin our discussion of Bukowski's autobiographical fiction by comparing some facts about his own life with particular events emphasised in the writing.

In his 1991 biography of Bukowski, Neeli Cherkovski notes,

somehow without giving it much thought, he [Bukowski] knew that his strength lay in illuminating the sleazy bars, littered alleyways, furnished rooms and lunchpail compatriots with whom he had rubbed shoulders most of his life.

(1991: 94)

Cherkovski makes this observation at a point in his biography when, in 1955, at the age of the 35, Bukowski began writing poetry. He had spent his twenties drinking in bars and travelling around America, working in an assortment of odd jobs. In 1952, Bukowski had begun a stint as a part-time postal worker at the Terminal Annex Post Office in downtown Los Angeles, but shortly after was hospitalised with internal bleeding as a consequence of heavy drinking in the preceding ten years (1991: 89-91).

Cherkovski treats this near fatal experience as a central factor in Bukowski deciding to work seriously at becoming a professional writer. Cherkovski notes:

Hank sat down at his typewriter, long unused, and began typing out poems. He didn't know where they came from, but believed they were probably spurred on by his near brush with death. 'It was some kind of madness.' [Bukowski tells him]. 'I didn't even think about what I was going to write. It was just automatic'

(1991: 91).

However, Bukowski would soon settle on subject matter that would preoccupy him for the remainder of his life: his own life experiences. These experiences become those of his anti-hero Henry Chinaski, and are revealed in five novels written between 1970 and 1989. This thesis will examine these five novels and one short story collection in the order in which they were published: *Post Office* (1970), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), *Hot Water Music* (1983) and *Hollywood* (1989). Bukowski also wrote a sixth novel, *Pulp*, published by Black Sparrow Press shortly after his death in 1994. This novel is the only one not to feature Henry Chinaski, and is an homage to pulp crime fiction.

Ham on Rye begins with Henry Chinaski's earliest memories, and concludes with Chinaski's refusal to join the armed forces following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. The novel is an account of Chinaski's childhood during the Depression, and its

particular focus is on the confrontational and sometimes violent relationship between the narrator and his father. Its readers are encouraged to draw links between this relationship and Chinaski's increasing alienation from mainstream American society, represented by his father in the young Chinaski's mind. Bukowski's four other autobiographical novels depict various periods of Chinaski's life, with a particular focus on this character's experiences with employment and women, culminating in *Hollywood* which is both a satirical and cynical account of Chinaski's brush with the commercial film industry. This surprising event follows the writing of a screenplay, ironically dealing with Chinaski's impoverished and drunken life before he became recognised as a writer. Bukowski had been asked by the French film director Barbet Schroeder to write a screenplay in 1979, eventually turned into the film *Barfly*, which received theatrical release in 1987.

That Bukowski often thought about his own ordinary, yet unusual life as suitable subject matter for his writing is confirmed in a 1962 letter to the novelist John William Corrington. Bukowski writes:

when I write a poem, it is only fingers on typewriter[sic], something smacking down. It is that moment then, the walls, the weather of that day, the toothache, the hangover, what I ate, the face I passed, maybe a night 20 years ago on a park bench, an itch on the neck, whatever, and you get a poem.

(*Letters Vol 2*: 1995: 34).

Ordinary details become prominent events for Bukowski, and many recur throughout both stories and poems. One example occurs in the short story "Life and Death in the Charity Ward" from *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*, and in a letter he wrote to Corrington in 1963, in which he places emphasis on a particular life experience contributing to his conflict with both his parents and mainstream society in general.

This experience, also written about in the Howard Sounes and Neeli Cherkovski biographies, and which became the catalyst for Bukowski deciding to take seriously the notion of becoming a professional writer, was the near fatal internal bleeding he suffered in 1952. Bukowski dwells on this incident at some length in the story, and writes in the letter to Corrington,

ended up in some charity hospital...My whore came to see me and she was drunk. My old man was with her. The old man gave me a lot of lip and the whore was nasty too, and I told the old man, 'just one more word out of

you, and I'm going to yank this needle outa my arm, climb off this death bed and whip your ass.'

(*Letters Vol 1*: 56).

The accompanying story written somewhere between 1967 and 1972, presents a stark description of the narrator's experience in an American charity hospital, and concludes with his blatant defiance of the medical advice given him. This is revealed as a return to drinking, even though he is told that he might die by doing so. The narrator, named Charles Bukowski in the story, is visited by his girlfriend, although the inclusion of this incident is more a statement about the narrator's relationship with his father than about the drunken state of his girlfriend. The narrator tells his father:

'She's broke. You bastard, you bought her whiskey, got her drunk and brought her up here.'

'I told you she was no good, Henry. I told you she was a bad woman.'...

'I know what kind of woman I have. Now get her out of here now, or so help me Christ, I'm going to pull this needle out of my arm and whip your ass!'

(1988: 138).

Although the letter to Corrington was written at least four years earlier, this event was significant enough for Bukowski to eventually turn it into a short story. The story acts as a commentary on a particular aspect of his own life that he would obsess over in his writing through stark depictions of Chinaski's volatile relationship with his father. The character named Vicky in the story is identified by Cherkovski as Jane Cooney Baker with whom Bukowski had a serious relationship, until her death from alcohol abuse in 1962. As we shall see, Baker reappears in the novels *Factotum*, *Post Office* and *Hollywood*. The thematic link between both the letter and the story is Bukowski's rejection of his father's values, also revealed in other stories, and in the novel *Ham on Rye* to be discussed at greater length. Both the letter and story also reveal the close link between Bukowski's own life as revealed in the letters and the biographies, and the appearance of his experiences within the stories themselves.

Bukowski's Early Publishing History.

The circumstances of Bukowski's publishing history constitute a significant aspect of his life, largely contributing to his reputation as a writer of the American

underground. In his entry on Charles Bukowski in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Michael Basinski notes that,

Bukowski's rise to fame was not meteoric...a self motivated poet from the blue collar class and a literary eccentric, Bukowski was the product of the small press, little literary magazine, and underground alternative journal. This publishing world - outrageous, raucous, volatile and generally unreliable - was one that Bukowski fit perfectly and as the independent publishing ventures of the 1960s gained notoriety, Bukowski's reputation also grew.
(1996: 64).

Although Bukowski did publish extensively in small literary magazines, alternatively referred to as 'littles,' throughout his career, it would be misleading to assume that his publishing history progressed no further. Since 1968 the independent publishing company Black Sparrow Press has published many collections of Bukowski's poetry along with four short story collections and six novels. Through the efforts of Black Sparrow Press, Bukowski's work would eventually be exposed to readers in Europe, Britain and Australia, culminating in a successful series of readings Bukowski gave in Germany in 1978, documented in the travelogue *Shakespeare Never Did This* (1979).

Bukowski also wrote a series of columns in the late 1960s for the Los Angeles street press newspaper *Open City*. These were compiled in the *Notes of a Dirty Old man* collection published by the esteemed Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1973. However, Bukowski's work was never at any time in his career taken on by any mainstream publishing company excepting the *Run with the Hunted* compendium published by Harper Collins in 1993 - compiled by John Martin of Black Sparrow Press.

There is a direct correlation between the pseudo-romantic, drunken lifestyle of Henry Chinaski, and Bukowski's own publishing history. This is revealed in the personal nature of his relationship with three key figures, John Martin of Black Sparrow Press and John and Louise Webb of Loujon Press, discussed at various times in letters and stories. However, before Bukowski had met any of these people, his low-key attitude towards the publication of his work was already apparent.

Bukowski's first substantial publication was a chapbook of 14 poems titled *Flower Fist and Bestial Wail*, published by a 'little' magazine editor E.V Griffiths under his own Hearse imprint in 1960. The earliest letters by Bukowski in *Screams from the Balcony* record the struggle by the then unknown writer to have his work published by

the ‘littles,’ and insights are offered into the alternative aspect of this avenue of the publishing industry. In an August 1959 letter to E.V Griffiths, Bukowski writes,

there are 10 or 12 other magazines that have accepted my stuff, but as you know there is an immense lag in some cases between acceptance and publication. Much of this type of thing makes one feel as if he were writing into a void. But that’s the literary life, and we’re stuck with it.
(*Letters Vol 1*: 11).

Although Bukowski is well aware of the hardships endured by writers of the underground, he nevertheless invests great efforts in seeking acceptance within this milieu. Subsequent letters to Griffiths reveal an eagerness to have his work published in chapbooks which reside at the smaller end of the publishing spectrum - an enthusiasm he would retain for the remainder of his life (*Letters Vol 3*: 302).

This is revealed in an upbeat October 1960 letter to Griffiths, written after Bukowski had gazed upon a copy of his first published collection of poetry: “I opened the package right in the street, sunlight coming down, and there it was, *Flower Fist and Bestial Wail*, never a baby born in more pain, but a beautiful baby, beautiful. The first collected poems of a man of 40 who began writing late” (*Letters Vol 1*: 25). It was noted earlier that Bukowski first began writing poetry at the age of 35. There is little evidence to suggest that he sought to fast-track his career at this stage by seeking the attention of established critics or commercial publishing companies. In this respect, Bukowski’s publishing history reveals a highly individualistic ethos, revealed in the fiction through the self-assertive personality of Henry Chinaski.

There are two subsequent events in Bukowski’s publishing history which also hint at an already developed alternative aesthetic. The first is the publication of a ‘little’ literary magazine titled *The Outsider*, edited and printed in the early 1960s by John and Louise Webb who ran the independent publishing company Loujon Press. The third issue of *The Outsider* published in 1962, was devoted almost exclusively to Bukowski’s poetry. In the editorial, Bukowski was named ‘Outsider of the Year’ (Cherkovski, 1991: 128-129). In response, Bukowski wrote a letter to John Webb in which he states,

I have always been pretty much outside it all, and I don’t mean just the art I try to send through my typewriter, although there it appears I stand outside the gate also. It appears from many rejections that I do not write poetry at all. Or as a dear friend told me the other day: ‘You do not understand the

true meaning of poetry. You are not lyrical. You do not sing! You write bar talk. The type of thing you can hear in any bar on any day.' I have always been one of those people who do everything wrong. This is essentially because I am not involved in the march. (*Letters Vol 1: 41*).

This letter to Webb in response to the praise of him as an outsider artist, contains thoughts and ideas suggesting the emergence of a distinctive literary aesthetic eventually becoming more clearly defined as Bukowski began to write longer prose works alongside the poetry. In the letter, Bukowski appears to relish the outsider status bestowed upon him, particularly when discussing the idiosyncracies of his poetry as simple, direct and conversational.

Bukowski's underground literary reputation was further established in a series of columns he wrote for *Open City*, a Los Angeles street newspaper, between 1967 and 1968, and about which he writes in the story, "The Birth, Life and Death of an Underground Newspaper," in the collection *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*, published in 1972. Gay Brewer notes that the columns had, "an inestimable influence on the creation of the Bukowski mystique: the violent and abusive loner, bard of the L.A. streets. He cultivates such a persona in the columns, with varying degrees of intentional irony." (1997: 46). The columns themselves are an admixture of surreal, drunken storytelling, grotesque portrayals of material and moral impoverishment, confronting depictions of sex and loose autobiographical narratives in which the narrator is often named Charles Bukowski. Brewer notes that stylistically, "the text is doggedly ungrammatical, redundant, and dedicated to its supposed artlessness." (1997: 46). In this writing, Bukowski advocates artlessness for its own sake. Grammatical imperfections in the writing possibly represent a conscious effort to heighten the impact of the crude, often sexually explicit subject matter, and also reflect the spontaneity and editorial freedom that writing for the street press provided.

Some of the columns also delve into Bukowski's views on literature which are commensurate with inflammatory comments regarding mainstream cultural mediocrity and conformity, reiterated in later works. One such literary opinion can be found in the opening paragraph of the first piece in the *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* collection, which contains autobiographical references to a period in Bukowski's life

when he had left his parents home in his early 20s and was living in a succession of downtown Los Angeles rooming houses. The piece begins: “I was sitting with my buddy Elf...[who] wrote too much like Thomas Wolfe, and outside of Dreiser, T. Wolfe was the worst American writer ever born...I was a student of Dostoyevsky and listened to Mahler in the dark” (1973: 9). Bukowski is critiquing romanticised literary portrayals of pre-war America characteristic of Thomas Wolfe’s writing, instead preferring, starker, more realist aesthetics. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* appealed to the struggling writer because it depicts a central character aggressively negating the conventions of the class society in which he lives, and expressing a solitary conception of freedom.

Existing Critical Work.

There are to date, only two major critical studies providing detailed analysis of Bukowski’s work. The Russell Harrison study, *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*, published by Black Sparrow Press in 1994, comprises a series of essays mostly focused on the recurring theme of employment in the writer’s short stories, poems and novels. Harrison notes in his introduction that, “Bukowski has emphasised the most important feature of the American class system: the individual’s role in the relations of production...He has done this through the prominence he has given to the role of the job and work in American life.” (1994: 15) He then proceeds to analyse passages from Bukowski’s writing which suggest that a principal characteristic of Henry Chinaski’s personality, is a politicised working class affinity with his fellow workers in the factories and assorted menial clerical jobs in which he is depicted as having worked.

Harrison is quite specific about his intentions in his introduction: “The point I make in this book is that much of his best work (especially from the early 1970’s on) expresses in fictional and poetic terms, a critique of late capitalist society from a working-class point of view” (1994: 17). However, Bukowski is arguably content to simply depict the often unpleasant environments that factory workers find themselves in without necessarily attaching any specific political meaning. In a piece from the *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* collection, Bukowski writes, “I have no politics, I observe. I have no

sides except the side of the human spirit” (1973: 85). Bukowski also states quite bluntly how he feels about the mass of individuals comprising mainstream society in another untitled piece from the collection: “I don’t want to get as holy about being active and involved with mankind as [Albert] Camus did...because basically most of mankind sickens me” (1973: 56). Such a statement does contain a certain amount of irony. Camus wrote extensively about the absurd which Bukowski also does, although as we shall see in our discussion of the story, “Scream When you Burn” from the collection *Hot Water Music*, Bukowski’s objection seems to arise from the issue of style: Camus’ writing is often difficult to comprehend immediately, whilst Bukowski advocated aesthetic simplicity at all times. The sentiment itself, however, recurs throughout Bukowski’s poetry and prose. But Harrison is content to accept that because blue collar work appears quite regularly in Bukowski’s work, it then follows that the writer himself was expressing a specifically politicised perspective.

This is not to say, however, that Bukowski was not critical of capitalism as it existed in post war American society. Bukowski particularly objected to what he saw as the accumulation of personal wealth blunting the development of one’s creative faculties and also one’s sense of his or her individuality. The writer was also highly critical of his own father’s values which he equated with an unhealthy obsession with material wealth, as we shall see in our discussion of the novel *Ham on Rye* and also in two short stories in *Hot Water Music*. However, it is not difficult to determine from a brief survey of Bukowski’s life that he was never politically active, nor did he set out to make any specific political statements in his writing. Harrison’s study does, however, offer a detailed examination of a considerable number of Bukowski poems, stories and novels. In this respect, it makes an important contribution to the small amount of critical writing currently existing on Bukowski’s work.

Furthermore, Harrison is not alone in portraying Bukowski’s work as politically charged. Tamas Dobozy’s essay, “In the Country of Contradiction the Hypocrite is King: Defining Dirty Realism in Charles Bukowski’s *Factotum*,” is an ideologically oriented analysis of Bukowski’s work. Dobozy sets out to demonstrate that the novel *Factotum*, “does provide a model of subversive operativity within post industrial culture” (2001: 5). He argues that Henry Chinaski deliberately mocks capitalist values by perpetually seeking work in the most routinised and deadening

factory jobs, but only in order to resign shortly thereafter. Such an employment cycle does in fact comprise the subject matter of *Factotum*. There is however, little discussion in Dobozy's essay about how other factors such as Chinaski's volatile relationship with his father - which is brought up at various times in the novel - and his perpetual drunkenness, might have in some way influenced his rejection of the day-job. Dobozy accepts unquestioningly that Bukowski's capitalist critique - regardless of the fact that it is always discussed within the context of his own experiences - is intentionally political.

Dobozy also discusses the role of pastiche in Dirty Realist novels - with whom Bukowski's writing has been identified (Brewer, 1997: 6) - as a device consciously employed to subvert the capitalist ethos. He notes that "Bukowski's writing, rather than developing another ideology susceptible to co-optation, takes its 'tactics' from the system it seeks to subvert." (2001: 2). This ironic post-modern interpretation of Bukowski's writing, views Henry Chinaski as a character who actually embraces capitalism by fixating on work in the novel, only to subvert this fixation by resigning from every job he takes on. Dobozy notes that, "Chinaski serves as a contested site between the social realities and pressures of his day, and an idealised stoicism capable of resisting the all encompassing pressures to conform to the marketplace" (2001: 5). Although this comment is valid to some extent, there is little context offered to give the reader a clearer understanding of where Chinaski's 'idealised stoicism' might have originated in terms of his own life experiences, an omission this essay will address.

In the second major critical study of Bukowski's work, a Twayne's United States Authors Series publication, Gay Brewer makes the interesting observation that, "For Bukowski, the shifting of experience into fiction, particularly in the novels, is a skillful method of selection and reorganisation that is frequently overlooked by both admirers and detractors" (1997: 7). It will be argued in the next chapter that Bukowski places a strong and consistent emphasis on particular life experiences, which distinguishes his writing from factual autobiography. His alternative literary aesthetic is also revealed through Henry Chinaski's obsession with sex, and drinking and gambling addictions, which are connected to his struggle to come to terms with the absurdity of the world.

Bukowski's Place in Twentieth Century Fiction.

In his discussion of Bukowski's work in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Michael Basinski notes that, "although critics have not been able to fit him into any of the literary or poetic schools associated with the era, Bukowski exemplified, more than Allen Ginsberg, the anarchistic, anti-middle-class attitude of the decade." (1996: 68). Other critical studies have also suggested difficulties placing Bukowski within a specific twentieth century stream of literature. Brewer notes that,

His work also anticipated and doubtlessly influenced, the 'dirty realism' prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the stories of Raymond Carver. But Bukowski's persistent focus on the lower class and his unrepentant use of drink and scatological idiom...contribute to setting him apart stylistically and ideologically. (1997: 6).

Bukowski's stubborn anti-lyricism sets him apart from his contemporaries and forebears in terms of what he described as 'word tricks' in literature. In his preface to a re-published edition of John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust* in 1980, Bukowski writes,

I was a young man, starving and drinking and trying to be a writer. I did most of my reading at the downtown L.A Public Library, and nothing that I read related to me or the streets or to the people about me. It seemed as if everybody was playing word-tricks, that those who said almost nothing at all were considered excellent writers. Their writing was an admixture of subtlety, craft and form, and it was read and it was taught and it was ingested and it was passed on. It was a comfortable contrivance, a very slick and careful Word-Culture. (1980: 5).

Bukowski proceeded to repeat this view in his autobiographical novels, and in letters, *Open City* columns, and numerous stories and poems. He did so in order to emphasise a particular literary perspective that emanated solely from him.

Bukowski was, however, quite open about the influence of particular writers on his alternative art. In the poem 'The Burning of the Dream,' Bukowski lists a number of writers who meant something to him when he, "lived in a plywood hut behind a roominghouse for \$3.50 a week" (*Run With the Hunted*, 1993: 70). His greatest literary influences referenced in the poem are the nineteenth century Russian writers Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Ivan Turgenev, and twentieth century modernists, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and D.H Lawrence although, as Bukowski notes in the

poem, "I considered Gogol and Dreiser complete fools" (1993: 73).

These influences explain much about Bukowski's own literary style. From Hemingway and Anderson, Bukowski absorbed the unadorned and direct line. Bukowski also possibly identifies with the narrator's expression of outrage at the hypocrisies of mainstream values in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The writer takes Lawrence's depictions of sexuality in such novels as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to new and explicit heights. To this list we might also add two American prose writers, John Fante and Henry Miller who both wrote autobiographical fiction depicting the struggle of a central protagonist to overcome a society hostile to uninhibited self expression. Interestingly, the focus of Bukowski's work remains at odds with a long tradition of politicised working class realist literature, although Bukowski regularly depicts working class experiences. The explanation for this apparent inconsistency is noted by Brewer who writes that "He [Bukowski] expressed no interest in schools, movements or explicit ideologies" (1997: 9). Bukowski regularly expressed such beliefs, as we have discussed.

Bukowski's writing also differs in some significant respects from his contemporaries, the Beats. He is, however, represented in the *Penguin Anthology of the Beats* with a short prose piece describing an encounter between himself and Jack Kerouac's great muse, Neil Cassady. (1993: 438- 441). There are some thematic similarities between Bukowski and the Beats, particularly in terms of shared beliefs about what it means to be free. However, as we shall discuss in the next chapter, the romanticised, experimental modernist literary tradition, a cornerstone of Beat poetry and prose, is noticeably absent in Bukowski's aesthetically simple writing. The Beats were an American sub-culture unto themselves. The earliest Beat writers believed that free creative expression was the manifestation of a pure freedom which transcended post-war conformity. The goal was the transformation of mainstream American society where artistic expression would eventually be regarded as the most noble human goal, rather than political achievement or the pursuit of wealth. The Beats' romanticised, utopian vision of American society was rejected by Bukowski. In a 1965 letter to the poet Douglas Blazek, Bukowski writes,

Ginsberg, Corso...have been sucked in playing their entrails across the
applause of the crowd, and they are dead and they know that they are dead,

it's useless, they've skipped across listened to the applause of half-drunk freaks too long...too long have they taken the bait.
(*Letters Vol 1*: 197).

Through such criticism, Bukowski sets himself apart from his literary contemporaries, and establishes his own alternative vision.

The Matter of Autobiographical Theory.

In his study *Fictions in Autobiography* John Eakin notes that,

autobiographers themselves...are responsible for the problematical reception of their work, for they perform willy-nilly both as artists and historians, negotiating a narrative passage between the freedoms of imaginative creation on the one hand and the constraints of biographical fact on the other.
(1985: 3)

The theoretical study of autobiography and its link to fiction revolve around a number of central questions: To what extent does the autobiographical writer speak the truth, and how can one determine where fact and fiction intersect in any particular autobiographical work? Linda Anderson notes that previous to post-structuralist interpretations of autobiography, the answers to these questions were determined by focusing on the author's intentions. Thus, "intention...is further defined as a particular kind of 'honest' intention which then guarantees the truth of the writing...Trust the author...if s/he seems to be trustworthy." (2001: 3) Such a statement is more purposeful to our discussion than the tangled complexities of post-structuralist discourse concerning the concept of fictions within fictions.

A relevant question, however, might be to ask how one is able to establish whether or not a particular author is trustworthy. Bukowski's 'trustworthiness' can be partially determined by comparing biographical details compiled by other writers with statements made by Bukowski himself in letters and interviews, and then comparing both statements and biographical details with events and characters in the fictional works themselves, in order to identify at what point Bukowski's experiences have been transformed into those of Henry Chinaski. One might reasonably wonder whether Bukowski ever consciously set out to deceive his readers and what he might gain from doing so. In response to a question asked of him by an Italian journalist concerning his

intense focus on his own life in his writing, Bukowski responded, “I can write more truly of myself than of anybody else that I know. It’s great source material...I only want to escape common reality that is distorted by false needs.” (*Letters Vol 3*: 136-138).

Bukowski’s truth is thus manifested in his fiction as a reaction to a perceived falseness in mainstream society and the way it functions. His truth is only revealed when the reader accepts his own conceptions of what constitutes falsity. The reader must thus enter into a pact with the writer Bukowski. Consequently, meaning can be extracted from the writing, if the reader is willing to accept that there is a certain honesty in Chinaski’s view of the world and related quest for freedom.

In his analysis of particular works of autobiographical fiction by Mary McCarthy, Henry James and Jean Paul Sartre, John Eakin concludes that, “in all three cases the autobiographical act is deliberately presented as but the latest instance of an inveterate practice of self invention which is traced to a determining set of biographical circumstances.” (1985: 182). Autobiography is commonly understood as a literature of the self, but the very act of writing constitutes an act of self invention. Therefore, as Eakin notes, whether consciously or not by both reader and author, “the fictive nature of selfhood...is held to be a biographical fact” (1985: 182). Eakin acknowledges that the self is a “mysterious reality, mysterious in its nature and origins” (1985: 277) which essentially means that literary self expression only ever offers a simulation of the self, thus the true nature of the self will always remain mysterious.

In Bukowski’s writing Chinaski exists to lessen the mystery of his creator’s self. His reliability as a narrator is dependent on the extent to which the writer’s version of his own life, reflected in Chinaski’s life experiences, can be construed as reliable. Bukowski did focus obsessively on particular aspects of Chinaski’s life which might explain this character’s perpetual conflict with mainstream society, but which also entertain the reader, particularly in his many humorous depictions of sex. These particular distortions distinguish Bukowski’s autobiographical fiction from a chronologically ordered set of historical facts. Therefore, Bukowski’s readers can determine quite quickly that they are not reading historical autobiography. However, a cursory examination of Bukowski’s life also reveals a close similarity between it, and that of his literary persona. Subsequently, as Smith and Watson note,

when we recognise the person who claims authorship of the narrative as the

protagonist or central figure in the narrative...we read the text written by the author to whom it refers as reflexive or autobiographical. With this recognition of the autobiographical pact...we read differently and assess the narrative as making truth claims of a sort that are suspended in fictional forms such as the novel.
(2001: 8-9).

In a 1975 interview, Bukowski tells his interviewer, “generally what I write is mostly fact but its also adorned with a bit of fiction. (Calonne, 2003: 125). Later into the interview he adds, “I have to keep living in order to write. (2003: 12). Bukowski’s intention is thus to communicate his own struggle, through a central character's experiences, whilst entertaining his readers by either over-emphasising or ‘spicing up’ particular autobiographical experiences. At these times the writing crosses over from autobiography to fiction, but the value of Bukowski’s art for the reader who can identify with the ongoing struggle of Henry Chinaski as Charles Bukowski’s literary self, nevertheless remains.

In the preface to his biography of Marcel Proust, George Painter addresses the extent to which Proust’s modernist masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past* should be considered an autobiographical account of his own life. Painter notes that,

A La Recherche turns out to be not only based entirely on his [Proust’s] own experiences: it is intended to be the symbolic story of his life, and occupies a place unique among great novels in that it is not, properly speaking, a fiction, but a creative autobiography. Proust believed, justifiably, that his life had the shape and meaning of a great work of art: it was his task to select, telescope and transmute the facts so that their universal significance should be revealed.
(1996: xvii).

By ‘selecting, telescoping and transmuting,’ Proust transformed the facts of his own life into an aesthetic form, thus writing what Painter labels, “a creative autobiography.” Bukowski also wrote a creative autobiography in five novels, albeit in a manner that differed considerably from Proust. Autobiographical fiction is a term used often in this essay to define Bukowski’s writing. Painter makes the distinction between autobiography and autobiographical fiction by observing that Proust’s, “places and people are composite in time and space, constructed from various sources and from widely separate periods of his life. His purpose in so doing was not to falsify reality, but, on the contrary, to induce it to reveal the truths it so successfully hides in this world.” (xviii). Painter argues that Proust does so to discover, “the inner meanings of what

exists.” (xviii). However, Proust engaged in considerable aesthetic experimentation, and his novel is thus representative of a particular modernist sensibility that is, “associated with attempts to render human subjectivity in ways more real than realism.” (Childs, 2000: 3) On the contrary, Bukowski’s writing belongs more within a tradition of realism in literature, in terms of it featuring, “characters, language and a spatial and temporal setting very familiar to...contemporary readers.” (2000: 3). Nevertheless, Painter’s observation, that Proust’s masterwork is a fictionalised portrait of his own life, could also be made of Bukowski’s writing. Hence the use of the term autobiographical fiction in this essay.

Like Proust, Bukowski chooses to emphasise certain parts of Chinaski’s life over others. It will be argued in this thesis that he does so in order to accentuate particular themes that recur throughout his work. For example, that Bukowski focuses considerable attention on Chinaski’s relationship with his father in the novel *Ham on Rye*, suggests a major theme in that novel which is the genesis of Chinaski’s eventual transformation into a writer of alternative literature. Bukowski does not present Henry Chinaski’s life as an interconnected series of autobiographical details with the aim of achieving strict factual accuracy. Rather, Bukowski introduces aspects of his own life in the writing, in order to enrich his aesthetic intent and to provide his readers with insight not only into the life of the character Henry Chinaski, but that of the author as well.

In this sense, Bukowski is not alone in twentieth century American literature. Such writers as Henry Miller, John Fante and Jack Kerouac, wrote fiction that drew heavily on each writer’s own experiences. Both Miller and Kerouac engaged in aesthetic experimentation, and their writing can be subsequently placed within the realm of modernist literature according to accepted definitions. However, as we shall see, Bukowski deliberately avoided the linguistic and rhythmic word play normally associated with modernist writing. In some respects, it is therefore easier for the reader to accept the fictional nature of Jack Kerouac’s writing, as he devoted much of his literary career to developing and practising a technique he called ‘Spontaneous Prose’, modelled after the stream of consciousness style practised by such modernist giants as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. In a letter to the editor Malcolm Cowley, Kerouac confidently asserts that his novels, “will cover all the years of my life, like Proust, but done on the run, a running Proust.” (*Selected Letters*, 1995: 515). But Bukowski’s

writing is not as aesthetically innovative as Jack Kerouac's or Henry Miller's. It is much simpler and rougher, hence the use of the term 'alternative aesthetic' in this essay when discussing Bukowski's literary achievements. Bukowski's writing is densely autobiographical, but is not filtered through an aesthetic form that is as consciously experimental as the autobiographical fiction of Kerouac, Miller and Proust.

A Note on Aestheticism and the Absurd.

Throughout this thesis the term 'aesthetic' is often used when discussing Bukowski's art. At first glance this might seem unusual, as aestheticism as a movement is defined by a conception of art that is removed from everyday experience: "Fundamentally it [aestheticism] entailed the point of view that art is self-sufficient and need serve no other purpose than its own ends." (Cuddon, 1977: 17). The key element in appreciating aestheticism is beauty: "An aesthete is one who pursues and his devoted to the 'beautiful' in art, music and literature." (1977: 17). Aestheticism existed as part of a romantic tradition in art which, "reflect[ed] the growing apprehension of the nineteenth-century artist at the vulgarisation of values and commercialisation of art." (*Modern Critical Terms*, 1987: 3).

In twentieth century literature, prose experimenters like Marcel Proust and the Beats celebrated beauty as the ultimate goal of the artist. Such beauty would be revealed not in theme alone, but also in the very act of aesthetic experimentation. In these terms, aestheticism might initially appear as representing all that Bukowski rejected in art. However, one might nevertheless conclude that there is something beautiful about Chinaski's quest for freedom and emphatic non-conformity. Beauty is, after all, a highly subjective term.

One might also argue that there is something aesthetically beautiful about the idiosyncratic perspective of Bukowski's fictional self. It is noted that aestheticism is, "profoundly a movement of reaction and protest." (*Modern Critical Terms*, 1987: 3). Henry Chinaski spends much of his life engaged in protest of one sort or another. However, it is not the case that Chinaski could be described as an aesthete who believes in communities of artists celebrating the sanctity of the creative act. At one point in the novel *Women*, Chinaski declares that,

writers were to be avoided, and I tried to avoid them, but it was almost impossible. They hoped for some sort of brotherhood, some kind of togetherness. None of it had anything to do with writing, none of it helped at the typewriter.
(1993: 140).

Such sentiments explain the use of the term ‘alternative aesthetic’ in this essay when describing Bukowski’s art, in order to distinguish it from the canon.

‘The absurd’ is a term that also appears often in this essay. It is a key concept in existentialist writing and is discussed in detail in Albert Camus’ philosophical treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which is concerned with how the alienated individual can resist the absurd by being, “rebelliously alive.” (2000: xvi). In his study *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, in which he often refers to Camus, David Galloway discusses the individual’s rebellion against absurdity being motivated by, “man’s hunger for unity in a disordered universe.” (1971: 6). Galloway notes the absurd can thus be understood as the “disproportion” between a “persistent appetite for unity appear[ing] to be diametrically opposed to the reality which contemporary man encounters.” (1971: 6) Such a disjunction is also relevant to the literary grotesque in terms of an anti-hero responding to his/her awareness of horror. In his opening chapter, Galloway notes that, “many American novelists are considering the same disquiet, the same anxieties, and the same apparent lack of meaning and hope which Camus analysed in the *Myth of Sisyphus*.” (1971: 8)

Although Galloway uses this idea as a starting point to examine the concept of the absurd hero in the novels of John Updike, William Styron, Saul Bellow and J.D Salinger, such a statement is also relevant to Charles Bukowski, because a major theme in his writing is one individual’s quest to try and make sense of the meaninglessness of ordinary life by embracing what he believes it means to be free. But the awareness itself is the dominant aspect of this theme. Such an awareness is discussed by Camus in the *Myth of Sisyphus*. Galloway notes that, “...the absurd moment – which may come in a telephone booth or in a factory or on a battlefield – shows forth to the observer the heart of the world, and in Camus’ vision that heart consists of the entire meaningless picture of life.” (1971: 10). Chinaski’s awareness of the absurd accounts for Bukowski’s portrayal of work in the novels *Post Office* and *Factotum* as ultimately meaningless because the day-job deprives the individual of freedom. In both novels, Chinaski muses upon the

question of why an individual would willingly choose to relinquish freedom to work in a job one despises, simply in order to accumulate material comforts, which are themselves meaningless.

Henry Chinaski is arguably a flawed hero who struggles to comprehend the absurdity of his life, but who is also tireless in his quest for freedom from the absurd. Freedom for Chinaski is defined by a discovery of meaning which he finds in alcohol and writing. It is noted that Camus conceives of the absurd as, “the tension which emerges from man’s determination to discover purpose and order in a world which steadfastly refuses to evidence either.” (*Modern Critical Terms*, 1987: 1). Chinaski’s struggle culminates with his transformation into an artist, and subsequent discovery that art is the catalyst for order and purpose in an otherwise strange life.

A salient point about Bukowski’s writing is that it occupies an unusual place in literature. In some respects, his writing confounds the critical tools that one would ordinarily employ when assessing one writer’s body of work. For example, an accepted critical approach to examining Bukowski’s autobiographical novels would involve an examination of shifts and changes in his narratives which might reveal the development of Bukowski’s artistic approach to his own life experiences. One who uses these reference points when embarking on such an examination might discover that the central literary character in each of these novels, changes little over time.

In *Hollywood*, Bukowski acknowledges that Chinaski’s view of the world, formed by his experiences as a youth, and depicted in the novel *Ham on Rye*, has remained constant, despite considerably different circumstances. In *Hollywood*, Chinaski mixes with people who are comfortable in a material sense. He is also depicted as having achieved an amount of domestic contentment with his wife and cats, yet his awareness of the absurd has not left him. Musing on the ultimate meaninglessness of material success in the novel, Chinaski states:

Of course, what made the whole thing smell was that many of the rich and famous were actually dumb cunts and bastards. They had simply fallen into a big pay-off somewhere. Or they were enriched by the stupidity of the general public. They usually were talentless, eyeless, soulless, they were walking pieces of dung, but to the public they were god-like, beautiful, and revered.
(1989: 92).

This forcefully expressed sentiment is consistent with Chinaski’s cynical and melancholy

view of the world generally.

A possible explanation for such consistency is offered by Bukowski in a 1975 interview with the *Northwest Review*, in which he observes: “If you break my stuff down and just run it down on one total line it all sounds the same – with minor exceptions...I’m trying to keep it simple and yet still keep it tight.” (Calonne: 125-126). Such an opinion might indicate that Bukowski is denigrating his art by reducing it to continuous repetition, yet, that his ‘one total line’ is expressed across hundreds of poems, dozens of short stories and in five autobiographical novels, suggests that Bukowski was always expanding upon his narrator’s various adventures from which the ‘one total line’ would be illuminated. This essay will take a closer look at the unfolding of these adventures in the autobiographical novels, and the illumination of Bukowski’s aesthetic in each of them.

CHAPTER ONE

BUKOWSKI IN CONTEXT

Bukowski's fictional self, Henry Chinaski, represents to some extent what Ihab Hassan describes as the modern self in recoil, manifested in literature through the appearance of the anti-hero. Hassan notes that, "in fiction, the unnerving rubric 'anti-hero' refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal...the freak, the outsider." (1961: 21). Bukowski's Chinaski represents a type of anti-hero, maybe an absurd hero, who exists on the fringes of modern American literature by virtue of his alternative views about the world and the way it functions. These views are commensurate with his anti-social lifestyle revealed through a blatant rejection of work, alcohol abuse, a continuing emphasis on sex rather than romance in his relationships with women, and a perpetual questioning of socially accepted conventions. By projecting his own views and habits through Chinaski, Charles Bukowski has created a literary identity which reflects his own alienated state. It is through the process of following the various escapades of Henry Chinaski as he struggles to be free, that the reader learns much about the writer himself, his own struggles and values.

Influences and Adversaries.

In the early 1950s, Bukowski began sending out poems to small literary magazines with names like *Trace*, *Harlequin* and *Outsider*. His only previous publications were a short story in New York magazine *Story* in 1944, titled "Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip," another short story in *Portfolio* magazine in 1946, and a couple of stories and poems in a magazine titled *Matrix*, all published in 1946. From the very beginning Bukowski used his own experiences as the source material for his writing. Howard Sounes notes that Bukowski's early poems are "interesting in that they deal with the subject matter which became his stock-in-trade: rooming house life, bar life and unfaithful women." (1998: 26). Sounes also notes that the early Bukowski story published in *Matrix* titled "Love, Love, Love", "depicts a mean spirited father who bills his son for living at home, charging him for laundry, room and board." (1998: 27). The

subject matter of this story pre-dates the novel *Factotum* (by thirty years) in which Henry Chinaski is also billed by his father for living at home. (1975: 35). Chinaski's volatile relationship with his father is also one of the central themes of the 1982 novel *Ham on Rye*.

As mentioned, Bukowski is not alone amongst twentieth century writers in turning life experiences into a fictional form. Grand modernist Marcel Proust wrote his epic *Remembrance of Things Past* based on his own life experiences and those of people he knew, from which he created characters who were composites of their real life counterparts. Bukowski never mentions Proust, but the writer often cited the autobiographical fiction of another French modernist, Louis Ferdinand Cèline, as an important influence, particularly his 1930 novel *Journey to the End of the Night*. A number of the earlier novels of American writer Henry Miller are also important literary precursors to Bukowski's writing, in particular, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn* and the *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, written in the 1930s and 1940s.

In 1940 George Orwell wrote an essay titled "Inside the Whale" in which he notes that in Miller's writing, "it is not so much a question of exploring the mechanisms of the mind as of owning up to everyday facts and everyday emotions." (1966: 13). Orwell also identifies Miller's novel with James Joyce's modernist classic *Ulysses*, in noting that, "what Miller has in common with Joyce is a willingness to mention the inane squalid facts of everyday life." (1966: 14). This is also true of Bukowski's writing which is very much grounded in everyday experience, and which is mostly concerned with expressing the absurdity of modern life.

However, in comparing Miller to Joyce, Orwell does point out that "Joyce is an artist, in a sense in which Miller is not and probably would not wish to be." (1966: 14). In the opening pages of *Tropic of Cancer* Miller writes,

This then? This is not a book. This is libel, slander, defamation of character. This is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty...What you will.
(1980: 2)

Bukowski expresses similarly strong views which reflect an expression of outrage about the romantic conception of creativity as a transcendental or sacred act. In his essay, Orwell also refers to Cèline's *Journey to the End of the Night* stating that this novel's,

“purpose is to protest against the meaninglessness and horror of modern life - actually, indeed, of life.” (1966: 15). Such an observation could also describe Bukowski's writing in which Chinaski responds to horror with dry humour, cynicism and drink.

Gay Brewer notes that, for both Miller and Bukowski, “the shifting of experience into fiction...is a skillful method of selection and reorganisation that is frequently overlooked by both admirers and detractors.” (1997: 7) Henry Miller turned his own life experiences into fiction - but only those which reflected his own views about the squalid state of American society - and the first person narrator of each of his novels is named Henry.¹ Moreover, the confrontational and often profane language found in Henry Miller's novels parallels the everyday colloquial language spoken by Bukowski's characters - in Bukowski's writing there is a particular emphasis on dialogue which is often profane and sexually explicit. Bukowski's choice of confrontational language serves a threefold purpose: It sharpens one's focus on unpleasant experiences in Chinaski's life. Secondly, it suggests a refusal to emulate the aesthetic richness of his romantic, modernist and post-modernist contemporaries and predecessors. Thirdly, in the interests of gaining his readers' trust, Bukowski employs the language of the street - the commonplace, colloquial speech of the working poor.

The use of such language is consistent in the writing of both Bukowski and Miller, although Miller's writing is frequently interrupted by abstract digressions. This aspect of Miller's work is noted by Bukowski in a 1984 letter to the poet Douglas Goodwin, in which he writes, “I don't know why they sometimes compare me to Henry Miller. I always had trouble reading him. He'd go on all right a while and then he'd get astral or fluffily literary and I'd get discouraged.” (*Letters Vol 3*: 56). This might be because Bukowski never strayed from his original intention to write in a manner that was simple and direct, with a heavy emphasis on dialogue. A cursory reading of his poetry and prose bears this out, particularly the earlier short stories and column pieces published in *Open City* in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, there exists a number of significant similarities between the confrontational anti-heroic stance adopted by Miller's narrator, and the volatile personality of Henry Chinaski, particularly in terms of an aggressive pursuit of individual freedom, which makes Miller an important literary influence in this

1 The central theme of the *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy is Henry's relationship with Mona, a woman based

respect.

The Beats.

Although Bukowski was a contemporary of the Beats, some of whom also wrote autobiographical fiction, there are nevertheless key differences as a result of diverging literary perspectives. The Beats mostly believed in literary experimentation as a means of enlightenment through which society could be transformed. Bukowski, on the contrary, refused to believe in the sacredness of the creative act. But there does exist a defiance of accepted social conventions, along with sexual explicitness and drug and alcohol use in the writing of both Bukowski and the Beats. Jack Kerouac had always intended to make his own life the subject matter of his fiction. The novels he wrote can be placed in an autobiographical sequence which cover key events of his own life, and his characters are based on people Kerouac knew.² A significant link between Bukowski and the Beats in this respect, is a shared desire to turn life experiences into fiction even if the reasons for doing so are considerably different.

An authoritative source on this subject is Jean Francois Duval's recently published study *Bukowski and the Beats* which uses Beat writing as a frame of reference for discussing Bukowski's own. Duval points out correctly that:

All the Beat writers are autobiographical by nature. And it is clear that Bukowski's prose texts and poems, even when he presents Henry Chinaski do not escape this rule. It's the same whether the narrators call themselves Duluoz (Kerouac) Chinaski (Bukowski) or Mr. Miller (Henry Miller in *Sexus*). The events and the gestures of the characters/narrators are the same as the authors'.
(2002: 95).

It is, however, the essential differences between Bukowski and the Beats which place Bukowski's art in sharper focus. In his discussion, Duval compares and contrasts the utopian politics of Beat poet Allen Ginsberg with Bukowski's political ambivalence, the dystopian futuristic vision of William Burroughs expressed in the highly experimental language of the cut-up, and Bukowski's simple linear narratives, and in particular, Jack

on June Mansfield with whom Miller experienced a volatile relationship in the 1930s.

² Characters in the original draft of Kerouac's *On the Road* retained the names of actual people.

Kerouac's sentimental romanticism compared to Bukowski's harsh and confronting realism. Duval notes that "While the Beats danced along the road composing a hymn to their freedom from social proprieties, Buk [Bukowski] put in forty years to free himself from the shackles which alcohol and poetry alone helped him to forget at times." (2002: 26-27). The Beats celebrated the sacredness of aesthetic experimentation, rejoicing in the lyrical potential of poetry and prose, whilst Bukowski wrote crude, simplistic narratives about the insecure lives of the working poor in an economically prosperous consumer society. However, Bukowski avoided any display of sympathy for this one social group, unlike Kerouac's romanticised portrayal of poverty. Duval notes that, "for Bukowski, America was much more unsentimental than a lyrical poem in Kerouac's style." (2002: 27).

Duval further distinguishes the Beat romantic/utopian vision from the glaring realism in Bukowski's writing in the following passage:

There remains one big difference between Kerouac, the Beats and Bukowski. The Beats believed themselves bards of a new reality. Kerouac had his face constantly turned towards God, towards an assumed paradise. He believed in the celestial nature of his hobos and bums...Behind everything, he discovered the flip side of the Void, i.e potential fullness. A palpitation, a kind of joy, a kind of grace runs through his writing. Bukowski considered himself a painter of hell and the grotesque. (2002: 103).

Nevertheless, despite differing aesthetic aims, the Beats do provide some context for Bukowski's ruggedly self-expressive art. In particular, it is the single-minded devotion to the transformation of life experiences into fiction above all other considerations, that distinguishes Henry Miller, the Beats and Charles Bukowski from other twentieth century American writers.

The Letters.

Black Sparrow Press has published four collections of Bukowski letters since his death in 1994. Bukowski was a prolific letter writer, and many letters were sent to poets, editors, and readers of his work who had struck up a correspondence with him after discovering that his writing struck a chord with their own life experiences. The letters tell us much about Bukowski's literary views, events in his life he considered

particularly significant, and his alternative perspective on such activities as work and sex which reappear in the fiction. In letters, Bukowski repeatedly expresses the view that mainstream American society is essentially absurd and alienating. He uses this view to explain his retreat to the margins of society and abhorrence at what the ordinary man had to do in order to survive. For example, in a 1966 letter to the poet Ann Menebroker, Bukowski writes, “there is something about this land and its ways that kills almost everybody. there [sic] doesn't seem to be room or reason for the truly living creature.” (*Letters Vol 1*: 268). Like his fiction, Bukowski's letters pack a heavy punch in the way they examine his conflict with society in general, and his disdain towards those writers who spend their time, “sweating out the correct image, the precise phrase, the turn of a thought.” (*Letters Vol 2*: 14).

Bukowski also writes about his daily struggles as one of the working poor - particularly when working as mail sorter in the 1960s - and he occasionally adopts the unsure tone of one who is uncertain whether he will spend his creative life in obscurity. The writer acknowledges as much in a 1988 letter to his publisher John Martin: “Although what I wrote I felt was good enough for me, I never felt I would have any kind of literary luck...my idea was not victory but a continuance against the odds.” (*Letters Vol 3*: 104). However, despite the modest acclaim Bukowski's writing received later in his life, he notes in this letter that his primary motivation in writing at all was as a way of helping himself to make sense of the hardships he experienced in his younger years. In earlier letters the writer provides considerable insight into his dreary working life, also reflected in the aesthetic simplicity and directness of his prose writing at this time. In a 1965 letter to the wife of writer William Wantling, Bukowski writes about the routinised dullness of his job:

I keep looking at that clock and keep doing the same dull things over and over and over again with my hands looking at the clock and doing the dull thing over and over much faster than I want to in order to keep up with production so I can keep my job and die some more.
(*Letters Vol 1*: 204).

The drudgery of his job is only ever alleviated when he is at home sitting at the typewriter, as he makes clear towards the end of the letter when he writes, “if I don't crash through with a poem every now and then, I am finished.” (*Vol 1*: 205).

Bukowski often discusses in letters, past and present experiences that

have contributed to the alternative aesthetic he promotes in his fiction. This we see in a 1964 letter to the poet Douglas Blazek, in which Bukowski reflects on his earliest attempts at writing.

I started with the short story, starving in little rooms around the country and drinking too much cheap wine, and I'd mail things out to the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper's* and when they came back, I tore them up. I used to write 8 or 10 short stories a week. All I'd do was write these stories and drink as much as possible.
(*Letters Vol 1*: 114).

Bukowski worked in an assortment of factory and blue collar clerical jobs during the time he is writing about in the letter, and the cumulative effect of these experiences explains in part how his literary aesthetic was formed, revealed as follows: "I know damn well I don't wax the golden poetic and I don't try to because I believe it to be essentially outside of life - like lace gloves for a coal stoker." (*Letters Vol 1*: 79).

Bukowski is also reluctant to separate art from daily life with its own absurdities and tragedies. As someone who claimed he wrote as a way of saving himself from insanity, a motive which imbues his art with meaning, Bukowski seemingly discovers value in art which expresses the artist's struggle with his or her own suffering. In a 1966 letter to Douglas Blazek, Bukowski writes, "I do not judge poems as a critic out of learning but as a human being out of my own experience which must nec. [sic] be limited but which nevertheless contains truths and instincts." (*Letters Vol 1*: 236). Bukowski repeats this view on numerous occasions. There are thus recurring themes in both the letters and the fiction which suggest an explanation for the writing turning out as it did: raw, hard, fixated on the working poor, often sexually explicit and sometimes violent.

Seamus Cooney notes about Bukowski's letters that "their searing vividness - a stream of feeling and suffering more than stream of consciousness - gives them an impact which must have been easy to recognise." (*Letters Vol 1*: 355). The nature of Bukowski's suffering is often revealed as more physical than metaphysical. Cooney writes:

More often, even when the letter accompanies submissions of poems or other writing, there is a full outpouring of the self in its present situation, generally incorporating notations of the immediate, mundane circumstances: people passing or working outside, activities in the apartment, toothache, hangover, radio sounds, etc.

(*Vol 1*: 355).

These mundane circumstances are described by Bukowski as the little tragedies that “tear us to the final pieces” (*Vol 1*: 285), and appear often in his prose and poetry. If small events in everyday life contribute to Bukowski’s suffering, his writing about them serves as a much needed distraction. Thus, as Cooney notes: “Writing poems and letters - he tells us as much - was what kept him from suicide and insanity.” (*Vol 1*: 358).

Bukowski the loner, imbues his life with meaning by creating an identity through the act of writing, whatever the form his writing takes. Thus, in terms of explaining to his readers the source of his alienation, the letters are as important as the fiction, particularly as sentiments similar to those expressed in earlier letters, can also be found in later stories and poems. Moreover, Bukowski's later letters also contain as much vitriol as earlier ones, despite the writer's changing fortunes.

However, there are small clues in the later letters which point towards Bukowski's changing lifestyle as royalties increased. In a 1984 letter to the editor and publisher Stephen Kessler, Bukowski comments that, “I write the BMW poems to piss off those who hated me when I lounged upon the park benches.” (*Letters Vol 3*: 62). Bukowski is suggesting that his chosen themes will always result in his placement at the margins of acceptable literary discussion. His comment in the letter to Kessler is tongue-in-cheek, but consistent with the nature of his art generally. Bukowski suggests that those who once criticised his alcoholic lifestyle are no longer in a position to complain now he has earned social respectability by investing in a BMW, yet he will continue to be despised just the same.

Bukowski's art does not drastically change as a result of his more comfortable financial position, because his awareness of the absurd remains unchanged which we see in the later novel *Hollywood*. Bukowski believed throughout his life that he was just an ordinary person reacting to a hostile society through poetry and prose, and this idea emerges in all his letters. In a 1992 letter to the poet Michael Basinski who had written an essay on the writer for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Bukowski reflects that,

if there was anything which directed me or gave me some impulse, some drive, it was that I was discouraged with the work I saw my contemporaries doing. I fired from both guns hoping to wake up the show. An act of desperation against life and literature? And...something to do while I was

drinking.
 (*Letters Vol 3: 228*).

Bukowski maintains that it is absurd to perceive artists as a sanctified group of people who regularly create great majestic works. He regards such a belief as evidence of absurdity in the world. In a letter to William Packard, editor of the *New York Quarterly* literary magazine, Bukowski writes,

they [the public] have no idea that it [art] can be done by a bus driver, a field hand or a fry cook. They have no idea where it comes from. It comes from pain, damnation and impossibility. The blow to the soul of the gut. It comes from getting burned and seared and slugged. It comes from being too alive in the middle of death.
 (*Vol 3: 199*).

Thus, art comes from suffering. Bukowski's suffering is revealed in the letters as a physical and mental anguish caused by the deadening routines of his work in the post office, daily events as his car breaking down or a toothache, and ongoing relationship troubles. These grievances are as integral to the letters as they are to his own poetry and prose, and they also assist the reader in better comprehending Bukowski's alternative aesthetic.

Bukowski's Themes.

In our discussion of Bukowski's five autobiographical novels and one collection of short stories, we will be looking at how each work contributes to Bukowski's alternative view of the world, reflected in Henry Chinaski's struggle to overcome the absurd. What often prevents the writing from becoming merely morose is Bukowski's skill at introducing a deadpan humour to some of the absurd and unusual situations Chinaski finds himself in. Moreover, it is the many years spent drinking in bars, working in factory jobs and becoming involved in difficult relationships with women, which allow Bukowski to write about, "the basic realities of the everyman existence...something seldom mentioned in the poetry of the centuries." (*Calonne: 215*).

Bukowski is not alone in writing about the working poor in twentieth century literature. Such writers as Jack Kerouac, Jean Genet, Hubert Selby Jr, Henry Miller and George Orwell wrote novels which feature characters who live on the margins of acceptable society. However, unlike these writers, Bukowski avoids politics or

aesthetic experimentation in order to emphasise the essential meaninglessness of Chinaski's suffering.

Thus, we find in the collection *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, an untitled story in which the narrator named Charles Bukowski reflects on a particular incident in his youth (also recounted in his 1982 novel *Ham on Rye*) when he was afflicted with a severe case of acne, causing him to break out in huge boils and scarring his body for the remainder of his life. The story itself is a rambling narrative discourse on what it means to be on the outside of society looking in. Bukowski uses as a frame of reference, a school experience involving the narrator wearing a uniform to cover up the boils. We will focus on the opening paragraph in which the narrator alludes to the effect that his face has on other people:

I have often let shackjobs and whores slash my face as my mother did, and this is a most bad habit; being frozen does not mean let the jackals take control, and, besides, children and old women, and some strong men, now wince, as they see my face.
(1973: 241).

The reference to his mother slashing his face is brought up in the preceding story in the collection in which the narrator hits his father after returning to the family home drunk and vomits on the carpet, causing his father to rub his son's nose in the mess to teach him a lesson. His mother then attacks the narrator by scratching his face which causes the boils to open up and bleed: "Finally I turned my face full toward her and let her rip and scream, slashing with her fingernails, tearing the flesh from my face, the fucking blood dripping and jerking and sliding down my neck and my shirt." (1973: 241) Both passages convey in an immediate way, violence and physical grotesqueness, contributing to the narrator's introverted state, subsequently reflected in the hard drinking, self obsessed Chinaski persona.

This persona has been crafted from the particular nature of Bukowski's writing method which Jean-Francois Duval discusses in the following passage:

He tuned into classical music, drank a mouthful of beer or wine, lit up a cigarette and started to type without giving it any prior thought. A completely physical, natural activity without any involvement in or deliberate appeal to the intellect or tradition, without anything romantic, visionary, affected, forced or inspired. Being the most natural possible, this should come from inside oneself. His poetry with its defects and faults, flowed from the source.

(2002: 132).

This description suggests there is nothing particularly extraordinary or mysterious about Bukowski's craft, yet his art is formed from this idiosyncratic writing method which Bukowski claims he stuck to for the remainder of his life. Duval would most likely have pieced together Bukowski's working methods from letters and interviews, in which the writer discusses the circumstances inspiring his muse. In response to a question asked by an interviewer concerning his personal approach to the act of writing, Bukowski states,

I look forward to the next piece of paper in my typewriter, the sound of the keys, the radio onto the classical music, that fine bottle of wine to my left, red and wonderful. What could be better? What could be luckier? Nothing could. It's everything.
(*Letters Vol 3*: 139).

Such a writing method impacts in a significant way on the writing both thematically and stylistically.

Earlier work features Henry Chinaski drinking in bars and becoming increasingly obsessed with sex, but as Bukowski began to achieve a small amount of critical praise and financial success from increased sales of his books throughout the 1970s, his work in the following decade began to focus more on themes of domesticity, and also the surprising turns that Bukowski's life as a writer began to take, as he increasingly gave poetry readings and developed a reputation as the 'Dirty Old Man' of American letters.

By the time we get to *Hollywood*, the anti-hero Henry Chinaski finds himself in the midst of the film world. In this novel, Chinaski drinks heavily most of the time, and is highly cynical about the consumer ethos driving American society, yet is quite happy to receive the royalty cheques for the screenplay he wrote for a mainstream Hollywood film about his earlier life as a struggling writer. Despite Chinaski's more comfortable lifestyle in *Hollywood*, Bukowski is not necessarily at ease with America as revealed also in the short story collection *Hot Water Music* and the novel *Ham on Rye*, where domestic life is portrayed as a breeding ground for disappointed hopes, excessive drunkenness and violence. In these works, Bukowski expands upon particular themes which emerged in the earlier novels *Post Office*, *Factotum* and *Women*. The first two of these focus, in particular, on Chinaski's rejection of work, but Chinaski's expression of loathing for the day-job would recur at times in all the autobiographical novels as well as

in many of the poems and stories. Yet, the general tone of *Hollywood* is more lighthearted than in earlier works. For the first time in his life, Chinaski is able to relax a little, and although he never lets down his guard, his lifestyle is certainly portrayed by Bukowski as more comfortable.

Whatever his circumstances, Chinaski is not a character with whom Bukowski's readers will be instantly sympathetic. He often criticises women, he is mostly drunk in the novels, poems and stories, he is highly critical of much of the canon's literature, and the lifestyle he leads in all the work up to *Hollywood* comprises the daily struggle of one of the working poor. In *Factotum*, Chinaski works in a series of back-breaking and sometimes dangerous factory jobs, and in *Post Office* Bukowski depicts the awful drudgery of menial clerical work. Both novels will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Yet, readers should be able to identify, or at the very least, derive some satisfaction from Chinaski's resolve to confront the challenges facing him with determination and humour. This character is engaged in a perpetual struggle to assert his own identity in a society that promotes mediocrity through conformity, and is held together by routine and habit. Neeli Cherkovski describes Bukowski's own struggle as follows:

By then [the late 1960s] the man who had been named Outsider of the Year in 1963 had clearly defined himself as a nonpolitical, working-class man who just happened to write poetry and prose. His motifs - centring around the battle of the sexes, the impossibility of maintaining a sane and rational relationship, the crises with landlord and boss - had been poured in concrete.
(Weizmann (ed.) 2000: 126).

The central motif of Bukowski's belligerent literary critiques is that art and life should not be regarded as two distinct spheres. The purpose of art should be to reflect basic realities and not to transcend them. Chinaski often suffers, but total despair is avoided through his dry sense of humour and engagement in straightforward pleasures such as drinking and sex. As discussed in our introduction, Bukowski was quite excited that *Outsider* magazine had named him 'Outsider of the Year' in 1963. This is because he could use this title as a starting point to shape Henry Chinaski's identity, who in turn reflected the outsider views of his creator.

There is no doubt that Chinaski is a flawed hero. His hostility towards most people with whom he comes into contact and his perpetual drunkenness reveal a person

who is at times as insecure as he is insensitive. There are, nevertheless, moments in the writing when Chinaski reveals aspects of himself which contradict his aggressive masculinity. In one such instance from the novel *Ham on Rye*, the school age Chinaski chances upon a group of boys inciting a bulldog to attack a cat. Although Chinaski is unable to work up the courage to intervene, he nevertheless expresses disgust at what he has witnessed with scant regard to how his schoolmates will treat him afterwards.

Watching the scene unfold, Chinaski observes,

The dog moved forward slowly. Why did the guys need this? This wasn't a matter of courage, it was just dirty play. Where were the grown-ups? Where were the authorities? They were always around accusing me. Now where were they?
(2000: 93)

In this passage, Chinaski separates himself from the wanton cruelty of the boys whose aggressive actions are yet another manifestation of the way Chinaski perceives his relationship with his father, and with society in general. Although Bukowski is attempting to incite the reader's sympathy for Chinaski, he is also suggesting that unchecked aggression will often lead to violence which Chinaski rejects by retreating to the life of the barfly at the novel's end. Here we have an example of Chinaski the anti-hero resisting the dominant will of the crowd. He concludes the passage by stating, "that cat wasn't only facing the bulldog, it was facing Humanity." (2000: 94). Later in the novel, a girl who Chinaski has been avoiding asks a friend what's wrong with him: "'He's just strange,' said Jim." (2000: 183). Chinaski's strangeness is characterised in his eyes by his refusal to conform to what he considers to be society's aggressiveness.

The Relationship between Punk Music and Bukowski's Writing.

When he was interviewed by *Paris Metro* writer Ron Blunden in 1978, Bukowski declares that, "I must be closer to the punks than the beatniks. I'm not interested in this bohemian, Greenwich Village, Parisian bullshit. Algiers, Tangiers...that's all romantic claptrap." (Calonne: 164). By referring to the two North African cities of Algiers and Tangiers, Bukowski is commenting on writers such as Paul Bowles and William Burroughs who lived there in the 1950s and '60s. Burroughs wrote his most famous novel *Naked Lunch* whilst living a bohemian lifestyle in Tangiers.

Bukowski suggests in this statement that the Beat writers needed exotic stimuli in order to create. In contrast, Bukowski rarely left Los Angeles, and most of his stories are set in the poorer areas of this city. By stating that he felt closer to the punks than the beatniks, Bukowski is aligning himself with a particular subculture whose tastes in fashion and the arts sometimes bordered on the nihilistic, and differed considerably from the 1960s counter-culture embodied by utopian ideals involving spiritual transcendence and free-spirited bohemianism.

As we have seen in the comparison of Bukowski and the Beats, there exist some shared ideas about creativity as an expression of freedom. But there is a noticeable absence of Beat spirituality in Bukowski's realism. The punks of the '70s and '80s celebrated anti-heroic lifestyles like Henry Chinaski's, because they saw Vietnam war era America as a dystopia rather than fertile ground for spiritual salvation. Musically, punk bands, particularly in California, reacted to the optimistic folk-rock of the Woodstock generation with crass simplistic blasts of noise, and were more inclined in their lyrics to depict the essential strangeness of urban life. Bukowski, as an underground writer residing in Los Angeles, who had little interest in any music other than classical, must nevertheless have been aware of what was taking place in the music underground at that time, as demonstrated by his reference to punks in the 1978 interview.

Ernest Fontana notes that, "For Bukowski, Los Angeles is a given; it is the ordinary world that assaults one's freedom; it is the unexotic world of working class deprivation or the stark marginality of the unemployed, not the territory of cosmic discovery." (1985: 4). In his account of the Clash's 1977 tour of England, the music critic and avid supporter of punk music Lester Bangs cites Bukowski's *Love is a Dog from Hell* collection of poetry as a favoured companion on the tour bus (*Psychotic Reactions*, 1990: 243). What Bangs admired about Bukowski was his punk-like attitude towards writing and society in general. In his biography of Bangs, Jim DeRogatis notes that: "Out of tune with the peace'n'love ethos of the sixties and the Me Generation navel-gazing of the seventies, he [Bangs] agitated for sounds that were harsher, louder, more electric and more alive." (2000: xiii). Punk music was, thus, the musical counterpart to Henry Miller's 'gob of spit in the face of art,' and Bukowski's dry and dirty realism.

In his history of the Los Angeles music scene, Barney Hoskyns writes,

Punk...scared the hell out of the mainstream rock establishment. This was

particularly the case in Los Angeles which had been singled out as a bastion of bloated, out-of-touch superstardom. Predictably, the industry had been slow to take punk (or 'new wave') seriously, so radically uncommercial did it sound to their ears.
(1997: 298-299).

The 'radically uncommercial' nature of punk music was precisely its appeal to fans. Punk music flew in the face of the perceived blandness of mainstream culture. It was subsequently brash, loud and confronting. Younger generations across America and in Bukowski's home city, Los Angeles, rejected the utopian ideals of the counterculture as unworkable, much as Bukowski had rejected Beat romanticism in the 1960s, adopting instead an alternative, more realist view of the world represented in musical expression. The punk music scene was essentially an underground movement rarely discussed in mainstream music publications like *Rolling Stone*. Information about punk music was mostly spread through crudely put together magazines with small distribution, titled 'Fanzines' or 'Zines'. Punk bands often had their music distributed by independent record labels, and the mainstream music industry was pretty much avoided altogether. This is not to suggest that sales of Bukowski's books are directly linked to the birth of punk music in the late 1970s. But there are legitimate links between the wilful crassness of punk music and Henry Chinaski's confronting and irreverent persona, suggesting a possible appreciation of Bukowski's writing amongst disaffected listeners of punk music.

Bukowski's punk-like approach to writing also found favour in some rather unexpected places. In a written response to an interviewer's question, Bukowski declares that, "men in jails have written me that they like my work. One of them wrote me, 'yours are the only books that pass from cell to cell.' This to me is the highest praise." (*Letters Vol 3*: 137). In this letter Bukowski is enthusiastic that his books are being read in places other than literary circles or in respectable society. In light of Bukowski's confrontational views about the literary profession, a statement like this is not supposed to be ironic, and is consistent with the tone of his writing in general. There is something subversive about the idea that his work is popular in an environment which epitomises alienation from mainstream society in real rather than existential terms. The harshness of prison life is a physical reality that no amount of aesthetic adornment could ever transform, therefore it seems entirely appropriate that his books would be popular in such an environment. Within Bukowski's statement is the suggestion that there is a

certain edginess in his writing, because it has become popular in such a dangerous anti-social environment as gaol, in much the same way that its potential appeal to fans of punk music, can be explained by its committed alternative perspective.

The Poetry.

Bukowski wrote many hundreds of poems throughout his career. A considerable number of these express simple, yet forcefully stated sentiments concerning the narrator's awareness of what it means to be free. We will now briefly discuss a couple of poems relevant to our discussion. Bukowski's poetry thematically mirrors his prose in terms of his alternative view of the world, but it is expressed even more directly than in the novels and short stories. We learn something of the nature of this view in the poem "Nirvana," in which Bukowski writes about a small everyday pleasure. In this poem, Bukowski portrays an aimless young man travelling on a bus through North Carolina, and introduces a small event that ultimately makes the journey more bearable. After stopping at a cafe Bukowski writes,

the waitress was
unlike the women
he had
known.
she was unaffected,
there was a natural
humour which came from her.
the fry cook said
crazy things.
the dishwasher,
in back,
laughed, a good
clean
pleasant
laugh.
the young man watched
the snow through the windows.
he wanted to stay
in that cafe
forever.
(*Run with the Hunted*: 1993: 130).

Here, the narrator derives some comfort from the sheer ordinariness of his

surroundings. We are told at the beginning of the poem that the narrator was a “young man/riding a bus/through North Carolina.” (1993: 129). After dropping out of College in 1941, Bukowski escaped the violence of his family home, and proceeded to travel around America, drinking in bars and sleeping in rooming houses - this part of his life is recounted in the novel *Factotum*. Although we are not told that the narrator is travelling to escape a past trauma, we do learn something of his present state of mind in such lines as 'he wanted to stay in that café forever'. The narrator wants to stay in the cafe because he feels safe there. This is a sentiment repeated further into the poem when Bukowski writes, “the young man thought/ I'll just sit here/ I'll just stay here.” (1993: 131).

The narrator nevertheless resumes his journey on the bus, yet the experience in the cafe has seemingly resonated with him and him alone, as he distinguishes himself from his fellow travellers by noting, “they had not/ noticed/ the/ magic.” (1993: 132). This poem is not atypical of Bukowski's poetry in general which often makes very simple observations or introduces everyday motifs. Although the narrator has not necessarily undergone a transformative experience in the poem, he has felt a moment of calm in what is otherwise a restless life. Significantly, a moment of 'magic' has been generated from a set of ordinary routines. One can imagine that had the narrator's reverie been disturbed, the typically cynical and jaded Bukowski voice would have intruded.

Nevertheless, that the narrator was able to derive a certain satisfaction from his solitude, tells us much about the nature of Bukowski's art generally, particularly in terms of explaining the motivation behind such a statement in the poem, “The Genius of the Crowd” in which Bukowski warns his readers to,

Beware The Average Man
The Average Woman...

Not Wanting Solitude
Not Understanding Solitude
They Will Attempt To Destroy
Anything
That Differs

From Their Own.
(1993: 186)

The reasons for Bukowski's social alienation are further explained in the opening stanza

Bukowski, however, does not merely pour out his grievances without offering a possible course of action that will potentially alleviate his narrator's suffering. Hence, he concludes the poem with the lines:

my only freedom, my only peace is when I am away from
them, when I am anywhere else, no matter where -
some old fat waitress bringing me a cup of coffee
is in comparison

like a fresh wild wind blowing.
(1993: 263).

This is a sentiment also expressed in the poem "Nirvana." Bukowski is acknowledging in both poems that there is something life-affirming about the ordinary behaviour of both the café staff and the 'fat waitress bringing me a cup of coffee,' which he recognises as a simple human act devoid of cruelty. Bukowski is also hinting that true freedom will only come to those who are willing to make the effort to look for it. In this respect, Jean-Francois Duval notes that,

Buk [Bukowski] was a man forced to put up with reality and get his hands dirty. A nonconformist who throughout his life tried to choose freedom and come to terms with his contradictions and darkness. In short, a man who, to use Sartre's terminology, couldn't be classified among the 'bastards'.
(2002: 119).

According to this interpretation, Bukowski's poetry and prose thus constitutes an act of defiant self-assertiveness, acknowledged in the concluding lines of his poem "Cornered":

now
lighting new cigarettes
pouring more
drinks

it has been a beautiful
fight

still is.
(1993: 487).

This defiance is also found in the poem "Trollius and Trellises" in which Bukowski pays homage to his publisher John Martin of Black Sparrow Press. Bukowski writes:

together we
laid down the gauntlet

and there are takers
 even at this late date
 still to be
 found
 as the fire sings
 through the
 trees.
 (1993: 491).

Bukowski's defiance in the face of adversity arguably constitutes the greatest value of his work, and is a key aspect of his personality, revealed in the poetry as well as the prose.

The Interaction between Reality and Fiction.

The extent to which fact and fiction interact in Bukowski's writing didn't appear to overly concern him in terms of his overall literary aims. In a 1988 letter to Jeff Waddle, a student of his work, Bukowski writes: "On the novels, I'm afraid they're more fact than fiction and I suppose in the real sense they can't be called novels. Sometimes in the short stories everything is entirely fictional, other times not. The poems are hardly fictional." (*Letters Vol 3*: 99). Bukowski is, however, generally regarded as a writer of fiction. This is because there are a number of aspects to his writing which distinguish it from autobiographical writing and which Bukowski himself acknowledges. In a 1983 letter to Gerald Locklin, Bukowski writes, "I like things to be entertaining. If I feel entertained at this machine maybe somebody else will feel that way too." (*Letters Vol 3*: 48). There is something entertaining about the perpetually absurd situations Chinaski finds himself in, particularly in a novel like *Hollywood* in which this character who has spent much of his life shunning mainstream society suddenly becomes, for a brief period, the focus of attention in the entertainment industry.

Moreover, there is much emphasis placed on snappy dialogue in Bukowski's writing which sometimes take the form of comical routines as we see in the following verbal exchange between a misanthropic painter and his disgruntled girlfriend in the story "Less Delicate than the Locusts" from *Hot Water Music*:

Arlene was sitting in the pink chair reading the afternoon newspaper. 'You say five thousand people want to sleep with you. Where does that leave me?'
 'Five thousand and one.'

'You think I can't get another man?'
 'No, there's no problem for you. You can get another man in three minutes.'
 'You think I need a great painter?'
 'No, you don't. A good plumber would do.'
 (1992: 11).

In such passages dominated by dialogue, Bukowski's awareness of the absurd is filtered through the sardonic, and darkly humorous behaviour and commentary of his characters who almost never consider that life could be any other way. Such sentiments also reflect the author's own beliefs which emerge in the more strictly autobiographical works.

Bukowski never appears to suffer any anxiety about whether or not his readers will reject his version of the truth. In other words, although Bukowski would most likely appreciate his readers identifying with his experiences in terms of accepting his alternative view of the world, he is, nevertheless, also interested in placing emphasis on certain aspects of his life for reasons other than strict historical accuracy. In this sense, Bukowski's writing differs from those for whom,

autobiography's project - to tell the story of one's life - appears to constrain self representation through its almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and the verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria.
 (Gilmore, 2001: 3).

Each of these aspects of autobiography discussed by Leigh Gilmore is a factor distinguishing autobiography from fiction, because, for the writer of fiction, there should not exist any authorial anxiety about the extent to which imagination imposes itself on the real world.

It is highly unlikely that Bukowski would have been too concerned about how his work would be regarded by the casual reader. This can only be the case, however, if he has accomplished his initial motivation for writing to his own satisfaction, and to the satisfaction of those readers who are able to relate their own experience of the world to Henry Chinaski's. Chinaski is a literary creation. However, one should consider the extent to which Chinaski's personality can be divorced from that of his creator.

One might also consider the extent to which it is possible to rely on Bukowski's version of the truth. In her study of the autobiographical writing of such writers as Dorothy Allison, Mikal Gilmore and Jeanette Winterson, Leigh Gilmore notes

that:

The self who reflects on his or her life is not wholly unlike the self bound to confess or the self in prison, if one imagines self-representation as a kind of self monitoring. Thus, along with the dutiful and truthful accounting of a life one might find in autobiography, the self is not only responsible but potentially culpable, given autobiography's rhetorical proximity to testimony and the quasi-legalistic framework for judging its authenticity that is so easily mobilised.

(2001: 20).

In this context, the possibility does exist for the autobiographical writer to experience anxiety about possible accusations that his or her version of the truth might be misconstrued or mis-represented. The crisis emerges from an anxiety about where to draw a line between where the real ends and the imagined begins. Bukowski's response - consistent with his alternative aesthetic - can be found in the novel *Hollywood* in which Chinaski states, "if I worried about what the people cared, I'd never write anything." (1989: 36). In this sense, Bukowski is happy to express his alienation from an absurd society which, as one begins to understand from reading his work, would invariably question his version of the truth by doubting whether the memories of a heavy drinker can be held reliable. Thus, later in the novel Chinaski comes clean about his motivations for writing in the first instance: "There was always the typer to soothe me, to talk to me, to entertain me, to save my ass. Basically, that's why I wrote: to save my ass, to save my ass from the madhouse, from the streets, from myself." (1989: 88).

Bukowski often refers to his own writing as a therapeutic form of insulating himself from the madness of the world. In terms of the various definitions of autobiography outlined by Leigh Gilmore, the authenticity of Bukowski's work as containing certain truths about his own life can only be substantiated either by comparing the facts of Bukowski's life with those of Henry Chinaski, or by simply accepting Henry Chinaski as an authentic character whose personality resonates with the reader, or by identifying with Chinaski's alternative world view.

We have already seen that Chinaski's non-conformist identity reflects many aspect of Bukowski's own personality, which we learn about in poems and letters, and from the direction and focus of Bukowski's own reading. Although Bukowski, as an artist, led what could be described as an ordinary life – excepting the poetry readings he gave in the 1970s, and a few years in the latter part of the eighties when he briefly

entered popular culture after the cinematic release of the film *Barfly* in 1987 - he, nevertheless, imbues his recounting of this life in the fiction with the strength of his convictions and proclivity for self-assertiveness, which lends his alternative aesthetic a certain authenticity.

This aesthetic emerges in a much more nihilistic way in the poem, "The Genius of the Crowd," in which the narrator rails against the absurdity of the average person, who has become absurd for accepting mediocrity unquestioningly. Such a belief suggests that Bukowski's art constitutes an absolute focus on the capacity of the self to discover freedom. This is why Bukowski looked to those twentieth century writers such as Henry Miller, John Fante and Louis Ferdinand Cèline who, like himself, were unafraid to use their life experiences as the basis upon which to convey the horror of modernity in often crass and violent prose explosions linked to a fundamental concept common to all four writers: that horror is a direct consequence of human stupidity manifested as the herd mentality. Each narrator in the novels of these authors, believes himself to be outside mainstream society as a consequence of particular life experiences, and his outsider status is confirmed by the volatile nature of the art and its social response.

We have also remarked that there are a number of difficulties in discussing Bukowski's writing in strictly theoretical terms, particularly when discussing autobiographical theory as it applies to literature. A general summation of this theory can be articulated as one question: To what extent do autobiographical writers speak the truth? (Anderson: 2001: 2-3). This question can be modified in relevant terms when discussing autobiographical fiction, thus: Where, in any particular work of autobiographical fiction, is the interaction most pronounced between the real and the imagined? It is not the intention of this essay to go through Bukowski's writing with a fine toothcomb in order to pick apart every life experience appearing in either story, poem or novel in order to determine how believable Bukowski's representation of his life actually is. In this respect it is relevant to assert that his readers should be prepared to accept to some degree the notion of authorial 'intentionality.'

Regardless of the extent to which critical work might be devoted to exploring whether or not Charles Bukowski is Henry Chinaski, and whether or not Chinaski's life experiences match those of Charles Bukowski the writer in terms of strict historical accuracy, there is little doubt that Bukowski's writing does constitute a volatile

mix of fact and fiction manifested in Henry Chinaski's persona which suggests its literary value. The formation and development of Chinaski's identity will be explored in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BUKOWSKI'S ALTERNATIVE LITERARY AESTHETIC IN THE NOVELS *POST OFFICE*, *FACTOTUM* AND *WOMEN*

In response to a question from *Portfolio* magazine in a 1990 interview about the extent to which themes in his writing are dark, Bukowski observes about his work that, “if there is a darkness in my writing it is a darkness that is trying to work into the light or if it can’t make it into the light it is a darkness that lives somehow... within and against all odds.” (Calonne, 2003: 249). Much of Bukowski’s writing portrays Henry Chinaski’s struggle to overcome the dark periods in his life, but Chinaski’s position is never entirely hopeless. This is particularly the case in the novel *Hollywood*, a humorous account of Chinaski’s growing fame as a writer in the 1980s. Nevertheless, there are darker aspects to Chinaski’s persona revealed in each of the autobiographical novels. This chapter will examine Chinaski’s rejection of work, his chronic drunkenness and obsession with sex, beginning with the embryonic Chinaski persona appearing in Bukowski’s first published story in 1944. We then trace the development of this identity or persona through a number of short stories Bukowski wrote in the 1960s and in the three novels published by Black Sparrow Press in the 1970s, *Post Office* (1970), *Factotum* (1975) and *Women* (1978). Although each of these novels covers different periods of Chinaski’s life, Bukowski’s literary self consistently rages against the absurdity he sees in the world as a way of coming to terms with the darkness that seeped into his earlier life.

Bukowski’s earliest published work is a short story in *Story* magazine titled “Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip” published in 1944. In his discussion of the story, Neeli Cherkovski notes that Bukowski uses his own name for the central character (1991: 75).³ This detail suggests that at the earliest stage in his literary career, Bukowski was directing his creative energies towards placing his own experiences at the centre of his fiction. This story is significant because of the introduction of a number of themes that would preoccupy Bukowski for the remainder of his life. Also notable about the story is the first appearance of a character in embryonic form who would reappear in

³ Quotations from this story come from Neeli Cherkovski’s biography, *Hank*.

much of Bukowski's writing from then on, alternatively named Charles Bukowski or Henry Chinaski. Cherkovski notes that Bukowski begins the story with a response from Whit Burnett, the editor of *Story* magazine, to some writing the narrator had submitted to him for publication. Burnett begins by declaring:

Again, this is a conglomeration of extremely good stuff and other stuff full of idolized prostitutes, morning-after-vomiting scenes, misanthropy, praise for suicide etc. that is not quite for a magazine of any circulation at all. This is, however, pretty much a saga of a certain type of person and in it I think you've done an honest job.
(1991: 75).

Burnett's appraisal contains within it a number of key observations revealing something of Bukowski's earliest literary expression that would feed into the development of Henry Chinaski's personality. Although Bukowski was only 24 in 1944, his early experiences had already instilled in him a fascination with the underbelly of American life which he would write about in a far more confronting manner than had been previously attempted in American fiction, outside of the novels of Henry Miller. The troubling themes Burnett spells out would reappear in much of Bukowski's writing from then on. Significantly, Burnett acknowledges that the material Bukowski was sending to him was not generally suitable "for a magazine of any circulation of all." Within such a statement we find an early explanation for the reason Bukowski sent his work to a multitude of 'little' literary magazines once he began writing poetry with great fervour in the mid 1950s.

By rejecting much of what had preceded him in American fiction as a consequence of the highly critical nature of his own reading, Bukowski at 24 was preparing himself to enter into what is best described as the American literary underground. Burnett also observes that he is aware that Bukowski is seeking to present a particular literary persona in his stories, one who gives the impression that he is an anti-hero. Thus, Burnett notes that Bukowski's stories contain within them "a saga of a certain type of person" that suggests "an honest job." Burnett concludes that it is through the forceful nature of his narrator's self-expression, that Bukowski has achieved a certain honesty and integrity in this earliest writing. In this respect, the writer had been influenced by Henry Miller, who, as the critic Robert Nye notes, "is one of the few modern writers who can move a reader to tears, quite simply, by the pressure of his

own feelings.” (*Cult Fiction*, 1998: 196).

Bukowski concludes his first published story by stating that “I am too much a saga of a certain type of person: fuzzy blackness, impractical meditations, repressed desires.” (Cherkovski: 78). Here, Bukowski is striving, at this early stage in his career, to articulate the essential nature of his narrator’s personality. In the story, the narrator is made to look the fool when he goes out of his way to flatter a guest who has turned up at his home, mistakenly believing that the visitor is an editor who is interested in publishing his writing. The guest, who is shown making sexual overtures towards Bukowski’s girlfriend, turns out to be an insurance salesman. (1991: 78). This depiction of an absurd situation in which the narrator is placed, is not atypical of Bukowski’s body of work.

The Path to Henry Chinaski.

Following the publication of “Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip” and a couple of other stories in *Matrix* and *Portfolio* magazine in 1946 (Sounes: 25-26), Bukowski embarked on a ten year drinking binge in which little writing was accomplished. He began writing in earnest in the mid 1950s. At first he wrote mostly poetry, but by the late 1960s had accumulated enough short stories for a comprehensive volume published by City Lights as *Erections, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness* in 1972.⁴ In his discussion of these stories Russell Harrison notes that,

the repetitive, sometimes sloppy writing is the result of an aesthetic credo that marred a fair amount of Bukowski’s early work, especially the prose. For Bukowski, this appearance of spontaneity was something to be valued because it was important not to seem literary.
(1994: 255).

Bukowski’s intentions at this time can thus be explained as a concerted attempt to achieve aesthetic simplicity in his writing in order assert the primacy of his own alternative world view as reflected in experiences outside the mainstream. These early stories received some praise from readers who appreciated their ‘sloppiness.’ Gay

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This volume was later reprinted by City Lights as two separate volumes, *The Most Beautiful Woman in*

Brewer includes in his own study the following comment from a fan of Bukowski's early writing:

They can be called the most honest, straightforward, enlightening and important stories published in this country in the last couple of decades... Besides Charles Bukowski's mindbombs, most other short stories are effete puffballs, collegeboy finger exercises that have little to do with reality or the world outside.
(1997: 50).

Bukowski's deliberate aesthetic simplification can be understood as a direct response to the prevalence of 'collegeboy finger exercises' as noted by the enthusiastic fan.

Disavowing the aesthetic complexity of much Beat writing of the 1950s, as well as the often baffling metafiction of the 1960s post-modern experimentalists, Bukowski suggests a freedom of self-expression through plain, simple prose, despite exposing his writing to criticism that it might be judged sloppy or repetitive by critics and readers when comparing him to his contemporaries.

Henry Chinaski's persona is shaped within the context of Bukowski's new found sense of literary freedom. Much like Bukowski's other short story collections, the stories in *Erections, Exhibitions and Tales of Ordinary Madness* are an admixture of drunken tall-tales, occasionally surreal and absurd, and often sexually explicit semi-autobiographical reminiscence. In those stories narrated in the first person, the central character is referred to throughout as Charles Bukowski. Thus, in the story "3 Women" which describes the narrator's "days of desperation" (*The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*, 1988: 59) as he struggles with desperate poverty, drunkenness and his relationship with a woman named Linda, we learn something of the deprecating way in which the writer perceives the narrator who nonetheless derives strength from his own sense of freedom.

After describing in detail sexual acts with Linda and two friends she brings back to their rooming house, the narrator is evicted by the landlord who tells him, "we've always had respectable people here Mr Bukowski." (1988: 64). The narrator then packs his meagre belongings and leaves, also learning that he has been abandoned by Linda. However, a growing belief in his own capacity for self-assertiveness remains. He thus concludes the story by stating, "let's just say that one night I fucked or got fucked by 3

Town and *Tales of Ordinary Madness* and it is the former volume we will be referring to in the text.

women and let that be story enough.” (1988: 65). The narrator’s sardonic attitude towards himself and his circumstances recurs throughout the collection. There is, however, an assuredness in the tone and behaviour of this character which is transferred across to Henry Chinaski in later writing. Bukowski’s sense of his narrator’s self worth despite his impoverished state also emerges in “The Day We Talked About James Thurber.” In this story, the narrator notes, “So there I was, down and out, outa luck and outa talent, couldn’t even get a job as a newspaper boy, janitor, dishwasher.” (1988: 142) However, after describing in detail yet another sex act, the rejuvenated narrator concludes by observing, “And my talent was not yet finished.” (1988: 147). Based on a reading of what had preceded this statement, one might reasonably conclude that the narrator is referring to his sexual prowess more than his talent as a writer. Nevertheless, it is through such observations that the irreverent, anti-hero Chinaski persona is established.

Similar personality traits emerge in the story “The Birth, Life and Death of an Underground Newspaper” from *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town* collection. This story is a thinly veiled account of Bukowski’s experiences writing for the Los Angeles based newspaper *Open City* in the late 1960s which is facetiously named “Open Pussy” in the story. The story describes a significant time in Bukowski’s life when his underground literary reputation had begun to grow as a consequence of the opinion pieces and stories that were published in *Open City*. By the late 1960s, Bukowski had already had a number of chapbooks of poetry published, but the *Open City* columns brought his ‘street language’ styled writing to a wider audience due to the easy availability of the newspaper.

The subject of this story provides the reader with some insight into what the term ‘alternative literature’ might actually mean. Stories like “The Birth, Life and Death of an Underground Newspaper,” reveal aspects of Bukowski’s art against which the work of other writers belonging to other literary movements can be measured in terms of the presence or absence of characteristics which more precisely define what alternative literature communicates and represents. Throughout the story, Bukowski parodies the 1960s counterculture movement, consistent with his sardonic view of American society in general, whilst ironically providing some insight into what it meant to be actively involved in the counterculture and its political, social and cultural offspring. The very

concept of an ‘Underground’ newspaper makes greater sense within the rich artistic milieu of the counterculture involving experimentation with sex and drugs, and a rejection of consumerism and the sacrifice of one’s sense of self to a collective identity promoted by social and political institutions. Against this backdrop, the hard drinking, sex obsessed, Bukowski/Chinaski persona emerges in a literature that negates the ‘effete puffballs’ which have ‘little to do with reality or the world outside.’ Chinaski’s identity is thus established through Bukowski’s critique of what he believes to be the inherent falsity of the consumer culture which is a culture not of free creative expression, but one characterised by wealth driven production and consumption. In these early stories, Bukowski is also content to let his narrator’s flaws emerge in order to suggest an honest portrayal of his experiences.

Thus, at the beginning of the story, Bukowski is candid about the seemingly unsavoury aspects of his narrator’s personality when the narrator is told by the wife of the editor of the Los Angeles magazine ‘Open Pussy’ that at a party held at their home, “you refused to leave and you drank a whole fifth of whiskey and kept telling me that you were going to fuck me up against the bookcase.” (1988: 109). Consistent with Bukowski’s writing generally, there is no suggestion from the author that his narrator is remorseful for his behaviour in any moral sense. We learn that Bukowski’s narrator is a flawed character in much the same way that characters in Dostoyevsky such as Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot*, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and the unnamed narrator of *Notes from Underground* are flawed, in terms of an inability to disguise the onset of neurotic tendencies, but truths about the human state can nevertheless be learnt from them. In Bukowski’s story, his narrator’s cynicism prevents him from ever achieving any meaningful affinity with the counterculture movement even though the editor of ‘Open Pussy’ is depicted as receptive to Bukowski’s alternative writing. Such a portrayal is entirely consistent with Chinaski’s identity in later works even though his personal circumstances have changed. One might thus argue that Chinaski’s flaws are weaknesses in some aspects of his life, particularly in his relationships with women, but strengths in others, in terms of the suggestion that revealing one’s failings suggests a certain authorial integrity.

In the story Bukowski portrays his narrator as content to remain an outsider despite the open invitation to write for the newspaper. He recalls,

walk[ing] over to my skidrow court thinking about what a mistake I was making. I was almost fifty years old and fucking with these longhaired bearded kids. Oh, God, groovy, daddy, oh groovy! War is shit. War is hell. Fuck, don't fight. I'd known all that for fifty years. It wasn't quite as exciting to me.
(1988: 110).

In this passage the narrator distinguishes himself from the younger generation of the counterculture by parodying their affectations and beliefs. By stating his age as 50 – which Bukowski would have been when the story was written – the already world-weary narrator is confirming that to defy mainstream conventions is nothing new to him, suggesting that he has always seen himself on the fringes of mainstream American society. Such a suggestion is confirmed when we look at the circumstances of Chinaski's youth in the novel *Ham on Rye*.

Bukowski disparages the hippie movement because he identifies it with the self-mythologising literary identities of the Beat writers of the 1950s, from whom the counterculture/psychedelic social movement sprung, and to whom Bukowski refers in numerous letters, discussed elsewhere.⁵ However, in the story, the narrator also realises that a significant publishing opportunity has arisen, and he thus begins writing for the paper. The tone and subject matter of the writing itself is revealed in the following passage:

I found a pint in my place, drank it, four cans of beer and wrote the first column. It was about a three-hundred-pound whore I had once fucked in Philadelphia. It was a good column. I corrected the typing errors, jacked off and went to sleep...
(1988: 110).

The story at this point diverges into a description of the narrator's treatment by his employers at the post office where he works, when he is singled out for criticism because of the anti-social nature of his writing. After reading some of the writer's columns, the narrator is called to the personnel section, where he is quizzed about the writing and his personal situation. The inference from the questioning is that because the narrator is unmarried yet paying child support, he lacks moral fortitude. (1988: 115-116). His interrogator notes that “ ‘you would have been alright if you had kept writing poetry, but when you began writing this stuff...’ ” The narrator replies by asking, “ ‘Are we to

⁵ See the four collections of letters published by Black Sparrow Press.

consider postal officials as the new critics of literature?” (1988: 116). This somewhat Kafkaesque scene in the story depicts the narrator reacting to the status quo represented by his employer, and also suggests a rejection of social conformity. Such a reaction can be equated with the idea of maintaining one’s integrity and not selling out to the mainstream. The idea of articulating a rejection of conformity through artistic expression appealed very much to the Beats who self-consciously set out to create an alternative vision for society in which free creative expression negated ‘selling out’. In Bukowski’s story, his narrator’s verbal sparring match with officials from the post office reflects a defiance through self-assertion in order to resist the faceless conformity of the ‘grey flannel suit.’⁶ The somewhat sinister motives of the bureaucratic system he finds himself up against also recall the impenetrable, shadowy force faced by the hero of Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*.

As the story continues, Bukowski recounts the various trials and tribulations of ‘Open Pussy,’ focusing on law enforcement accusations of obscenity (1988: 119); the ongoing struggle of the volunteer staff to keep the paper afloat, who Bukowski describes as “starving for the Cause” (1988: 121); and the volatile behaviour of the editor Joe Hyans, who at one point in the story upon learning of his wife’s infidelity threatens to shoot her lover (1988: 122-123). Ultimately, the paper is unable to continue because of a lack of financing, a series of police busts and the increasingly wild behaviour of the editor. The narrator responds by stating: “It was over. The cops had won, the city had won, government had won. Decency was in the streets again.” (1988: 126). The story concludes on a note that is neither expectant nor defiant - for the narrator, life will go on. The final lines of the story read: “I went into the crapper and took myself a beautiful beershit. Then I went to bed, jacked off, and slept.” (1988: 129).

This story tells us much about the Chinaski persona as it existed in Bukowski’s work from the 1960s. Although Bukowski’s first published story in 1944 heralds the arrival of Chinaski in embryonic form, by the time we get to the stories of the mid 1960s, Bukowski’s confidence in revealing the assertive nature of Chinaski’s personality has markedly increased. Although the narrator of “Life, Birth and Death of an Underground Newspaper” realises that ‘Open Pussy’ offers a sympathetic forum for the particularly

⁶ Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* portrays a younger generation’s

confronting nature of his writing - at one point in the story the narrator remarks to the editor Joe Hyans that, “ ‘you are the only one who will print my column’ ” (1988: 124) - he is nevertheless antagonistic towards the paper’s counterculture affiliations (at another point in the story, the narrator describes Hyans as “brainwashed beyond himself.” (1988: 120). Such contradictions are consistent with Henry Chinaski’s personality in other works in which he is portrayed by Bukowski as being particularly confident about expressing his view of the world, despite the possibility of alienating likeminded people.

Gay Brewer notes about the *Most Beautiful Woman in Town* collection that “despite the satiric and light tone of several stories, the overall message...is downbeat.” (1997: 54). In the autobiographical stories in the collection, the narrator is mostly preoccupied with fleeting sexual encounters, drunkenness and satirical digs at the counterculture. These are concerns that would consistently reappear in later work, including Bukowski’s three novels of the 1970s, *Post Office*, *Factotum* and *Women*. The first two portray Chinaski’s experiences with employment, and the third focuses on relationships and sex as well as Henry Chinaski’s maturation as a writer.

Post Office- The Writer as Worker.

When Bukowski wrote his first novel *Post Office* in 1970, his narrator, Charles Bukowski, had been renamed Henry Chinaski. Chinaski would remain the central character in the novels and many of the short stories. A key characteristic of *Post Office* is the assertive and sardonic tone Chinaski adopts throughout, regardless of the many unpleasant situations in which he finds himself. As in his second novel *Factotum*, Bukowski portrays the misery of Chinaski’s blue collar work experiences in *Post Office*. Both novels contrast the routinised tedium of work with Chinaski’s ongoing pursuit of freedom. Chinaski’s zeal and determination to assert his non-conformist personality, despite the unpleasantness of his life at this time, suggests both the direction the narrative of *Post Office* takes, and the novel’s conclusion. Secondary themes include a number of encounters Chinaski has with women throughout the novel who are characterisations of people with whom Bukowski was involved when he worked as a postal clerk in the

1950s and 60s.

Bukowski begins the novel with a one page statement, presumably taken from an employment manual with the heading ‘Code of Ethics,’ that formally lists the behaviour expected of employees of The United States Post Office. The statement is littered with standard business-like phrases which call on each postal service employee to: “Act with unwavering integrity and complete devotion to the public interest.” (*Post Office (PO)* 1997: 9) This statement sets a standard by which Chinaski measures his own rebellious behaviour in the novel, particularly as the job itself is never portrayed as an extension of his own identity. Chinaski depicts the post office as an alienating, bureaucratic monolith which he battles against in order to maintain his sanity. Gay Brewer notes that the novel explores the idea that, “vitiating labour transforms men into grotesque parodies and battered broken monsters.” (1997: 15-16) but that, “through a denial of self-abnegating labour and a subsequent flight through hell, Chinaski the artist is formed, his habits of creation fomented as we watch.” (1997: 17). Bukowski acknowledges in a 1970 interview that “I had to give up the post office job because it was killing me, really. So I wrote a novel, *Post Office*.” (Calonne: 50). Before Bukowski can create art, he must first gain freedom. Chinaski’s own struggle to do so, comprises the main theme of the novel. The very title of the novel tells us that the eight hour job is the arena within which this struggle will take place.

At the beginning of the novel, Chinaski introduces himself with a short simple statement that tells us from the onset how he will perceive the job he is about to apply for: “It began as a mistake,” after having heard from, “the drunk up the hill, that they would hire damn near anybody.” (*PO*: 13). Bukowski frames this recollection with a glimpse of Chinaski’s personal circumstances at this point in his life: “I was shackled, but the shackjob was gone half the time, off somewhere, and I was lonely alright.” (*PO*: 13-14). Following this straightforward opening, the novel unfolds as an interconnected series of anecdotes separated into short chapters. Bukowski consistently provides insights into the drudgery of menial blue and white collar work, where employees are expected to act like automatons in order not only to serve their employers, but also, “to take great pride in this tradition of dedicated service.” (*PO*: 9).

The novel thus explores Chinaski’s response to an alienating and absurd environment. He suffers when choice is taken away from him because of the need to

work to order to survive. This we see, not only in *Post Office*, but the novels *Factotum* and *Ham on Rye*. When employed, Chinaski finds himself in a position where he has no choice but to follow orders. His initial reaction to such a situation is to reflect on the pettiness and narrow vision of society in general which accepts rules and conventions that Chinaski finds absurd.

We see in the early chapters of *Post Office* when Chinaski begins working as a mail carrier, that his alienated state results in a number of bizarre encounters with the general public. This we see in the following passage in which Chinaski comments on the inability of the average person to acknowledge the everyday pitfalls of modern life:

‘BILLS! BILLS! BILLS!’ she screamed. ‘IS THAT ALL YOU CAN BRING ME? THESE BILLS?’...

It wasn't my fault that they used telephones gas and light and bought all their things on credit. Yet when I brought them their bills they screamed at me – as if *I* had asked them to have a phone installed, or a \$350 t.v. sent sent over with no money down.

(*PO*: 40).

The nature of his job has increased his awareness of vacuous desires in mainstream society, which Chinaski rejects outright. Absurdity is emphasised through the woman who, having become aware of her powerlessness, vents her frustration on the mailman delivering the bills.

Chinaski contrasts the anger of the woman, with an uncharacteristically sensitive portrayal of a co-worker named G.G. This character is depicted as having spent his life working for the post office with deleterious consequences: “His voice was gone. He didn't speak. He croaked. And when he croaked, he didn't say much. He was neither liked nor disliked. He was just there...No light shone from his face. He was just a hard old crony who had done his job: G.G.” (*PO*: 42). Years of deadening, routinised work have harmed G.G. and Chinaski records his decline in order to comment on the effects of such work on the mind and body: “There he was, head down in his arms on one of the tables...He was sobbing and wailing. His whole body shook in spasms. He wouldn't stop.” (*PO*: 46). Chinaski's co-workers seem not to notice the old man's despair, but he nevertheless attempts to grab their attention with little success.

He concludes the chapter by noting that “I never saw G.G again. Nobody knew what happened to him nor did anybody mention him again.” (*PO*: 47). Bukowski uses this character to demonstrate what can happen when personal freedom is sacrificed. In a

rare moment of empathy, Chinaski expresses concern about G.G, thus distinguishing himself from his fellow workers who most likely do not want to be reminded that they too could end up like this pathetic and powerless individual. This character reminds Chinaski of why he detests the very concept of the day job, thus a third of the way into the novel Chinaski resigns, although informing his readers: “Little did I know that I would be back as a clerk and that I would clerk all hunched-up on a stool, for nearly 12 years.” (*PO*: 50). The consequence is Chinaski’s own physical and mental decline. He explains his antipathy simply: “Any damn fool can beg up some kind of job; it takes a wise man to make it without working.” (*PO*: 62).

It is during those times when Chinaski is not working that he discusses his personal life. In the novel, he describes his short marriage to a woman named Joyce - based on Barbara Frye, a literary editor Bukowski married in 1956 and divorced two years later - and an ongoing relationship with another woman named Betty (Sounes: 104). Chinaski describes Joyce as belonging to a family of considerable wealth, although he is never given the opportunity to enjoy any of it. Work remains the dominant theme. Joyce tells him, “ ‘We both ought to get jobs...to prove to them that you are not after their money.’” (*PO*: 62). Chinaski subsequently returns to the post office stating in a typically dry manner, “I might get used to it. I never got used to it.” (*PO*: 68). The marriage falls apart shortly after Chinaski’s return to work.

Chinaski’s hardness subsides when describing his relationship with Betty. In fact, the only real tenderness Bukowski allows Chinaski, is revealed in his relationships with the characters Sarah in the novel *Hollywood*, and Betty, who is also named Jan in the novel *Factotum*, and is based on Jane Cooney Baker, who is described in interviews, letters and the Sounes and Cherkovski biographies as Bukowski’s first true love. However, in the novel, Bukowski also describes Betty’s physical decline and her eventual death from alcoholism. The horrible reality of her illness is described in a typically stark manner, devoid of romanticism or nostalgia. In the novel, Betty’s suffering represents the suffering of the underclass.

We see this when Chinaski visits Betty who has been hospitalised as a consequence of her insatiable appetite for alcohol. Chinaski reacts with anger when he sees the miserable state she is in:

‘Why do you just let her lay there?’

‘We’ve done all we can, sir.’
 ‘SIR! SIR! SIR! FORGET THAT ‘SIR’ STUFF, WILL YOU? I’ll bet if that were the president or governor or mayor or some rich son of a bitch, there would be doctors all over that room doing *something!* Why do you just let them die? What’s the sin in being poor?’
 (PO: 111).

This scene recalls Bukowski’s short story “Life and Death in the Charity Ward,” which describes his stay in a charity hospital following a serious bout of internal bleeding brought about by a decade of heavy drinking (discussed earlier) and which illuminates the appalling conditions in US charity hospitals. Bukowski does not intend to make an overt political statement in this passage, but Chinaski’s vulnerability as one of the working poor is revealed in a way that is not seen in most of Bukowski’s work. In this sense, Chinaski is revealed as something other than a one-dimensional character. Betty’s suffering awakens him to the reality of his life, and he responds accordingly given the circumstances of his own experiences.

Nevertheless, although Chinaski expresses outrage at seeing Betty lying in a hospital bed, there is also an acceptance that everyday life consists of an endless struggle to overcome suffering, and such an acceptance explains the lack of further discussion in the novel of Betty’s plight in political or existential terms. In the chapters following Betty’s death, Chinaski deals with his own suffering by playing the horses and drinking. Yet he, like the character G.G, begins to experience a physical decline as a result of the tedium of his job. This we see in the following passage:

I began getting dizzy spells. I could feel them coming. The case would begin to whirl. The spells lasted about a minute. I couldn’t understand it. Each letter was getting heavier and heavier. The clerks began to have that dead grey look. I began to slide off my stool. My legs would barely hold me up.
 (PO: 149).

Chinaski is not the only who one who suffers because of the dreary nature of the work. He observes:

I had seen the job eat men up. They seemed to melt. There was Jimmy Potts of Dorsey Station. When I first came in, Jimmy had been a well built guy in a white T-shirt. Now he was gone...They had murdered him. He was 55. He had seven years to go until retirement...They either melted or got fat, huge, especially around the ass and belly. It was the stool and the same motion and the same talk.
 (PO: 179).

Bukowski suggests there are harmful physical consequences from the tedious and repetitive nature of Chinaski's work, which become a physical illustration of his loss of freedom. Such an awareness acts as the impetus for Chinaski to finally leave the post office.

As the novel reaches its conclusion, Bukowski introduces into the narrative a number of reports filed against Chinaski by his employers concerning regular absences which Chinaski makes no effort to explain or argue against. That the job itself is horrible is justification enough. But Bukowski does not attempt to incite any particular sympathy for Chinaski. Bukowski, in fact, holds Chinaski responsible for his own predicament, of which we learn from the very first lines of the novel; "It began as a mistake." However, Chinaski's belief in himself, and the legitimacy of his quest for freedom, redeems him. To truly comprehend what it means to be free, Chinaski has had to undergo a trial-by-fire, which consequently affirms and explains Bukowski's conception of freedom expressed through the skid row drinker of *Ham on Rye*, the sex obsessed writer of *Women* and the cynical anti-commercial Chinaski of *Hollywood*.

Bukowski includes the reports detailing Chinaski's absenteeism simply to suggest his own negativity towards work. To retreat from work signifies individual freedom in the novel. Never at any time in the narrative does Bukowski discuss work as a meaningful social activity which an individual undertakes in order to serve the greater good of society. Rather, work simply serves to enslave and destroy the will of the worker, which in Chinaski's case, comes about through an ongoing physical suffering that Bukowski returns to towards the end of the novel: "And there I was, dizzy spells and pains in the arm, neck, chest, everywhere. I slept all day resting up for the job. On weekends I had to drink in order to forget it." (*PO*: 179).

Unlike the waiters at Hotel X in George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, who are worked to exhaustion yet feel privileged at having been able to obtain such work, Chinaski takes no pride in his work at any time in the novel. Although he accepts that he needs to work in order to survive, there is an absurdity to it reduced to a simple equation. The job causes him physical pain. Therefore, Chinaski would be happier not working, despite his acceptance of the realities of his everyday life: "I had child support, need for something to drink, rent, shoes, socks, all that stuff. Like everyone else I needed an old car, something to eat, all the little intangibles." (*PO*: 188).

However Chinaski has never felt comfortable identifying himself as a member of mainstream society. Prior to this musing, Chinaski runs into an old colleague who has now become a supervisor, and explains it thus:

‘Hank, I’ve got four kids. They need me for bread and butter.’
 ‘All right, Tom,’ I said.
 Then I walked off.
 (PO: 188)

Subsequently, after witnessing further indignities at the post office such as the removal of water fountains, with the explanation that their presence affected productivity (PO: 184-185), Chinaski resigns for the final time, which initially causes a period of disorientation: “I went into the bends. I got drunker and stayed drunker than a shit skunk in Purgatory. I even had the butcher knife against my throat one night in the kitchen.” (PO: 192). The post office had come to dominate his life to such an extent that when the break is finally made, Chinaski is forced to confront himself and the period of suffering that the job brought.

In a letter to his German translator Carl Weissner in 1970, Bukowski mentions a period of anguish that accompanied his leaving the post office: “The first ten days I damn near went outa my skull – didn’t know what to do with my hands, my feet, my mind. I almost cracked.” (*Letters Vol 1*: 91). Later in the letter, Bukowski offers a possible explanation for his behaviour: “I suppose it was a transition from the 12 year thing, and when you look at it, maybe ten days shot going from one to the other isn’t too bad.” (92).

The ten days of drinking that followed his resignation was a culmination of all that Chinaski had suffered in the twelve years he worked at the post office. Gay Brewer notes that in the final chapters of the novel, “Bukowski is forging the persona present in his subsequent fiction.” (1997: 17). Chinaski’s experiences at the post office can be explained as a rite of passage – an experience of suffering which at the end illuminates his purpose in life, shaping his identity from then on. His time at the post office is a subjugation of his identity – a human transformed into an automaton. This is represented at the end of the novel by the onset of physical ailments reflecting the repetitive nature of the work. But Chinaski’s suffering is not simply physical. In the novel, there is a real risk of a loss of identity as Chinaski slowly becomes transformed into a machine whose existence is defined by routinised tedium. The Chinaski with whom readers are most

familiar emerges only when he is away from the post office. At these times, Chinaski's situation is not entirely hopeless. Bukowski suggests the means for Chinaski's salvation on the very last paragraph in the novel: "In the morning it was morning and I was still alive. Maybe I'll write a novel I thought. And I did." (*PO*: 196). This very last statement is the first time in the novel that Chinaski reveals that he is a writer. Gay Brewer notes about this particular aspect, that the novel is,

unique in that it barely mentions the craft of writing. All of art is relegated to a derogatory backdrop...Although Bukowski was writing and publishing poems throughout the period recounted in *Post Office*, this information is oddly omitted.
(1997: 14).

But the omission is not so odd when one considers that, throughout the novel, Chinaski is defined by his work status.

When referring to art being relegated to a 'derogatory backdrop,' Brewer is recalling such passages as the following, in which Chinaski's relationship with a woman named Fay, who is described as a participant in writers' workshops and who bears Chinaski's child, is tested by her dedication to a form of art that one who is familiar with Bukowski's earlier work would know he despises. Fay tells Chinaski about a writer from the workshop named Robby who wrote, "I was told, terribly funny stories about the Catholic Church. The magazines just weren't ready for Robby, although he had been printed once in a Canadian journal." (*PO*: 145). Bukowski goes on to describe Robby in such a way to suggest that Chinaski is far from impressed. "Robby had his back to us. His ass was wide and big and soft; it hung in his slacks. Can't they see that? I thought." (*PO*: 145). Robby's 'soft ass' serves as a metonymic representation of a suggested softness in Robby's writing. The inference is that because Robby has never felt the flame - that is, he has never suffered like the working poor suffer - he is incapable of writing anything that depicts in an accurate way the reality of everyday life in direct, common images.

However, aside from this one reference to how Chinaski perceives art, there is no mention that Chinaski is a writer in the novel apart from the final paragraph. This is because in *Post Office*, Chinaski is a worker, not a writer. His identity is defined by the nature of his work, which temporarily buries any other aspiration. It is not until the novel *Women* when Bukowski had been out of the post office for six years and surviving

on the monthly stipend promised him by John Martin of Black Sparrow Press, that Chinaski is depicted as a fulltime writer. Chinaski's transformation into a writer is portrayed as complete in *Women* and the later novel *Hollywood*. But on the very last page of *Post Office*, Bukowski informs his readers that Chinaski's suffering has not been in vain. Chinaski has not let his experiences at the post office disappear into an irretrievable memory hole. On the contrary, he is now ready to commit his memories to the page, an act that results in Chinaski's transformation from worker to writer.

Factotum - Rejection of Work.

Russell Harrison devotes a considerable amount of attention to Bukowski's depiction of work. In the introduction to *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*, Harrison suggests that,

Bukowski has emphasised the most important feature of the American class system: the individual's role in the relations of production; and he has emphasised it more consistently and to greater effect than any American writer in three quarters of a century. He has done this through the prominence he has given to the role of the job and of work in American life. (1994: 15).

Harrison's enthusiasm for Bukowski's writing stems from his belief in Bukowski's political sympathy with the American working class that, Harrison argues, is evidenced by the simple fact of the regular appearance of Chinaski's work experiences in Bukowski's prose and poetry. Later, in his chapter on Bukowski's poetry, Harrison states: "In Bukowski we now have the experience made significant by virtue of its proletarian quality, the opposite of its status under the Beats and the Confessionals." (1994: 43). Harrison goes on to argue that Bukowski offers a specific class analysis in his writing.

Like Henry Miller's anti-hero in *Tropic of Capricorn*, Chinaski comes to realise that if one works for a wage, one is not truly free. It is true that the subject matter of both *Post Office* and *Factotum* is focused on the issue of work. Yet, Bukowski does not attempt to integrate his experiences within either a political, philosophical or ideological framework in order to make any definitive statement about the role of the worker in capitalist America. Such a statement from Russell Harrison, that "Bukowski's critique of

the persistence of scientific management techniques is also significant,” (1994: 140) might be better suited to a sociological analysis of Bukowski’s work than a literary one. Such an analysis arguably deserves further investigation. But Bukowski is too obsessively focused on Chinaski’s singular world view to ever concern himself with broader assumptions about the role of the worker in post war America. This is true of *Post Office* as it is true of *Factotum*. Chinaski’s identity is directly connected to his own conception of freedom, and his freedom goes hand in hand with his suffering.

As stated elsewhere, Chinaski does not raise questions, like the Beat writers did, about the ways in which art could transform American society. Chinaski’s suffering comes from a simple awareness that social conventions are absurd, and he must therefore come to terms with his subsequent alienation in a material sense. If Chinaski equates the day job with conformity and the sacrifice of freedom, he is faced with the following choice. He can suffer through the day-job which provides him with the means to pay his rent, purchase alcohol and feed himself, or he can not work and suffer the material realities of poverty. In *Factotum*, Chinaski vacillates between these two existences. How he deals with each comprises the narrative flow of the novel.

Harrison notes that in *Factotum*, “Bukowski offers a radical, generalized critique of work and its function in U.S. society and, for the first time, a strategy of resistance.” (1994: 145). Chinaski reveals his strategy in a simple way in the novel. He does not engage in the kind of institutional analysis that one finds in such a work as George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Rather, Bukowski focuses on Chinaski’s suffering at having to work any job in order to survive – when Chinaski is not working he is free.

The contrast between Orwell’s autobiographical work and *Factotum* is worth some further discussion. Orwell’s narrator concludes his journey into the depths of poverty with the following statement:

I can point to one or two things I have definitely learned by being hard up. I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy...nor enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant. That is a beginning. (1989: 216).

In his study, Orwell sets out to humanise the impoverished class in Paris in the 1930s by drawing attention to their plight in a sympathetic way. Russell Harrison notes that one

similarity between Orwell's reporting and Bukowski's fiction, is a respective focus on the horrible realities of menial blue collar work.

However, a significant difference tells us much about Bukowski's alternative aesthetic. At times, Orwell romanticises the plight of the downtrodden with whom his narrator comes into contact. Only one who has experienced poverty with the knowledge that he/she is able to escape when it becomes too much, could agree with the following statement Orwell's narrator makes in *Down and Out...*:

And there is another feeling that is a great consolation in poverty. I believe everyone who is hard up has experienced it. It is a feeling of relief, almost of pleasure, at knowing yourself at last genuinely down and out. You have talked so often of going to the dogs – and well, here are the dogs, and you have reached them, and you can stand it.
(1989: 17)

Such a romantic statement is reminiscent of symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud's now famous assertion – at least as far as those modernists in the romantic tradition such as the Beats are concerned – that, “the poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences.” (1986: 10-11).

Orwell suggests in *Down and Out in Paris and London* that the tramp is similarly imbued with the capacity to receive greater wisdoms available only to those who are prepared to submit themselves to suffering – or in Rimbaud's case, the consumption of absinthe and hashish. Early in Orwell's book, the narrator reports a conversation with a character named Charlie who exclaims:

‘At twenty-two I am utterly worn out and finished. But what things I have learned, what abysses of wisdom have I not plumbed! How great a thing it is to have acquired the true wisdom, to have become in the highest sense of the word a civilised man.’
(1989: 7).

There are no such revelations from Chinaski in any of Bukowski's novels. He gains no pearl of wisdom from his experiences with poverty in *Factotum*, other than his experiences serving to illustrate the absurdity of modern life.

Harrison does, however, note that, “what connects Orwell's book to Bukowski's most strongly...is the issue of work, of the job.” (1994: 236). Bukowski's particular focus is on Chinaski's rejection of work. It is through the rejection of work that

Chinaski's non-conformist identity in the novel is illuminated. We learn of Chinaski's attitude towards the day-job early in the novel, after having arrived in New Orleans in a state of financial impoverishment and mental weariness: "I stayed in my room at night and drank wine...while my money ran out. In the daytime I took long slow walks. I sat for hours staring at pigeons. I only ate one meal a day so my money would last longer." (*Factotum* (*F*) 1989: 12). Despite his situation, Chinaski derives some contentment from his awareness that at this point in his life he is free, as we see in the following passage:

I went out on the street, as usual, one day and strolled along. I felt happy and relaxed. The sun was just right. Mellow. There was peace in the air. As I approached the centre of the block there was a man standing outside the doorway of a shop. I walked past.
 'Hey BUDDY!'
 I stopped and turned.
 'You want a job.'
 (*F*: 13).

Chinaski follows the man inside the shop and immediately contrasts his peaceful feeling with a description of what he sees:

Over his shoulder I could see a large dark room. There was a long table with men and women standing on both sides of it. They had hammers with which they pounded objects in front of them...I turned and continued walking down the street.
 (*F*: 13).

Chinaski describes a menacing and shadowy environment where workers pound objects like machines. This description invokes images of a netherworld where one's individual identity becomes subsumed by the will of an unseen entity. The awareness of what the day-job entails that Bukowski writes about in *Post Office*, in which Chinaski is older, and has had more experience of the world, is also present in the younger Chinaski who inhabits the pages of *Factotum*, particularly when Bukowski portrays each job that Chinaski works in throughout the novel as indistinguishable from the one preceding and following it.

The intrusion into Chinaski's general feeling of contentment at the beginning of the novel, invites a comparison with his father who believed that work defined one's identity: "I remembered how my father used to come home each night and talk about his job to my mother...There was no other subject except the

job.” (F:13). However, Chinaski notes that, “a few days later I was looking for one.” (F: 14). Following this act, Chinaski’s suffering begins. ‘I drank slowly and began to think again of getting a gun and doing it quickly – without all the thoughts and talk.’ (F: 16). But suicide would mean surrendering to the absurd, so Chinaski continues to cling to life. Bukowski goes on to describe a myriad of jobs that Chinaski works in, all within a short space of time. In each one, Chinaski adopts the role of an observer, looking for tell-tale signs suggesting that the job and the loss of freedom that follows, has become a burden not only on himself, but on his fellow workers as well. Thus, after starting a job at a magazine distribution house, Chinaski notes that, “the work was easy and dull but the clerks were in a constant state of turmoil. They were worried about their jobs.” (F: 16).

Chinaski does not, however, reach out to his fellow workers in order to initiate solidarity through any sense of a shared suffering. He is in fact critical of the other workers, equating their worries with a misplaced devotion to the institution of work itself, which Chinaski regards as evidence that most workers are happy to relinquish their freedom in the service of others. We see this in the distribution house job:

‘All right,’ one of the women said, ‘we know you think you’re too good for this job.’

‘Too good?’

‘Yes, your attitude. You think we didn’t notice it?’

That’s when I first learned that it wasn’t enough to just *do* your job, you had to have an interest in it, even a passion for it.

(F: 17).

Shortly thereafter, Chinaski resigns. This act establishes a consistent pattern throughout the novel. Chinaski takes on a labouring or clerical job for a short space of time, quickly becomes bored and resigns. The pattern is only broken when Chinaski returns to his parents home where his father immediately charges him board. Chinaski’s father tells his son: ‘If you stay here, I am going to charge you room and board and laundry. When you get a job, what you owe us will be subtracted from your salary until you are paid up.’ (F: 24). Bukowski portrays the relationship in this instance as similar to one between a landlord and a tenant. The relationship thus becomes one based on money which Bukowski equates in all his writing with a loss of individual identity.

Although Bukowski goes much further in his later novel *Ham on Rye* to explain

the motivation for his alienation from his parents, in *Factotum*, this aspect of Bukowski's life is referred to, as it had been in earlier stories and poems, as a significant one shaping Chinaski's non-conformist persona. His alienation from his parents, who in *Ham on Rye* come to represent society in general, is further alluded to at this early stage in the novel in the following passage: "As I relaxed in bed, I had this strange feeling in my head. It was as if my skull was made of cotton, or was a small balloon filled with air. I could feel space in my skull. I couldn't comprehend it. Soon I stopped wondering about it." (*F*: 25). In *Ham on Rye*, Bukowski writes about Chinaski experiencing a state of white air, a metonymic representation of Chinaski's withdrawal into himself.

After leaving his family home, Chinaski's subsequent travels in the novel take him through the bars, rooming houses and factories of Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia. Unlike Jack Kerouac's literary alter ego Sal Paradise whose travels across the American continent by car are a metaphorical representation of a spiritual journey through his inner consciousness, Chinaski's travels are characterised by a restless desire to escape what he perceives as the useless absurdity and horrors of a life of subservience and mediocrity. The initial impetus for Bukowski's travels around America is noted by biographer Neeli Cherkovski as a desire to escape his parents' attempts to impose values of duty and patriotism on their son after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941: "His parents, especially his father's constant prattle about the duty of a young man to serve his country, were insufferable. He yearned to stand alone, and to forge himself into a smoothly running writing machine." (1991: 56-57). The price is poverty, but Chinaski must pay this price in order to, "define himself without compromise." (1991: 58).

Chinaski's determination to forge his own path results in the realisation that he is truly alone. This idea emerges in *Factotum* with Bukowski's portrayal of the short period Chinaski spends in New York:

The bus station in New York city was near Times Square. I walked out into the street with my old suitcase. It was evening. The people swarmed up out of the subway. Like insects, faceless, mad, they rushed upon me, into and around me, with much intensity. They spun and pushed each other; they made horrible sounds.
(*F*: 38-39).

This grotesque portrayal of a crowd of people who Chinaski describes as 'like insects,' is intended to accentuate the horribleness of the grotesque, explaining Chinaski's retreat

from society and subsequent feelings of fear and despair. Nevertheless, in order to define himself without compromise he accepts that he must retreat from society: “I took no pride in my solitude; but I was dependent on it.” (*F*: 40). Chinaski soon learns that the frantic pace of densely populated New York city upsets his quest for solitude.

This culminates in what Chinaski describes as a vision from hell, as he sits in his rented room facing a subway platform:

I looked out into a row of New York faces who looked back. The train lingered, then pulled away. It was dark. Then the room filled again with light. Again I looked into the faces. It was like a vision of hell repeated again and again. Each new trainload of faces was more ugly, demented and cruel than the last.

(*F*: 40).

Chinaski’s vision reappears in different forms in the work he undertakes in New York, firstly putting up posters on subway walls, a job he resigns from before the completion of his first shift, then working in a dog biscuit factory which is portrayed by Bukowski as a similar hell to the vision in Chinaski’s room, and is reminiscent of a scene one might find in a Hieronymus Bosch painting, suggested in the following passage.

I was given a dirty white apron and heavy canvas gloves. The gloves were burned and had holes in them...I was given instructions by a toothless elf with a film over his left eye; the film was white-and-green with spidery blue lines...On such jobs men become tired. They experience a weariness beyond fatigue. They say mad, brilliant things. Out of my head, I cussed and talked and cracked jokes and sang. Hell boils with laughter. Even the Elf laughed at me.

(*F*: 45-46).

Consistent with his behaviour in the novel up to this point, Chinaski resigns soon after. But for the reader, Bukowski has been quite specific about the absurdity and ugliness of factory work which better explains a character who would rather spend his time drinking in isolation.

As the novel progresses, readers begin to gain a clearer idea of how Chinaski perceives himself at this stage in his life. His is not a journey of self-discovery. As will be shown in our discussion of *Ham on Rye*, Chinaski had at a young age acquired a definite sense of self-awareness, through which he comes to recognise the ways in which he differs from others within his immediate environment. The Chinaski who inhabits the pages of *Factotum* is slightly older than the Chinaski of *Ham on Rye*, but there is a consistency to particular character traits in both novels. What distinguishes them is their

respective focus. *Ham on Rye* deals with Chinaski's childhood, and gives readers the genesis of Chinaski's non-conformist identity. In *Factotum*, Chinaski responds to the seemingly endless succession of menial jobs he works in by increasingly asserting his sense of self, and the freedom that comes with this assertion.

When Chinaski becomes a full-time writer in *Women*, he has finally freed himself from the routines of the day-job, but in *Factotum*, work remains an obstacle he is unable to overcome. In this novel, Chinaski is not yet able to save himself through writing. But the nature of Chinaski's persona is revealed when he is forced to respond to questions about what he does. In one such passage, Chinaski arrives in St Louis, is unemployed, and encounters two girls in his rooming house. One asks him:

'Are you new in town?'
 'Yes.'
 'You're not in the army?'
 'No.'
 'What do you do?'
 'Nothing.'
 'No work?'
 'No work.'
 (*F*: 53).

Chinaski is not interested in impressing the girls with exploits real or imagined. His sense of himself and his place in the world have already been established, excluding the notion that one's social identity is established by what job he or she does. In this passage, Chinaski not only affirms his rejection of work, but also rejects a society that has created the unpleasantness of factory work in the first place.

Such a response emphasises Chinaski's alienation, which Bukowski refers to whenever Chinaski encounters other people he realises he could never be like. After another encounter with Gertrude, one of the two girls in the rooming house who innocently shows Chinaski her bedroom, he reflects that, "there was a space between us. The distance was too great. I felt as if she was talking to a person who had vanished, a person who was no longer there, no longer alive. Her eyes seemed to look right through me." (*F*: 58). Chinaski, who is in the process of breaking from a conventional lifestyle through his rejection of work and his travels as an itinerant, acknowledges that his withdrawal into himself has caused his social identity to vanish. Chinaski consequently accentuates his social isolation, which ultimately strengthens his sense of himself,

resulting in the far more confident Chinaski of *Women and Hollywood*.

Shortly following this incident, Bukowski mentions for the first time in the novel that Chinaski in fact aspires to become a writer. Bukowski's description of Chinaski's efforts to have his stories published whilst he pursues a life on the margins of mainstream society is very much in keeping with Bukowski's own publishing history, as has been well documented and discussed earlier in this thesis. Chinaski's attempts at writing are shown by Bukowski as influenced by his personal circumstances which in *Factotum* are characterised mostly by upheaval, the drudgery of blue-collar work and restlessness.

This we see in the following passage:

After losing several typewriters to pawnbrokers I simply gave up the idea of owning one. I printed out my stories by hand and sent them off that way...I wrote three or four short stories a week. I kept things in the mail. I imagined the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* saying: 'Hey, here's another one of those things by that nut.'
(*F*: 59).

This is the less than auspicious beginning of a literary career. Bukowski chooses to provide the reader with no more details than this. But there is enough information to suggest that the ambition is a serious one. Possibly because Chinaski has realised that writing will save him from the tedium of his everyday existence – an aspiration fully realised in the novels *Women and Hollywood*.

Chinaski also reflects on what he believes it means to be an artist. Revealing an absence of belief in the creative act as romantic, Chinaski muses that, "A man's soul was rooted in his stomach...The myth of the starving artist was a hoax. Once you realised that everything was a hoax you got wise and began to bleed and burn your fellow man." (*F*: 63). Art must subsequently reflect, in a simple and direct way, the causes of suffering. Chinaski rejects the romanticised 'myth of the starving artist,' as he rejects the myth of the worker's identity being defined by the nature of the work itself. Both are considered equally absurd in Chinaski's view of the world.

Similar views are expressed by the narrator of Louis Ferdinand Cèline's novel, *Journey to the End of the Night*. This novel is a startling semi-autobiographical account of one individual's awareness of the absurdity of modern life. The novel begins with the narrator joining up for service in the First World War, but he becomes increasingly aware that the war's destructiveness is utterly meaningless. After experiencing the horrors of

life at the front, Cèline's narrator declares: "I reject the war and everything in it...I don't deplore it...I don't resign myself to it...I don't weep about it...I just plain reject it and all its fighting men...Because I'm the one who knows what I want: I don't want to die." (1983: 54).

The similarities between this passage in Cèline's novel and Chinaski's awareness of the alienating strangeness of modern existence are worth emphasising, because the comparison tells us much about Chinaski as an anti-hero who concludes the passage quoted above with the Cèline-like declaration that: "I'd build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men, women and children – I'd shove it to them all the way." (*F*: 63). Such an aggressive reaction to the burden of his alienation can also be found in the confrontational manner adopted by Dostoyevsky's anti-hero in *Notes from Underground*, who states:

doesn't there in fact exist...some best good...which is more important and higher than any other good, and for the sake of which man is prepared if necessary to go against all the laws, against, that is, reason, honour, peace and quiet, prosperity – in short against all those fine and advantageous things – only to attain that primary, best good which is dearer to him than all else?
(1972: 30-31).

This 'best good' turns out to be: "One's own free and unfettered volition, one's own best caprice, however wild, one's own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness – that is the one best and greatest good." (1972: 31) Such a view effectively encapsulates the motivation of those autobiographical characters in the novels of Dostoyevsky devotees Henry Miller, Cèline and Jack Kerouac who become obsessively focused on discovering meaning in an absurd world, beyond the social boundaries constructed within mainstream society. So too, does this statement provide some insight into the thoughts and actions of Henry Chinaski in *Factotum* as he struggles to create an identity for himself that instinctively invites the scorn of mainstream society because of his committed rejection of work.

Russell Harrison points out that Chinaski's anti-social behaviour comes from an awareness that, "it is not just the work itself that is so horrible but the felt presence of the job throughout life. Even when not at work the job is still there, deforming people and human relationships in a variety of ways." (1994: 141). Such a remark is justified by Chinaski's own thoughts on the day-job:

The thought of sitting in front of a man behind a desk and telling him that I wanted a job, that I was qualified for a job, was too much for me. Frankly, I was horrified by life, at what a man had to do simply in order to eat, sleep, and keep himself clothed. So I stayed in bed and drank.
(*F*: 67).

As we shall see in our discussion of the grotesque literary tradition in Bukowski's work, such an expression of outrage suggests that horror for Chinaski is having to sacrifice his freedom for absurd ideals.

A melancholy tone in Bukowski's novel is thus established through Chinaski's consistent expression of his alienation, emphasised through excessive drinking and the aggressive assertion of his own will. As we have seen in *Post Office*, the means for Chinaski to escape the drudgery of his working life come at the end of the novel when he finally resigns from his job, and informs the reader that he is ready to express his identity anew as a writer. The possibility for salvation is similarly glimpsed by the reader in *Factotum* when Chinaski receives a letter from a publisher informing him that a story has been accepted for publication. In a rare moment of optimism in the novel, Bukowski records Chinaski's joyous reaction: "Never had the world looked so good, so full of promise." (*F*: 64). Chinaski's happiness at this moment reveals a growing awareness that a combination of writing and drinking will neutralise his despair. Writing, in particular, is the means through which he can express his sense of self and thus prevent himself from becoming a "person who was no longer alive."

However, aside from this momentary gleam of light, Bukowski emphasises the monotony of Chinaski's life as he continues to work in a succession of blue collar jobs which become utterly meaningless in their regularity. As the reader follows Chinaski's journey through a series of factories and warehouses, where Chinaski is actually working at any one time becomes increasingly less significant, because his reaction is always the same. Reflecting on his co-workers in a cleaning job, Chinaski notes, "Most of the old people working at night in the times building were old, bent defeated. They all walked around hunched over as if there was something wrong with their feet." (*F*: 150). Such a description is consistent with Bukowski's portrayal of Chinaski's co-workers in *Post Office*. The recurrence of such an observation emphasises the miserable plight of the working poor. Bukowski also uses Chinaski's awareness of the awfulness of the work environment to justify Chinaski's view that he would be happier not working at all.

While Chinaski is unemployed in the novel, he begins a relationship with a woman named Jan who is based on Jane Cooney Baker with whom Bukowski had a relationship both loving and torrid in the 1950s. Jan is depicted in the novel, as Betty is in *Post Office*, as a full-time drinker with a more extreme aversion to work than Chinaski's. After taking a job in an auto-parts warehouse, Chinaski notes Jan's reaction: "The new life didn't sit well with Jan. She was used to her four fucks a day and also used to seeing me poor and humble." (F: 108). His simple conclusion is that, "great lovers were always men of leisure. I fucked better as a bum than as a puncher of timeclocks." (F: 109). Both Jan and Chinaski are well aware of their status as social outcasts, an image that Chinaski himself does little to dispel as we see in the following description: "I slept in my shorts. The shorts were stained - we wiped with newspapers that we crumpled and softened with our hands - and I often didn't get all of it cleaned off." (F: 101). Bukowski is suggesting that Chinaski is engaged in a deliberate rejection of respectability. Thus, Chinaski's shabby appearance becomes a physical sign of his freedom. Jan's ire is raised only when Chinaski is in fact employed. She tells him: 'Now you got a few bucks in your pocket and you are not the same anymore. You act like a dental student or a plumber.' (F: 108).

Although Chinaski's one long term relationship in the novel is with Jan, the development of this relationship is not a major theme. In fact, the relationship itself is approached by Chinaski in the same disinterested manner in which he approaches work itself. Brewer notes that in the novel, "sexual liaisons are temporary and more sad than joyful." (1997: 26). This is primarily because Chinaski becomes increasingly obsessed with preserving his own sense of self. Women, like the day-job, are depicted in the novel as a distraction that prevents Chinaski from forging his own alternative world view. However, the relationship with Jan is sustained over a longer period than one would normally find in a Bukowski story or novel, possibly because he recognises some of himself in her. She is a drinker and suffers material impoverishment. Moreover, she does not expect Chinaski to be anything other than what he already is, and she does not begrudge his impoverished existence. Thus, although dysfunctional, the relationship nevertheless holds together. With Jan, Chinaski is temporarily freed from fulfilling the role of worker.

As the narrative reaches its conclusion, Chinaski continues to work in a succession of jobs. In each one he is fired after a short time. His employment is mostly in factories and warehouses. In one such job in the loading dock of a hotel, Chinaski is fired for drunkenly abusing a supervisor. The absurdity of the situation becomes clear when his employer reminds Chinaski what he had done: “You also told Mr Pelvington...that it would cut down on the theft if each employee was given one live lobster to take home each night in a specially constructed cage that could be carried on buses and streetcars.” (*F*: 195). In mocking tones, Chinaski is critiquing the nature of the work itself. He is also making the reader aware of the absurdities of his own nature that, in this instance, have arisen as a consequence of his perpetually drunken state. The seriousness with which his employers dedicate themselves to their jobs is offset by Chinaski’s irreverence. His fellow workers work harder to keep their jobs. Chinaski therefore works less and drinks while on the job to demonstrate that the submission of one’s individual will to his or her employer is absurd.

A final confirmation of the absurdity of his job at the loading dock comes at the end of the novel shortly before Chinaski is fired for drunkenly confronting his supervisor. Chinaski is given the job of hiring dishwashers. He responds by humiliating the prospective employees, as we see in the following passage when Chinaski throws a number of coins in the air to determine who gets employed:

I tossed the pennies high into the air above the crowd. Bodies jumped and fell, clothing ripped, there were curses, one man screamed, there were several fistfights. Then the lucky four came forward, one at a time, breathing heavily, each with a penny. I gave them their work cards.
(*F*: 193).

Although the act is a cruel one, the pathetic plight of the prospective employees is brazenly revealed. A dishwashing job is at the lowest end of the employment scale, yet when Chinaski throws the coins into the air, the desperation of the job seekers emerges. For Chinaski, the act of applying for a job is just as grotesque as working in one, because seeking work is the first step towards the sacrifice of individual freedom. Earlier in the novel Chinaski observes,

How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so?

(F: 127)

Albert Camus reflects on such a question in *The Myth of Sisyphus* when he writes:

Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep...according to the same rhythm – this path is followed easily most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.
(2000: 19).

The ‘why’ for Chinaski comes in the first pages of the novel. The cycle of drudgery Camus describes, commences the very moment Chinaski is offered work (“Hey, Buddy, want a job?” (F:13)). Chinaski rejects the offer, but he knows what to expect. Hence his negative reaction to the approaching horror – “I began to think again of getting a gun and doing it quickly” – but Chinaski is nevertheless resilient despite his flaws, which is how Bukowski portrays him in each of the autobiographical novels. Therein lies his appeal. Bukowski tinges Chinaski’s character with a forceful sense of his own self, fixated on protecting his independence, not as a worker, but as a free individual, whatever the cost.

The source of such an obsession is discussed by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* when he observes that:

Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening.
(2000: 19).

Camus poses a choice that Chinaski ponders. In *Ham on Rye* we learn that Chinaski’s weariness pre-empted the inevitable ‘acts of a mechanical life’ - he says to a teacher in his late teens “I’m already tired” (2000: 299) - but by the end of that novel Chinaski has decided upon the path he wishes to follow by choosing the hardships of skid row in order not to succumb to such an existence. This act constitutes Chinaski’s definitive awakening to the absurdity of modern life.

Camus notes in the *Myth of Sisyphus* that, “from the moment absurdity is recognised, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all.” (2000: 27). Harrowing, because such an awareness inevitably questions rational thought. Camus suggests that freedom comes from an embrace of the irrational which he offers as a dichotomy: “Man torn between his urge toward unity and the clear vision he may have of the walls

enclosing him.” (2000: 27). Chinaski’s vision is established early in *Factotum*. He arrives in New Orleans to escape the wall his parents enclosed around him in his dysfunctional family home in Los Angeles. An alternative world view is already firmly in place, revealed through his thoughts and behaviour, but not yet through artistic creation. On the final page of the novel, Chinaski who has lost yet another job visits a strip show and in the gaudy surroundings admits, “and I couldn’t get it up.” (*F*: 205). Chinaski has freed himself from the ‘mechanical life’ but doing so has exacted a toll. He is momentarily free. But further suffering is just around the corner. Nevertheless, his vision of the ‘walls enclosing him’ is firmly in place which suggests further engagement with drinking and writing, which Chinaski believes represents the means through which he can better comprehend the meaninglessness of the absurd and remain free.

Women - Chinaski as Writer and Lover.

Women is Bukowski’s third novel, published in 1978, three years after *Factotum*. Bukowski has stated that he modelled it on Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and responds to an interviewer’s question in 1981 by declaring, “I loved his [Boccaccio’s] idea that sex was so ridiculous, nobody could handle it. It was not so much love with him; it was sex.” (Calonne: 179). That Bukowski was thinking about such issues is suggested in a comment he made in a 1978 interview that, “I’m just discouraged that men and women have to live their lives the way they do...I don’t know the way out. So all I can do is write about the pain of it.” (Calonne: 167). The subject matter of the novel suggests Henry Miller as another important influence, particularly his *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, which focuses on the narrator’s obsessive relationship with a woman alternatively named Mara/Mona, and is sexually explicit throughout. In a letter to the editor AD Winans in 1977 Bukowski says about *Women*:

I may get killed for this one. it’s (sic) written as some type of high-low comedy and I look worse than anybody...when I re-read it I realise that I must have been crazy from 1970 to 1977...it was quite easy to write and didn’t take too much guts on 3 bottles of white wine a night.
(*Letters Vol 2*: 234).

Bukowski’s confidence as a writer at this stage in his life is no longer in doubt. By the mid 1970s he had already written a large number of poems, short stories and two novels

which had established his reputation in the literary underground, particularly in Europe (Sounes: 173-174). The one consistent factor in Bukowski's writing at this time is its rawness, simplicity and use of common imagery.

An interesting aside which provides some insight into how Bukowski perceived his writing style emerges in a letter he wrote to the poet Gerard Locklin in 1979 concerning a forthcoming second edition of *Women*. As we learn in the letter, Bukowski always sought to preserve the raw simplicity of his writing in order to refute a more formal aesthetic approach:

I tell John Martin [Black Sparrow Press editor and publisher] to go ahead and correct my grammar but this time he went too far...Like I like to say, 'he said,' and 'she said.' that's (sic) enough for me. But he threw stuff in, like 'he retorted,' 'he said cheerfully,' 'I shrugged,' 'she seemed to be sore.' Shit, it goes on and on. There's even one place where a woman had on a green dress and he put her into a blue dress. At least he didn't change her sexual organs. Think of playing with Faulkner like that?
(*Letters Vol 2: 260*).

Bukowski's concern seems to be that John Martin has tried to 'dress-up' his penchant for linguistic simplicity. Chinaski's persona is shaped from a combination of Bukowski's autobiographical experiences, his publishing history and his literary style. All three factors are interconnected in virtually all Bukowski's writing. *Women* is certainly no exception. However, despite Bukowski's misgivings at John Martin's minor editorial adjustments, this novel does not represent any significant stylistic departure from Bukowski's earlier work. Concerning themes, there is a greater focus on sex, and Bukowski now portrays Chinaski as a fulltime writer.

In *Women*, a sexually voracious Chinaski becomes involved with an unusually large number of women, most whom he meets because of his growing literary reputation. Chinaski's personal circumstances have changed considerably from those we encountered in the earlier novels. The novel is a fictionalised account of seven years of Bukowski's life. It begins with Chinaski's volatile relationship with a woman named Lydia Vance (based on the sculptor and poet Linda King who was Bukowski's on-off partner in the early 1970s) and concludes with Chinaski meeting Sara (who is based on a health food store owner named Linda Lee Beighle who Bukowski would marry in

1985).⁷

The novel is divided into 104 short chapters, and the reader is introduced to a bewildering number of women with whom Chinaski enters into relationships of varying length and intensity. The reader would be hard pressed to discover any significant transformation in the way that Chinaski perceives women as the narrative progresses. Simply put, Chinaski does not embark on a journey of discovery in the novel from which he learns something about what it means to fall in love. Consistent with Bukowski's writing up to this point, Chinaski's views about love are quite pessimistic. At one point in the novel, he states about his love for Lydia, "I felt ill, useless, sad. I was in love with her." (*Women (W)*: 39). In another passage, he observes that, "people in love often become edgy, dangerous. They lose their sense of perspective. They lose their sense of humour. They become nervous, psychotic bores. They even become killers." (*W*: 60). Chinaski spends the novel trying to avoid falling into that miserable trap, much as he seeks to avoid succumbing to the despair of his co-workers in *Post Office* and *Factotum*. However, one significant difference between these novels and *Women* which we discuss further into the chapter, is that Chinaski now earns money from giving poetry readings.

Many passages in the novel are devoted to depictions of sexual acts in which Chinaski vacillates between aggressor and victim. Gay Brewer suggests that the novel "explosively juxtaposes ingrained chauvinistic traits with the rising consciousness of the 1970s." (1997: 28). One might argue that Bukowski does so by demonstrating a sexual freedom in the women with whom he comes into contact. Thus, a number of his female partners are depicted as sexually aggressive, and there are occasions, particularly throughout Chinaski's relationship with Lydia Vance, when Bukowski portrays Chinaski as a victim of her volatile behaviour - on one particularly nasty occasion, Chinaski calls the police after Lydia attacks him on the front lawn of his house. (*W*: 116). Brewer also notes that, "analogous to *Factotum*'s stream of menial jobs, *Women* inundates the reader with continual, overlapping female characters." (1997: 27). The comparison is a valid one. Chinaski seemingly falls into a series of relationships without actively seeking them out, similar to him landing jobs without actively searching for work.

By no means does this essay seek to downplay Chinaski's chauvinism, and further

⁷ In chronological terms, the narrative of this novel continues on from *Post Office*.

study to explain this particular aspect of his character is certainly warranted. However, our discussion of *Women* will focus on the outcomes that arise from Chinaski's obsession with sex and Chinaski's development as a writer. In our discussion of the earlier novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*, Chinaski's attempts at writing remain very much in the shadows. In *Post Office* we only learn that Chinaski is a writer on the very last page of the novel. In *Factotum*, writing is depicted as a possible avenue of escape from the mechanical life, a means for Chinaski to record his struggle to overcome his suffering through an assertion of the self. But, Chinaski's efforts to write are barely mentioned in that novel.

In *Women*, however, writing preoccupies Chinaski almost as much as his sexual exploits. Reflecting Bukowski's changed circumstances when the novel was conceived and written, Chinaski no longer works in a day-job. He supports himself solely through his writing. The many relationships he forms in the novel, are mostly with women he has met at poetry readings, or have come about from letters he has been sent from admirers of his work. The chance encounter with bar-dwelling alcoholics (such as Jan in *Factotum*) has been replaced by pre-arranged meetings with women from a different social stratum (Lydia Vance is a poet and sculptor, Sara runs a health food store, another love interest in the novel named Dee Dee is a record company executive). Moreover, in contrast to his previous two novels, Chinaski is more forthright about his vocation as a writer, the very act that shapes his identity and saves him from mediocrity, and in his darkest moments, from thoughts of suicide. In the novel, Chinaski gives poetry readings, often at universities, and he comes into contact with other writers who are virtually absent in Bukowski's previous two novels.

On the first page of *Women* Chinaski describes his changed personal circumstances:

I'm not sure when I first saw Lydia Vance. It was about six years ago and I had just quit a twelve year job as a postal clerk and was trying to be a writer. I was terrified and drank more than ever. I was attempting my first novel. I drank a pint of whiskey and two six packs of beer each night while writing. I smoked cheap cigars and typed and drank and listened to classical music on the radio until dawn. I set a goal of ten pages a night but I never knew until the next day how many pages I had written. I'd get up in the morning, vomit, then walk to the front room and look on the couch to see how many pages were there.
(*W*: 7).

This description is consistent with how Bukowski described his writing method in letters and interviews. The reader is given an insight into Chinaski as writer, alongside the drinker, lover, fighter and subversive malcontent, which are the dominant aspects of his character in earlier works. Bukowski sets out such a scene so that the reader will identify his writing with these other aspects of his persona. Now we have the missing dimension to his character, expressed in a typically forthright manner, and a suggestion on the very first page of the novel that no matter how despairing his sexual relationships become, he will always be able to redeem himself by turning to the typewriter. The energy and anger in the writing is reflected in the writing method. The sacredness of the creative act is demystified, and the integrity of the Chinaski persona is again preserved. Bukowski portrays a drinker who is also a writer. That he drinks whilst he writes, ensures that the two acts are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the harshness of the lifestyle will guarantee a hardness in the writing.

In this respect, Bukowski provides this description of Chinaski's working method to dispel any doubts about what sort of a writer he is, so that the appearance of confronting depictions of explicit sex in the novel will be more readily identified in the reader's mind with Bukowski's own confrontational persona. This extends also to the disdain with which he approaches the literary scene in which he finds himself- at one point in the novel, Chinaski makes the claim that, "the worst thing is for a writer to know another writer, and worse than that, to know a number of other writers. Like flies on the same turd." (W: 53) Chinaski also views his previous existence as a worker with some distance, declaring that: "Monday was my favourite day. Everybody was back on the job and out of sight." (W: 47). Chinaski's increased focus on the writing profession and his place in it, arrives at the same time as his greater immersion in the literary scene. But Chinaski has no doubts about where he belongs within this scene, at one point observing: "So there I was, a \$65 a week writer sitting in a room with other writers, \$1000 a week writers." (W: 53). In his later novel *Hollywood*, Chinaski also expresses surprise at his entry into the world of filmmaking with a similar sardonic tone to that expressed in *Women*.

Chinaski's alternative views about the creative act, which we learn originated in his childhood years in the novel *Ham on Rye*, is similarly present in *Women*. The integrity of his character is yet again preserved in this manner. However, unlike what the

reader learns about Chinaski in *Post Office* and *Factotum*, the circumstances of Chinaski's life have changed considerably, even though his response to these new circumstances has not. Thus, the reader familiar with Bukowski's previous work will know what to expect from Chinaski in *Women* before the first page has been read. But the incentive to continue reading comes from the absurdity with which Bukowski portrays these new set of circumstances, an absurdity that is both comic and horrible, particularly with Bukowski's rather ludicrous and often deprecating portrayal of Chinaski as a sexual athlete.

This combination of the comic and the horrible can be found in passages such as the following, consistent with the novel's confrontational tone: "I gave her 3 or 4 particularly mean rips and she gasped. Now she knew a writer firsthand. Not a very well-known writer, of course, but I managed to pay the rent and that was astonishing. One day she'd be in one of my books." (*W*: 70). Chinaski is as obsessed with sex and drinking as he is about writing. And whilst engaged in a seemingly unromantic sexual act, Chinaski reflects on its significance in terms of providing material for his writing, whilst also deflating romanticised conceptions of the artist. Bukowski suggests that the confronting nature of his portrayal of sex suggests the overall tone of the novel – unpleasant, yet honest - which in turn, explains why his particular aesthetic has resulted in Chinaski's relative literary obscurity. Chinaski is also depicted as a flawed individual who, when it comes to matters of sexual relationships, sometimes displays an anti-social stubbornness that is revealed as a manifestation of his self-assertiveness, as we learn during a typically heated argument with Lydia:

'Don't you realise I'm a loner? A recluse? I have to be that way to write...' 'Are you famous? If you went to New York City, would anybody know you?'
 'Listen I don't care about that. I just want to go on writing. I don't need trumpets.'
 (*W*: 73).

Such a declaration shows Chinaski becoming more comfortable with his identity as a writer, though his view of the world has essentially remained the same, which in turn has influenced the subject matter of his writing and its reception.

Chinaski's honesty is arguably determined by a willingness to reveal enough of himself to suggest how the narrative will evolve. Thus, while sitting in airport bar after

having ended his relationship with Lydia, Chinaski muses, “people were interesting at first. Then later, slowly but surely, all the flaws and madness would manifest themselves. I would become less and less to them; they would mean less and less to me.” (W: 74). With the exception of his relationship with Sara, this observation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, accounting for the many short term encounters with women depicted in the novel. Accepting that he is a flawed individual, Chinaski leaves the reader in little doubt about the way he perceives the world and the way he acts to confirm that perception, often without fear of the consequences. This is why depictions of sex in the novel are often explicit and unromantic, “like one animal knifing another into submission,” Chinaski declares. (W: 77). Through explicit depictions of sex, Chinaski confronts mainstream society which, for him, has always been represented by the status quo aspirations of his parents, made clear in the following passage: “When I came I felt it was in the face of everything decent, white sperm dripping down over the heads and souls of my dead parents.” (W: 77). Chinaski struggles in the novel to come to terms with how such a view might impact negatively on his relationships with women, which possibly explains the reason for his unwillingness to sustain any one of the many relationships in the novel over the long term. This he articulates as follows: “I continued to struggle with women, with the idea of women.” (W: 77).

However, Chinaski’s focus on women sustains the narrative, and offers the reader some insight into this particular aspect of his persona. Chinaski does not romanticise his relationships with women like the autobiographical narrators of Jack Kerouac’s novel *The Subterraneans*, and Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. Proust’s narrator aesthetically elevated his obsessive relationship with Albertine to that of a supreme human accomplishment. But, like Kerouac and Proust, Bukowski openly discusses Chinaski’s flaws. Proust’s narrator analyses in great depth his many neurotic tendencies, such as a crushing jealousy that ultimately destroys his relationship with Albertine. Similarly, Kerouac’s narrator in *The Subterraneans* becomes consumed with doubt which results in his failure to commit to a woman named Mardou, the focus of his attention in the novel. However, Chinaski’s troubles seem to stem not from jealousy or self-doubt, but from an abnormal fixation on sex over other considerations that make for a meaningful relationship. His libido thus becomes the primary factor determining whether any one relationship will succeed or fail.

This obsession results in a number of humorous interludes in the novel in which Bukowski portrays Chinaski's partner as exceeding his own sexual appetite. This is the case in the following exchange between Chinaski and Lydia, when an injury to his leg as a result of a drunken fall has diminished Chinaski's capacity to satisfy her sexually:

'...I don't think I can fuck with my leg the way it is.'
 'What the hell good are you then?'
 'Well, I can fry eggs and do magic tricks.'

As the exchange escalates, Lydia suggests that Chinaski's sexual inactivity has resulted from his perpetually drunken state: " 'If you hadn't been drunk you wouldn't have fallen and cut your leg. It's *always* the bottle!'

...'Lydia, sex isn't *everything*. You are obsessed. For Christ's sake, give it a rest.'"

Chinaski's efforts to make light of this absurd situation, enrages Lydia, who screams at him, "YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH! I'LL KILL YOU!" (W: 91). This scene recurs throughout the novel in various forms. Earlier in the novel, when Chinaski has become intimate with a woman named Mindy, he declares, "I was too drunk to perform. One hell of a great lover." (W: 77). Chinaski's openness in talking about himself, suggests Bukowski's unwavering belief in the freedom of self expression.

Although one might argue that Bukowski's recounting of Chinaski's argument with Lydia indicates that he is encouraging the reader to see him as the victim, Chinaski nevertheless balances this perspective by also openly expressing his own shortcomings which might raise doubts about the veracity of his attempts to portray himself in this way. This can be seen in his description of himself whilst he is waiting in an airport to meet a woman whom he has met through an exchange of letters: "And there I was, 225 pounds, perpetually lost and confused, short legs, ape-like upper body, all chest, no neck, head too large, blurred eyes, hair uncombed, 6 feet of geek, waiting for her." (W: 97). This unflattering self-description reveals vulnerabilities in the aggressive armour in which Chinaski usually cloaks himself. Irony and dark humour can be extracted from the fact that so many women in the novel are attracted to Chinaski, despite his less than charming appearance and perpetual drunkenness.

Chinaski's identity as a combination of drunk and writer is presented as a harmonious union in this novel. In *Women*, Chinaski has become a writer, whilst also devoting much of his time to drinking, accounting for his confidence in asserting an

aggressive masculinity in the novel when it comes to his dealings with women who also serve as a significant inspiration for his writing. In *Factotum*, Bukowski portrays Chinaski as the writer-in-waiting. Chinaski must first suffer the torments of the routinised tedium of the day-job before Bukowski can reward him with the integrity he seeks as a writer. In *Women*, the struggling writer and worker has been vindicated by his earlier suffering. The struggle has been replaced by a voracious appetite for drinking and sex. At one point in the novel, the severity of Chinaski's alcoholism is revealed. After a particularly tense argument, Lydia smashes Chinaski's stock of beer which he is unable to replace until the liquor stores open the next day. Chinaski casually observes that, "the thirst in me was terrible. I walked around picking up beer bottles and drinking the bit that remained in each one. Once I got a mouthful of ashes as I often used beer bottles for ashtrays." (W: 43).

As we will see in our discussion of the later novels and short stories, Bukowski doesn't cast any moral judgement on Chinaski for engaging in such behaviour. He is, in fact, more inclined to reveal flaws in Chinaski's character that have arisen because of his passions, in order to depict Chinaski as an absurd hero. Thus, after Chinaski commences a relationship with a woman named Katherine towards whom he is mostly placid, Bukowski once again reveals Chinaski's aggressive sexual attitudes in order to subvert the romanticising of sex that appears in the work of such modernist writers as Proust, Joyce, Kerouac and Lawrence. In consistently doing so, Bukowski frees himself from experiencing any anxiety about a negative critical response. Having established the subdued nature of Chinaski's relationship with Katherine, he proceeds to contradict this perception through his description of the sexual act itself: "I came inside of her, agonising, feeling my sperm enter her body, she was helpless, and I shot my come deep into her ultimate core." (W: 99).

Bukowski is content at this point to depict Chinaski in accordance with his belief that it is possible for an ordinary person to turn their life into art, but a particular type of art that becomes defined by its relation to those alternative concerns and depictions found in the novels of previous writers like Louis Ferdinand Cèline and Henry Miller. This we see in the following passage, as Chinaski reflects on the nature of his relationship with Katherine:

Katherine knew that there was something about me that was not

wholesome in the sense of wholesome is as wholesome does. I was drawn to all the wrong things: I liked to drink, I was lazy, I didn't have a god, politics, ideas, ideals. I was settled into nothingness; a kind of non-being, and I accepted it.
(W: 104).

The intended effect of such a passage is to confound the reader's conception of Chinaski as the tough sexual athlete. Even though Bukowski, at times, suggests that Chinaski is just that, he nevertheless demonstrates that this is not a complete picture in passages like the one quoted above. Thus, a little later in the novel Chinaski observes that, "I always felt inferior to waiters. I had arrived too late and with too little. The waiters all read Truman Capote. I read the race results." (W: 127).

Although Chinaski is a writer, he is also an ordinary person with ordinary desires. However, the way he expresses his desires, singles him out from other literary characters. Chinaski doesn't romanticise the creative act. As he says, he would rather read the 'race results.' Thus, one can discover repeating patterns to Bukowski's themes and portrayal of Chinaski across the novels, suggesting a consistency of intent that doesn't allow for ambiguity when assessing the thoughts and behaviour of Chinaski to determine the contours of his character. This suggests a distinctive literary aesthetic that is also revealed at times in the novel through particular character traits of some of the women with whom he becomes involved. Chinaski observes about a record company executive named Liza that she, "stayed away from literature, she stayed away from the so-called larger questions. She wrote me about small ordinary happenings but described them with insight and humour." (W: 186)

It is not surprising that Chinaski would choose to emphasise this aspect of Liza's writing. Chinaski also avoids the 'so-called larger questions,' and focuses on 'small ordinary happenings' in the novel. Such an intent is confirmed when Liza asks if Chinaski, "lives in order to write." Chinaski replies, " 'No, I just exist. Then later I try to remember and write some of it down.' "(W: 194). This response explains a later statement in the novel that, "writing was only the residue." (W: 227). Thus, lived experience is being emphasised, and the task of the writer must therefore be to capture the nuances of the experience as best as he or she can. In the final pages of the novel Chinaski states: "A man could lose his identity fucking around too much." (W: 290), but he is not really talking about himself. Because no matter what happened in his personal

life, Chinaski always knew that his identity would be preserved through his writing. So too, for the author of the novel.

Although the circumstances of Chinaski's life changed over time, the core characteristics of his personality that defined him as a social and literary outsider did not. We set out to illuminate some of these characteristics in this chapter. Bukowski introduces the Chinaski persona in his first published story in 1944. In this story the narrator inhabits a world full of "idolized prostitutes, morning-after-vomiting scenes, misanthropy, praise for suicide." (1991: 75) Such unsavoury aspects recur in a more fearsome manner in the stories Bukowski wrote in the 1960s, collected together in *Erections, Ejaculations and Tales of Ordinary Madness*. These stories depict the writer and drinker Charles Bukowski narrating in a consistently sardonic tone, a myriad of sexual and drunken experiences, as well as encounters with the counterculture movement which we see in the story, "Life, Birth and Death of an Underground Newspaper." The writing itself is characterised by a conscious literary artlessness in order to give the impression of spontaneity, and to strengthen the impact of the subject matter which is often crude and explicit.

The earlier prose and Bukowski's first novel *Post Office* are linked through a commitment to simplicity, a dominant aspect of Bukowski's alternative aesthetic. Bukowski constructs this novel as he would all his novels from then on, as a thematically linked set of short chapters. He wrote the novel quickly, suggesting a greater immediacy between both the writer's and Henry Chinaski's experiences, particularly considering that Bukowski wrote the first draft of the novel a matter of weeks after resigning from the post office. Although there is little stylistic difference between the early novels, Chinaski's experiences are considerably different in each. Bukowski's early novels contribute to his overall aim to portray the struggle of one individual as he winds his way through life with determination and humour. But, Bukowski was focusing on various stages of Chinaski's life from his mid-twenties onwards. It was only after he had satisfied himself that he was able to write lengthier prose works, that Bukowski turned in the early 1980s to his boyhood, a most significant period in Chinaski's life. Chinaski's self assertive literary and social identity is grounded in his earliest experiences, his troubled relationship with his father in particular. *Ham on Rye* is the novel to which we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

HAM ON RYE - THE TROUBLED BIRTH OF AN ARTIST

Charles Bukowski's fourth novel, *Ham on Rye*, was published by Black Sparrow Press in 1982. This novel comprises an account of Henry Chinaski's childhood, beginning with his earliest memory and concluding with Chinaski's refusal to sign up with the armed forces shortly after Pearl Harbor is bombed. There is an absence of nostalgia or sentimental reflection in Bukowski's account, which distinguishes this work from the autobiographical fiction of such a writer as Jack Kerouac who romanticises his youth in such novels as *The Vanity of Duloz* and *Maggie Cassidy*. In contrast, *Ham on Rye* is a raw account of a troubled young man who aspires to become a writer, while becoming increasingly alienated from his family and school mates. Gay Brewer notes that in the novel, "each feature of the [Chinaski] persona is by turn introduced: drinking, classical music, rooming houses, attitudes towards sex, writing habits and tastes in literature." (1997: 34). The subject of *Ham on Rye* signifies Bukowski becoming more reflective about portraying Henry Chinaski's younger years following his commitment to writing as a fulltime occupation after leaving the post office in 1970. As Bukowski became increasingly comfortable as a writer, he began to look more closely at those aspects of his life which had been previously buried, because they were too painful for him to explore on paper. Neeli Cherkovski notes that when writing the novel, "Hank re-opened memories that were often difficult to face...and once he got going, the writing came easily. 'It was like being in the old neighbourhood again,' Hank recalls, 'but a lot easier to take than before'" (1997: 300).

This chapter will discuss *Ham on Rye* with respect to the origins of both Chinaski's alternative view of the world and the self assertive nature of his personality, reflected in the strengthening of his resolve to come to terms with his suffering. Chinaski's quest for freedom begins in this novel as a result of traumatic childhood experiences. These experiences come to bear on Chinaski's first thoughts about writing and his discovery of alcohol. The novel offers insights into a series of painful experiences in Chinaski's youth, which played a central part in his transformation into a writer of the American literary underground. The extent to which Bukowski successfully

communicates the significance of these experiences with respect to Chinaski's quest for freedom ultimately determines the novel's meaning.

In his preface to the Rebel Inc edition of the novel, Roddy Doyle states that its narrative is concerned with "Hank, explaining how he became Hank, Bukowski explaining how he became Bukowski...a scorching account of a childhood, an adolescence, a life of ugliness, pain escape, alcohol, loneliness. It is a book about writing, finding a voice." (*Ham on Rye (Ham)*: 2000: xi). The hardened, cynical stance that Chinaski adopted following the harshness of his earliest encounters with the absurdity of the world is reflected in the persona of an older Henry Chinaski in the novels *Post Office*, *Factotum*, *Women* and *Hollywood*. *Ham on Rye's* narrative concerns a much earlier period in Chinaski's life when, as a child, he tried to make sense of the strangeness and hostility of the Depression era world in which he grew up. The novel is set entirely in Los Angeles, and Chinaski's formative experiences are depicted in a straightforward linear form. Bukowski's narrative places an emphasis on significant aspects of Chinaski's life such as his taste in literature, attitudes towards sex and his strained relationship with his parents.

The novel is divided into 58 short chapters in which Bukowski provides a harrowing account of alienation and domestic violence. Bukowski was seemingly influenced by Louis Ferdinand Cèline's second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan*, in which its narrator depicts his childhood as a violent and absurd set of circumstances which he is unable to ever fully comprehend, and over which he has no control. In his novel, Cèline describes in detail the volatile and violent relationship between the narrator, Louis, and his father. Chinaski begins his account in *Ham on Rye* by describing his parents in a similar way:

Two people: one larger with curly hair, a big nose, a big mouth, much eyebrow; the larger person always seeming to be angry, often screaming; the smaller person quiet, round of face, paler, with large eyes. I was afraid of both of them.

(*Ham*: 1)

Chinaski's father becomes a dominating presence in his son's life as the narrative progresses, while his mother occupies a much less significant place in Chinaski's memories. In this short opening description, Bukowski outlines feelings towards his parents that the young Chinaski would maintain for the rest of his life. He is afraid of

them because he is unable to ever fully understand their behaviour. It is only when Chinaski's perceptions develop as he grows older, that he begins to equate his father's aggressiveness with an irrational desire to exert total control over his son.

In this first chapter, Chinaski contrasts his fear of his parents with the awakening of feelings for his grandfather who we learn is a gentle man but a heavy drinker. Bukowski writes, "He held out his hand. As I got closer I could smell the stink of his breath. It was very strong but he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen and I wasn't afraid." (*Ham*: 4). Although too young to fully understand what his grandfather's breath signifies, Chinaski nevertheless defies his family's judgements, by choosing to embrace what his family rejects - we learn his parents' opinion of his grandfather from the following excerpt: "I was told that my grandfather was a bad man, that his breath stank." (*Ham*: 3). Thus, at the very beginning of the novel, Bukowski begins to shape the way Chinaski perceives the world. Unlike heavy drinking, the more socially acceptable temperance, hard work, and pursuit of wealth increasingly becomes a problem for Chinaski as he grows older.

Bukowski focuses on a number of incidents in Chinaski's early life which are significant in terms of the formation of his non-conformist identity. First, we learn about Chinaski's early rejection of his parents' social and moral values as a consequence of his father's aggressive nature. Also, when Chinaski begins to attend school he soon becomes aware that the other children, "seemed very strange, they laughed and talked and seemed happy. I didn't like them. I always felt as if I was going to be sick, to vomit, and the air seemed strangely still and white." (*Ham*: 21).

This description of the air as a white blankness recurs in the novel. In an interview with Jean Francois Duval, Bukowski explains that, "the air was always white. It was not right. Everything was wrong: the air, the people." (2002: 148). The whiteness that Chinaski describes in the novel suggests a metonymic representation of his growing discomfort with the environment into which he has been born, and the people with whom he comes into contact, including his own immediate family. This we see in the opening paragraph of chapter five, when Chinaski decides that, "I had begun to dislike my father. He was always angry about something. Wherever he went, he got into arguments with people." (*Ham*: 20). The source of his father's anger becomes more apparent as the novel progresses. Bukowski depicts it in terms of the frustrations and

anxieties that had been caused by the Depression. His father believes in the pursuit of wealth as a desirable sociable goal, but is frustrated by the realities of economic hardship.

The Depression had a great impact on American society, as people became increasingly desperate as a consequence of decreased employment opportunities. A number of chapters in the novel which deal directly with Chinaski's primary and secondary school experiences depict weaker children harrassed by the stronger ones, and these schoolyard experiences are similar to Chinaski's relationship with his father. The young Chinaski is portrayed as essentially defenceless against his father's abuse which in turn has been engendered by his father's inability to succeed materially, and his failure to achieve respectability in social terms.

Bukowski is very specific about the intimidating effect Chinaski's father has on his vulnerable son in passages when his father is beating him:

Everything vanished, the chair I was sitting in, the wallpaper, the walls, all of my thoughts. He was the dark covering the sun, the violence of him made everything else utterly disappear. He was all ears, nose, mouth, I couldn't look at his eyes, there was only his red angry face.
(*Ham*: 34).

After the beating is over, Chinaski reflects that, "I felt that even the sun belonged to my father, that I had no right to it because it was shining upon my father's house." (*Ham*: 35). As the narrative progresses, questions emerge concerning what avenues of escape exist for Chinaski, as he gradually begins to emotionally detach himself from his parents and class mates.

Bukowski depicts Chinaski's father as unemployed for much of the novel, although he does for a time deliver milk by horsecart. His financial difficulties are revealed in the following passage: "My father got out and knocked on doors. I could hear him complaining loudly, 'HOW THE HELL DO YOU THINK I'M GOING TO EAT? YOU'VE SUCKED UP THE MILK, NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO SHIT OUT THE MONEY!'" (*Ham*: 48). His father uses a different line each time. Sometimes he comes back with the money, mostly he doesn't. His father's belligerent attitude towards his customers is linked to disruptive relationships within the families themselves. This is shown later in the chapter, when a woman who has been paying for milk by offering Chinaski's father sexual favours, turns up at the Chinaski home. This results in an argument between Chinaski's parents which ends in violence: "It was very

loud and very ugly. Then my father began beating my mother. She screamed and he kept beating her.” (*Ham*: 50). Although he attempts to open a locked door to save his mother from the beating, he is nevertheless depicted as acting dispassionately towards both parents despite the unpleasantness of the situation. Chinaski eventually turns to writing as a form of escape from the ugly reality of his everyday life. He also discovers alcohol which serves the same purpose. And for the adult Chinaski depicted in the other novels, writing and alcohol are interconnected, as Chinaski increasingly uses alcohol to provide stimulus for the writing.

A significant event which emphasises the domineering nature of Chinaski's father, appears in the novel as a simple domestic chore. He carefully instructs Chinaski to mow the lawn so that it is perfectly even, telling his son, “I DON'T WANT TO SEE ONE HAIR STICKING UP IN EITHER THE FRONT OR BACK LAWN! NOT ONE HAIR.” (*Ham*: 68). His father proceeds to watch Chinaski as he mows the lawn, and then carefully inspects it once he has finished. When he discovers a spot that is uneven, Chinaski is beaten with the dreaded razor strop. Chinaski's whole world at this point in the novel is reduced to his despairing relationship with his father: “millions of people were out there, dogs and cats and gophers, buildings, streets, but it didn't matter. There was only father and the razor strop and the bathroom and me.” (*Ham*: 71). The father dominates his son as a way of overcoming his fears about the stigma of unemployment which always exists, even in times of severe economic hardship. We see this when Chinaski observes:

My mother went to her low paying job each morning, and my father who didn't have a job, left each morning too. Although most of the neighbours were unemployed, he didn't want them to think he was jobless. So he got into his car each morning at the same time and drove off as if he was going to work. Then in the evening he would return at exactly the same time. (*Ham*: 120).

This absurd charade is played out for the benefit of the neighbours because Chinaski's father desires their respect. Towards the end of the novel, Chinaski has abandoned his father's values by becoming completely indifferent to the conventions of respectable society, particularly with respect to work.

But as Chinaski grows older, he gradually begins to see his father in a different light. His father's vulnerability is eventually revealed, and the nature of their

relationship changes as a consequence. The origin of this change occurs when Chinaski is receiving yet another beating with the razor strop. Bukowski writes:

The room no longer blurred. I could see everything clearly. My father seemed to sense the difference in me and he began to lash me harder, again and again, but the more he beat me, the less I felt. It was almost as if he was the one who was helpless. Something had occurred, something had changed.

(*Ham*: 130).

Chinaski concludes the chapter by stating, "it was my last beating from him." (*Ham*: 130). The fearsome devil, who has mercilessly beaten his son, has finally revealed his weaknesses. Chinaski has matured to the extent that he can now read the fears displayed on his father's face, and this awareness has altered the destructive nature of their relationship.

Chinaski's growing awareness also provides a context for the source of his father's anger. Because his father's aggressive behaviour is partly due to an inability to demonstrate his social worth through a job which allows him to proclaim the attainment of a desirable social status, Chinaski consequently rejects the very concept of employment as a socially meaningful activity. He also rejects the inherent materialism of capitalist societies in general. Simply demonstrating that he will never become like his father is sufficient. He exposes his father's aggressive outbursts as irrational according to his alternative view of the world, because once the source of the outbursts are removed from Chinaski's own values, it becomes illogical for him to act in the same manner.

The next major event in the novel that contributes to Chinaski's retreat into himself, occurs when the young Chinaski breaks out in huge boils covering most of his body, resulting in physical pain, adolescent humiliation and regular treatment in hospital. After a trip to the hospital Chinaski notes, "On the streetcar ride back I sat in the back smoking cigarettes out of my bandaged head. People stared but I didn't care. There was more fear than horror in their eyes now. I hoped I could stay this way forever." (*Ham*: 157). Just as he had failed to understand his father's aggression, Chinaski is unable to comprehend why he has been destined to suffer the humiliation of an ugly and painful physical affliction. Yet, the significance of Chinaski's ailment becomes clear after the reader is made aware that it has in some way contributed to Chinaski's transformation into a writer. Bukowski describes Chinaski's first tentative efforts to write shortly after

the acne outbreak. At this point in the novel, the young Chinaski retreats from social interaction with his classmates because of his ugly appearance, and finds that he is forced to rely on his own creative impulses as he spends greater amounts of time on his own, resulting in an increasing preoccupation with reading and writing.

Chinaski searches his local library for literary works which reflect the intensity of his experiences, but initial attempts are unrewarding: "I walked around the library looking for books. I pulled them off the shelves, one by one. But they were all tricks. They were very dull. There were pages and pages of words that didn't say anything." (*Ham*: 164). Bukowski suggests the nature of his own alternative art in such passages which portray Chinaski's response to the literature of the canon. Chinaski subsequently reflects on the development of his own idiosyncratic ideas about art as a consequence of his experiences - any writing that communicates fiery themes in a simple and direct manner deserves to be read. About D.H Lawrence Chinaski observes, "the lines on the page were pulled tight, like a man screaming...This Lawrence of the tight and bloody line." (*Ham*: 165). Other writers are assessed in a similar manner:

One book led to the next. Dos Passos came along. Not too good, really, but good enough. His trilogy, about the USA, took longer than a day to read. Dreiser didn't work for me. Sherwood Anderson did. And then along came Hemingway. What a thrill! He knew how to lay down a line. It was a joy.
(*Ham*: 165).

Chinaski realises that literature might be a tool that neutralises the absurdity of his life, acknowledged in straightforward terms: "words weren't dull, words were things that could make your mind hum. If you read them and let yourself feel the magic, you could live without pain, with hope, no matter what happened to you." (*Ham*: 165).

Once the reader is made aware of this simple philosophy, the connection between Chinaski's experiences and his literary influences become clearer. About the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, Chinaski notes, "Turgenev was a very serious fellow but he could make me laugh because a truth first encountered can be very funny. When someone else's truth is the same as your truth, and he seems to be saying it just for you, that's great." (*Ham*: 166). The ability to communicate directly and clearly with humour and passion is what endears certain writers to Chinaski - he thus equates simplicity with integrity. These concerns, however, differ considerably from those of his father who

attempts to obstruct his son's literary discoveries. His father yells out, 'All right, that's enough of those goddamned books! Lights out!' (*Ham*: 166). Chinaski goes on to explain that his father's concerns are more economically motivated than those of his son: "His conversation at home was always about 'the job.' He talked to my mother about his 'job' from the moment he entered the door in the evenings until they slept." (*Ham*: 166).

Chinaski's literary discoveries are preceded in the novel by his first encounter with alcohol, which takes on a similar importance. No reader of Bukowski's work would be unaware of the prominence of alcohol consumption in the writing. Chinaski is depicted as somebody who drinks in order to block out his suffering. In his interview with Jean Duval, Bukowski explains that, "a man who drinks, he can become this other person. He has a whole new life. He is different when he is drinking...And this gives a man two lives. And that's usually in my other life, my drinking life, that I do my writing." (2002: 141-142). In the other novels, Chinaski's drinking is ever present, but no great significance is attached to it. But in his letters, Bukowski often writes that drinking and writing go hand in hand, and he would not be able to do one without the other. In *Ham on Rye*, Chinaski's discovery of alcohol is described as a major life event: 'I thought, well now I have found something, I have found something that is going to help me, for a long long time to come.' (*Ham*: 101). He thus believes that alcohol assists, rather than hinders the development of his alternative world view.

Chinaski increasingly begins to rely on this alternative perspective of the world as the means through which he can explain his alienation from his parents and classmates, and also define his own identity. He finds it absurd that people are born merely to follow the dictates of socially acceptable conventions which allow for a life of mediocrity but little more. He notes, "Everybody had to conform, find a mold to fit into. Doctor, lawyer, soldier - it didn't matter what it was. Once in the mold you had to push forward...either you managed to do something or you starved in the streets." (*Ham*: 195). Although resigned to the fact that the time would come when he too would have to work in a job to survive, Chinaski is nevertheless already considering how he might avoid fitting a predetermined mold simply by recognising that surrendering one's will to sanctified social goals is not necessarily a preferable way to live.

However, shortly after making this social observation, Chinaski brings the reader back to the unpleasant reality of his immediate social environment - discovering

freedom will have to wait a little longer:

I changed into my working clothes, went out, and with my father watching me from beneath his dark and evil eyebrows, I opened the garage doors and carefully pulled the mower out backwards, the mower blades not turning then, but waiting.

(*Ham*: 196).

The routine of mowing the lawn under the ever watchful gaze of his father becomes a metonymic representation of other routines that individuals are expected to perform throughout their lives in accordance with the will of similarly menacing authority figures.

The first paragraph of chapter 44 is devoted to a strong expression of non-conformity that articulates the nature of Chinaski's increasingly self assertive personality, which is further developed in Bukowski's other autobiographical novels:

I could see the road ahead of me. I was poor and I was going to stay poor. But I didn't particularly want money. I didn't know what I wanted. Yes, I did. I wanted someplace to hideout, someplace where one didn't have to do anything. The thought of being something didn't only appall me, it sickened me. The thought of being a lawyer or a councilman or an engineer, anything like that seemed impossible to me. To get married to have children, to get trapped in the family structure. To go someplace to work every day and to return. It was impossible...was a man born just to endure those things and then die? I would rather be a dishwasher, return alone to a tiny room and drink myself to sleep.

(*Ham*: 213).

This thought sets the tone for the remainder of the novel. Chinaski rejects the concept of the work ethic as a meaningful social belief. For him, the work ethic, a key element in capitalist societies, robs an individual of the opportunity to express his or her own identity. Chinaski abhors the concept of the day-job, because to work in an unfulfilling job suggests the sacrifice of individual freedom to a socially defined role that preserves the basic structure of capitalism.⁸ By not subscribing to socially acceptable rules and routines, the only option left to Chinaski is to behave in a manner that communicates his awareness that striving for material success in order to achieve an enviable social status is a meaningless and absurd quest. This is the basis upon which Bukowski shapes Chinaski's identity.

The subsequent development of Chinaski's identity in the novel takes place within the context of his contemptuous response to his father's values. This is suggested

⁸ In a 1981 interview with the magazine *High Times*, Bukowski tells his interviewer that, "working eight

in the passage which follows the previous declaration:

My father had a master plan. He told me, 'My son, each man during his lifetime should buy a house. Finally he dies and leaves that house to his son. Then his son gets his own house and dies, leaves both houses, to his son. That's two houses. That son gets his own house, that's three houses...' The family structure. Victory over adversity through the family. He believed in it. Take the family, mix with God and Country, add the ten hour day and you had what you needed.
(*Ham*: 213).

Chinaski reacts with cynicism to the idea that patriotism and hard work both result in the betterment of society, identified by Russell Harrison as a rejection of work. Harrison notes in his discussion of *Factotum* that: “the representation of many horrible jobs as opposed to just one, reinforces the powerful dead-end impression that is one of the novel's great achievements. It is not that one happens to have a horrible job: jobs are horrible.” (1994: 140). Chinaski would rather not work at all. Whenever he does work, he chooses jobs which require the minimum of effort to perform, in order to reject the very concept of the day-job as constituting something meaningful to him in any significant way.

By negating his father's values, most of which are connected in some way to the work ethic, Chinaski breaks the generational pattern that his father believes characterises a successful life. He concludes from his musings that his father, “was a stranger. My mother was non-existent. I was cursed. Looking at my father I saw nothing but indecent dullness.” (*Ham*: 214). In the short story collection *Hot Water Music*, published a year after *Ham on Rye*, we learn that Chinaski takes a final revenge on his father's values in the stories, “Death of the Father Parts 1 and 2,” by making sexual advances towards his recently deceased father's girlfriend at the funeral, and then giving away most of his father's possessions to his neighbours.

A significant moment suggesting Chinaski separating himself from society comes towards the end of the novel, when, on the night of the senior prom, he stands outside in the dark, looking in through a window at the boys and girls dancing inside:

...Then I caught a glimpse of my reflection staring in at them - boils and scars on my face, my ragged shirt. I was like some jungle animal drawn to the light and looking in. Why had I come? I felt sick but I kept watching. The dance ended. There was a pause. Couples spoke easily to each other.

It was natural and civilised...and yet I knew that what I saw wasn't as simple and good as it appeared. There was a price to be paid for it all, a general falsity, that could be easily believed, and could be the first step down a dead-end street...As I watched them I said to myself, someday my dance will begin.

(*Ham*: 215).

Chinaski is eventually chased from the window by a security guard. At this moment, a fundamental break with society has taken place. Chinaski realises that he will never achieve social success in material terms, but neither will he succumb to what he believes is the price to be paid for social success - that is, the surrender of one's individual will in order to belong.

Work.

Once he graduates from high school, Chinaski makes a few half hearted attempts to find a job, and winds up working in a Mears Starbuck department store. The strong personality formed from his experiences with his parents and school is now firmly in place. Chinaski's job experience is shortlived after he is fired for becoming involved in a fistfight with some former classmates, but his dismissal is of little consequence to him. Bukowski portrays Chinaski's experience in the department store as routinised and absurd, which we learn from such statements as the following: "Now, I thought, pushing my cart along, I have this job. Is this to be it? No wonder men robbed banks. There were too many demeaning jobs." (*Ham*: 233). Chinaski quickly learns on his first day that he is not suited to a life of servility. Further into the chapter, he considers his ideal life: "What I wanted was a cave in Colorado with three years worth of foodstuffs and drink. I'd wipe my ass with sand. Anything, anything to stop drowning in this dull, trivial and cowardly existence." (*Ham*: 234). Chinaski is expressing an awareness that he has entered a world occupied by people like his father, who delude themselves about their self-worth, and whose interests, goals and desires differ considerably from Chinaski's own. This becomes clear when the reader discovers the reason for Chinaski's dismissal. Faced with taunts from some former classmates whilst he is at work, Chinaski reflects that: "They were soft, they had never faced any fire. They were beautiful nothings. They made me sick. I hated them. They were part of the nightmare that

haunted me in one form or another.” (*Ham*: 236). Chinaski proceeds to fight one of them and loses his job as a result.

By the end of the novel, the reader has learnt that Chinaski has become increasingly tormented by people who, intentionally or not, seek to obstruct his freedom to live a life of his own choosing. He despises those he refers to as 'beautiful nothings' for not raising questions about the society in which they live. His own willingness to do so is a key element in Chinaski's transformation into a writer of alternative literature, which he becomes in the novels *Women* and *Hollywood*. For Chinaski, the refusal to question how society is organised perpetuates an endlessly repeating social cycle over generations, and this realisation becomes the source of Chinaski's nightmare. Chinaski's quip that his former class mates had 'never faced the fire' is contrasted with his own desire to confront society by rejecting, without fear of the consequences, those values he considers absurd. For Chinaski, becoming one of the working poor, drinking in bars with unemployed alcoholics, working in a series of deadening factory jobs, sleeping in rooming houses, and regularly engaging in drunken fights with women and brawls with other bar dwellers, constitute 'facing the fire.' Such acts are as far removed from the behaviour of his father or former class-mates as he is able to get.

Politics.

Chinaski's increasing self absorption is further revealed in the novel when he enrolls at the LA City College to study journalism, shortly after his dismissal from the Mears Starbuck job. This part of Chinaski's life, as with most other events in the novel, parallels Bukowski's own, discussed in both the Sounes and Cherkovski biographies. Cherkovski points out that Bukowski, “believed that formal education meant another form of enslavement, yet he held a vague idea of somehow using it to his advantage.” (1997: 45-46). In order to stir up trouble at the College, Bukowski began to openly espouse right-wing views in order to rail against the left-leaning political orientation of a number of the professors in a college that had, “earned a reputation as 'the little red college', due to the large number of faculty members with left-leaning sensibilities.” (1997: 47). Cherkovski, however, also notes that Bukowski “didn't believe in any manner of ideological slavery, whether on the right or the left.” (1997: 48). This view is

consistent with Bukowski's own political ambivalence expressed in a number of pieces he wrote for *Open City* in the late 1960s and later re-published in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (discussed earlier).

Chinaski's brief involvement with politics is intended more as parody than anything else. Moreover, Bukowski always filters any mention of politics through his own alternative perspective. This we see in the following statement: "As for me, I had no desire to go to war to protect the life I had or what future I might have. I had no freedom. I had nothing." (*Ham*: 262). Subsequently, Chinaski begins espousing right-wing views which take the form of clichéd sloganeering in order to set himself apart from his classmates. Bukowski presents these views in connection to Chinaski's personal circumstances and temperament. Thus, "with all the instructors being anti-German I found it personally impossible to simply agree with them. Out of sheer alienation and a natural contrariness I decided to align myself against their point of view." (*Ham*: 262). Bukowski explains Chinaski's apparent right-wing orientation as an opportunity to accentuate the willingness of his college professors to accept any political doctrine that reflects the status quo. Although Chinaski openly expresses conservative views on what has turned out to be a left oriented college campus, he points out that,

I avoided any direct reference to Jews or Blacks who had never given me any trouble. All my troubles had come from white gentiles. Thus, I wasn't a nazi by temperament or choice; the teachers more or less forced it upon me by being so much alike and thinking so much alike and with their anti-German prejudice. I had also read somewhere that if a man didn't truly believe or understand what he was espousing, somehow he could do a more convincing job, which gave me a considerable advantage over the teachers. (*Ham*: 263).

There is much to learn about the nature of Chinaski's non-conformist personality from this passage. Chinaski objects to the submissiveness of the College professors to one particular viewpoint because of a misguided sense of self-righteousness. He doesn't believe in anything other than his own capacity for self-expression, and therefore demonstrates the absurdity of blind faith in a political doctrine by passionately espousing views he doesn't actually accept on principle.

This point is furthered when Chinaski meets others on campus who, unlike him, are passionately committed to the fascist cause. The contrast is established simply and directly. Upon meeting one such individual, Chinaski observes, "The guy's head was

sunk down into his shoulders, he had a very round head, small ears, cropped hair, pea eyes, tiny wet round mouth. A nut, I thought, a killer.” (*Ham*: 265). Chinaski finally concludes, “Why did the Master Race movement draw nothing but mental and physical cripples.” (*Ham*: 265). Bukowski subsequently draws no further conclusions. Chinaski's flirtation with politics is thus covered by Bukowski in one short chapter. This is the only occasion when politics are mentioned in any of Bukowski's novels. This particular chapter is, however, instructive in explaining Chinaski's alienation from society in a more general way. For only someone as concerned with the self as Bukowski was, would portray Chinaski in the manner that he did at a time when America was at war.

Transformation into a Writer.

Much of what happens in the novel is a consequence of the nature of the relationship between Chinaski and his father. Towards the end, the final break with his father is depicted as coinciding with tentative efforts to write, revealed as conflicting with his father's values, and thus a significant impetus for Chinaski pursuing the writing craft, but in a way that means something only to him. Chinaski does not begin to write seriously with the aim of creating something aesthetically sublime, rather, the work would always be deliberately rough and confrontational in order to represent his view of the world. Chinaski's break with his parents occurs when he is walking home from college, and his mother informs him that his father has read some of his stories, and subsequently strewn all his belongings across the front lawn. The contents of the stories themselves are never revealed, but Chinaski acknowledges for the first time in the novel the value he attaches to his writing: “I went after my manuscripts first. That was the lowest of the blows doing that to me. They were the one thing he had no right to touch. As I picked up each page from the gutter, from the lawn, and from the street, I began to feel better.” (*Ham*: 274).

This moment heralds a new phase in Chinaski's life, mostly because he has reached an age where he is able to influence the direction his life will now take. As the novel concludes, Bukowski gives the reader a clue as to what Chinaski's future life will look like:

I made practice runs down to skid row to get ready for my future. I didn't

like what I saw down there. Those men and women had no special daring or brilliance. They wanted what everybody wanted...I knew that I wasn't entirely sane. I still knew as I had as a child that there was something strange about myself. I felt as if I were destined to be a murderer, a bank robber, a saint, a rapist, a monk, a hermit. I needed an isolated place to hide. Skid row was disgusting. The life of the sane, average man was dull, worse than death. There seemed to be no possible alternative. Education also seemed to be a trap. The little education I had allowed myself had made me more suspicious. What were doctors, lawyers, scientists? They were just men who had allowed themselves to be deprived of their freedom to think and act as individuals. I went back to my shack and drank. (*Ham*: 307).

Sentiments expressed in this passage are consistent with Chinaski's view of the world, particularly his ongoing concern with the issue of freedom. At this point in the novel, Chinaski has moved into a rooming house in a district of Los Angeles inhabited by poor immigrants. This passage suggests that although Chinaski does not find anything particularly pleasant or romantic about skid row, he has nevertheless decided that he prefers the poor life to one that involves surrendering his freedom. Chinaski has made the decision to completely reject the materialist dreams of his parents, and has moved both physically and internally to the fringes of society.

In *Ham on Rye*, Chinaski finds himself trapped between two poles as we learn from the preceding passage. He concludes that the poor on skid row, "wanted what everybody else wanted," yet, "the life of the sane, average man is dull, worse than death." Bukowski never feels comfortable with any social group, and this is a common thread running through much of his fiction. Yet, there is a suggestion in the novel that Chinaski's salvation will come through the act of writing. It is through writing that Chinaski reclaims the ability to 'think and act' as an individual. Therefore, the humiliation and suffering which he experiences at various times in the novel, such as the outbreak of acne, and the physical abuse at the hands of his father become, for both author and fictional self, the source material of poems, short stories and novels. Aubrey Malone notes that, "the cruelty he suffered under his parents and classmates...formed the basis for six decades of anger." (2003: 107).

In the final chapter of the novel Chinaski runs into a college friend shortly after Pearl Harbor is bombed. His friend has joined the army, but Chinaski refuses, having offered his reason earlier on: "Your parents controlled your growing-up period,

they pissed all over you. Then when you got ready to go out on your own, the others wanted to stick you in a uniform so you could get your ass shot off.” (*Ham*: 296).

Chinaski is more concerned with his own welfare than that of the greater society, but he outlines his reasons for adopting this stance quite openly throughout the novel. And his refusal to join the military is not unexpected, given what has come before.

The Novel's Significance.

Ernest Fontana concludes his article, “Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* and the Los Angeles Novel” with the following passage.

He [Chinaski] resolves at the end of *Ham on Rye*, as America enters World War II, to fight his own private war, to resist the society that is appalled by him and his scars. He will continue to appall it and thereby reveal its own less visible scars. He will fight it by refusing its myths, blandishments, responsibilities and wars. *Ham on Rye* narrates Henry's growth to self-awareness in a Southern California denuded of its regional myths. It is not a special place, but a representative America, an America against whose dominant myths and institutions solitary struggle is seen as the only available and honourable option.
(1985: 8).

This view expresses quite clearly the expression of Bukowski's art in the persona of the anti-hero Chinaski who spends much of the novel engaged in a solitary struggle against people, his parents in particular. He is also critical of such practices as paid employment and formal education which he believes obstruct his capacity to act in a manner that satisfies his feelings of responsibility to himself. The idea that Bukowski spent much of his life fighting his own private war is also discussed by Jean Francois Duval who uses a boxing analogy when describing the effects Bukowski's words were intended to have on his readers: Duval writes that Bukowski “responded blow by blow with words, the writer's weapons, to the knocks that reality inflicted upon him.” (2002: 106). Duval argues that Bukowski adopted a confrontational stance in his writing because, “the aim of his whole work is to denounce illusions, to tear up the veil that the world would have thrown over reality.” (2002: 110).

Ham On Rye should thus be read as Chinaski's struggle to renounce the illusions that he discovers in various aspects of his early life, which ultimately results in his alienation from family and school friends, shapes his quest for freedom, and also

engenders his critical reactions to the institutions of work and education. The consequence is that he withdraws from society, explaining why we see him retreating to rooming houses in poorer Los Angeles districts at the end of the novel, and choosing a life of drunkenness and poverty over a career or higher education. He does so, because he believes that this is a more honest way to live. Chinaski ultimately chooses to accept a reality from which the veil of illusion has been lifted.

This idea is revealed earlier in the novel when the school age Chinaski hands in an essay he has written about attending a visit to Los Angeles from the then President Hoover, when he had in fact remained at home. His teacher is impressed with the essay and reads it out to the class whereupon Chinaski concludes, “so that's what they wanted: Lies. Beautiful lies. That's what they needed. People were fools. It was going to be easy for me.” (*Ham*: 87). The implication is that people in any society are always content to believe in myths. The novel is structured so that each life experience has been specifically chosen to expose the myth of the American dream. This can be understood from Chinaski's earliest memories in the novel. He is told that his grandfather “was a bad man,” because he was a heavy drinker (*Ham*: 3), but the infant Chinaski senses that his grandfather, “is the most beautiful man I had ever seen and I wasn't afraid” (*Ham*: 4). This response is contrasted with Chinaski's reaction to his father who was “always angry about something.” (*Ham*: 10).

At the end of the novel, Chinaski muses, “Maybe I could live by my wits. The eight-hour day was impossible, yet almost everybody submitted to it.” (*Ham*: 296). This observation comprises the central themes of the earlier novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*. That the eight-hour working day is impossible for the hapless Chinaski is seen in Bukowski's description of him at the time that he has left his parents' home for the poorer districts of Los Angeles:

I would never set any trends or styles. My white t-shirt was stained with wine, burned, with many cigarette and cigar holes, spotted with blood and vomit. It was too small, it rode up exposing my gut and belly button. And my pants were too small. They gripped me tightly and rose well above my ankles.
(*Ham*: 283).

This portrayal is intended to suggest withdrawal and weariness - in response to a question from his English teacher at college, who asks him how he intends to survive,

Chinaski responds, "I don't know. I'm already tired." (*Ham*: 299). Such a statement corresponds with Gay Brewer's assertion that, "*Ham on Rye* exposes the fraudulent myth of social advancement through merit or hard work." (1997: 36).

Ham on Rye is Charles Bukowski's most autobiographical work. From it, the reader learns much about the early life of Henry Chinaski, particularly in terms of those life experiences which would shape the outsider identity of the adult Chinaski in other novels. In particular, the novel focuses on Chinaski's painful relationship with his father, who would come to represent all that Bukowski himself despised about Middle America. We also learn something of the source of Chinaski's alienation from school friends and girls, particularly where physical affliction is transformed over time into Chinaski's mental suffering. Throughout the novel, Bukowski goes into great detail about Chinaski's views on education, literature and the 'eight hour job,' which have been influenced by his awareness of the absurd.

The development of Chinaski's views about the world coincide with his first attempts at writing and the link between the two is an intentional one. Chinaski also discovers the pleasures of alcohol as a way of blocking out his suffering. Thereafter, writing and drinking would go hand in hand for the remainder of Chinaski's life. The novel is significant in Bukowski's collected work, for it brings together particular aspects of Chinaski's life which he had written about previously, but had scattered across poems and stories, and the three novels he wrote in the 1970s. *Ham on Rye*, thus provides a context for those life experiences which most mattered to him in terms of explaining what motivated his alternative world view, as well as providing considerable insight into the circumstances of Chinaski's youth.

Chinaski's awareness of the absurd lies at the heart of his quest for freedom, which is continued in chronological terms, in the novel *Factotum*. *Ham On Rye* details the early experiences of Chinaski the absurd hero, who becomes increasingly defined by the self assertive nature of his personality in those other novels which focus on the experiences of his adult years. A possible explanation for such self-obsession is articulated by David Galloway in his study of the absurd when he asserts that, "the absurd becomes a new and extreme articulation of the necessity of man's appealing to himself as a source of values." (1970: 15). Such a necessity arises in order for the absurd hero to resist the meaninglessness of the world in which he lives, and thus place

greater focus on his or her purpose for existing at all. As we have seen in our discussion of *Ham on Rye*, Chinaski seeks to prevent being indoctrinated by the mainstream values embraced by his parents. However, his awareness of the absurd is also depicted in the novel as the source of his alienation, enforced towards the end by his retreat into chronic drunkenness and rejection of the day-job. But to choose such a life is inexorably linked to Bukowski's literary aesthetic.

The question of choice in terms of the creative act is raised in the collection of short stories, *Hot Water Music*, published in 1983. A number of these stories are concerned with failed artists who are portrayed as having become overwhelmed by the absurdity of the world, and who enter into a moral and physical decline, which is presented as grotesque. The grotesque is a device particularly accentuated in *Hot Water Music*, in which Bukowski focuses on the human capacity for violence and self-annihilation as a way of expressing the grotesqueness of having to struggle to stay afloat in an absurd world. Chinaski continues the struggle to overcome his suffering even after his artistic endeavours have received some recognition, as we see in the autobiographical stories in the collection, but there are others who fail in the attempt. The various literary devices and themes that support such an interpretation of this particular collection of short stories are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOT WATER MUSIC - THE GROTESQUE AND THE ARTIST DEMYSTIFIED

There has been to date, no comprehensive analysis of the grotesque in Bukowski's writing, although there is some discussion of the co-existence of humour and horror in the poems, letters and prose in the two existing critical studies of his work, and in Neeli Cherkovski's biography. In *Hot Water Music* Bukowski portrays American society as violent and misanthropic, and also depicts artists generally as fatalistic misfits who create art solely out of desperation. There are some similarities between these depictions and Bukowski's own irreverent attitude towards art. This ironically gives his stories the subversive spark that engenders interest in them from readers who can identify with Bukowski's beliefs about creative freedom and social solitude.

In this chapter, we will discuss the significance of the grotesque in terms of explaining its appearance in *Hot Water Music* as a filter through which Bukowski's outsider views resonate. By portraying modern American society, along with the artistic profession as grotesque and absurd, Bukowski is focusing on two significant elements appearing in much of his writing which work particularly well together: horror and comedy. We will also look at a number of stories in the collection in which Bukowski humorously critiques the notion that creativity is a sacred act transcending everyday experience. The grotesque is a significant literary device Bukowski employs to turn the circumstances of his own life into fiction. Although the literary grotesque appears in much of his work, it is particularly pronounced in *Hot Water Music*. This collection assists the reader in better understanding Chinaski's self-assertive personality formed from the painful circumstances of his younger years, as we have seen in our discussion of *Factotum* and *Ham on Rye*.

In *Ham on Rye*, the literary grotesque appears as a sense of unease felt by the young Chinaski as he increasingly becomes aware of the absurdity of both his social environment and his father's aggressive behaviour towards him. In *Factotum* the grotesque is revealed as the very existence of the day-job. Although the grotesque is ever present in Bukowski's writing, it is often lurking in the background of Chinaski's experiences, but illuminated at those times when he reacts with dark humour to the

situations in which Bukowski places him. Many of the stories in *Hot Water Music* are linked to a conception of a world that is filled with absurdity and misanthropy. In a number of stories discussed in this chapter, Henry Chinaski is not present, however, one might argue that the authenticity of Chinaski's experience of the grotesque depends on the extent to which Bukowski discovers it in a broader social context. By doing so, Bukowski enhances the claim that the literary grotesque is a significant aspect of his aesthetic, but illuminated particularly intensely in *Hot Water Music*.

Russell Harrison notes about the collection that, "the dilemma that Bukowski's characters had confronted in the early poetry and novels: how to respond to the legitimate demands of the social world while at the same time maintaining one's self is here ratcheted up several notches. Now the question is: is there a social world?" (1994: 265) In *Hot Water Music*, Bukowski responds to such a question by depicting suburban American society in a state of decay, and inhabited by characters who have surrendered to the absurd. As we shall see in our discussion of the stories "Death of the Father I and II," Chinaski has settled upon an acceptance that the world is absurd, resulting in Bukowski placing emphasis upon the self-assertive nature of Chinaski's personality which might rescue him from despair. However, the characters in such stories as "Some Hangover" and "Less Delicate and the Locust," also discussed in the chapter, are depicted as hopelessly disillusioned and bored, resulting in an "insensitiv[ity] to 'normal' society." (Brewer: 65). Subsequently, "violence, death and ordinary madness," become inescapable features of their lives. (71). Bukowski often contrasts Chinaski's own sense of self with such characters in the autobiographical novels. Nevertheless, it is valid to discuss some non-autobiographical stories in this collection in order to address particular themes which recur in the autobiographical fiction itself.

In 1983, Black Sparrow Press published *Hot Water Music*, Bukowski's third short story collection. The collection comprises 36 stories written while Bukowski was working on the novel *Ham on Rye* published a year earlier. Around this time, Bukowski was quite prolific, having written a screenplay in 1979 for the French director Barbet Schroeder, which Bukowski revisits in his later novel *Hollywood*, as well as a travelogue of a trip to Europe to visit relatives, titled *Shakespeare Never Did This*, also published in 1979, and enough poetry to fill two volumes, *Dangling in the Tournefortia* (1981) and *Bring Me Your Love* (1983). That he was writing so much in the late 1970s and early

1980s is not surprising in view of the circumstances of his life at this time. The writer had not worked in regular employment after resigning from the United States Post Office in 1970. Aside from gambling on horses and drinking, Bukowski found himself with increasing amounts of time to devote to writing. The writer also no longer had to worry about coming up with money to pay his rent, having purchased a house with an advance he had received for the screenplay, and he was no longer drinking in bars as much as he had in his younger years. This particular lifestyle change is reflected in a greater emphasis placed on domestic themes and environments in a number of stories in *Hot Water Music*, which are set in nondescript suburban houses and apartments. Bukowski appears to have become increasingly interested in depicting the interaction of people within ordinary domestic environments as his career progressed which was due, in part, to the increasing domesticity of his own life.

Gay Brewer notes about the collection that, “the most radical alteration in subject matter is the emphasis on couples and domestic strife.” (1997: 65) Interestingly, these stories were written at a time when Bukowski had found, for the first time in his life, domestic contentment with his partner Linda Beighle, whom he would later marry. This particular relationship stands in sharp contrast to the many difficult relationships he had experienced with a number of women throughout the 1970s, written about in *Women*. However, Bukowski always believed that literature should reflect the world of lived experiences, and that writers should not avoid subject matter that may be confronting or unpleasant simply in order to create works of art that are aesthetically pleasing. It will thus be argued in this chapter that a major aspect of Bukowski's cynical world view is the idea that sustaining a loving relationship against a backdrop of rampant materialism, is both comical and horrible. The artistic profession is also portrayed by Bukowski throughout the collection as misanthropic and self-serving. However, we will first turn to the literary grotesque and its appearance in Bukowski's writing in more general terms.

Arriving at an all encompassing definition of the grotesque tradition in literature is an enormous task well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, there are particular aspects of the literary grotesque in Bukowski's writing which enhance his critique of American society. The grotesque in Bukowski's writing suggests a constructed device that exists in contrast to the beautiful and sublime. Bukowski's

conception of the grotesque differs considerably from such a writer as the Southern Gothic novelist Flannery O'Connor, who focuses at times on the essentially humane nature of often physically deformed individuals. In contrast, the grotesque in Bukowski's literature suggests a consistent opposition to beauty.

A striking example of domestic ugliness can be found in the following passage from the novel *Factotum* in which the school age Chinaski is confronted by his father after arriving home drunk. The father's response to his son's ever increasing willingness to act in defiance of social norms is immediately aggressive:

Suddenly I vomited on their Persian *Tree of Life* rug. My mother screamed. My father lunged towards me.

'Do you know what we do to a dog when he shits on the rug?'

'Yes'.

He grabbed the back of my neck. He pressed down, forcing me to bend at the waist. He was trying to force me to my knees...

I came up from the floor with the punch. It was a perfect shot. He staggered back all the way across the room and sat down on the couch. I followed him over.

'Get up'.

He sat there. I heard my mother. '*You Hit Your Father*'...she screamed, and ripped open one side of my face with her fingernails...She scratched my face again. I turned to look at her. She got the other side of my face.

Blood was running down my neck, was soaking my shirt, pants, shoes, the rug. She lowered her hands and stared at me.

(1989: 29).

Abject elements such as the vomit on the carpet, and the dripping blood as a result of his mother's attack, emphasise the grotesque nature of the encounter. The stark manner with which such incidents are presented, forces the reader to momentarily share Chinaski's suffering and to confront the grotesque. This idea accords with Philip Thomson's remark that, "the shock effect of the grotesque may be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective" (1972: 58).

In Bukowski's art, such conventions in ordinary life as working in a regular job or undertaking formal education, coupled with sacrificing one's freedom to consumerism, represent a modern horror. Such a philosophy is linked to an interpretation of the grotesque tradition in literature discussed by Wolfgang Kayser who argues that an awareness of the grotesque can be empowering for both the author and the reader because, "the darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the

incomprehensible forces challenged” (1981: 188). Consequently, there has been “AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD [his emphasis]” (1981: 188). Bukowski attempts to subdue the world’s demonic aspects by writing about them. Kayser argues, “that the word ‘grotesque’ applies to three different realms - the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception - is significant and appropriate as an indication that it has the makings of a basic esthetic category” (1981: 180). That Bukowski comes to terms with his despair at the horror of modern life by writing about it is an act that is potentially liberating for Chinaski and Bukowski’s readers regardless of its reception which, as we have discussed, mattered little to the writer in critical terms.

However, in his own discussion of the grotesque tradition in literature, Alan Clayborough is critical of Kayser’s statement that grotesque art can serve the purpose of, “attempting to banish demons” (1981:188). In Clayborough’s view, Kayser never specifically mentions what the unpleasant forces are in the world that a writer who has illuminated the grotesque, might be seeking to overcome. In response to Clayborough’s argument, one might argue that Bukowski discovers the dark forces he seeks to confront within the social conventions and institutional structures of modern capitalist societies. These are forces, moreover, which Bukowski perceives as restricting individual freedom by obstructing the ideal of self expression in the modern world.

Deprivation of freedom in *Hot Water Music* is represented as a struggle for survival that prevents individual characters from devoting any energy to questioning the absurdity of their often mundane existence, or even wanting to question why people behave as they do. A relevant example concerning this latter point is the completely fictional story, “Some Hangover,” in which a husband and wife are faced with accusations that the husband, named Kevin, sexually molested the children of a neighbouring couple. Kevin claims that he can’t remember the incident because he had been drinking. Bukowski juxtaposes the accusation with the sheer ordinariness of the couple's life together:

Gwen walked into the kitchen and Kevin went to the bathroom. He threw cold water on his face and looked at himself in the mirror. What did a child molester look like? Answer: Like everybody else until they told him he was one. Kevin sat down to crap. Crapping seemed so safe, so warm. Surely this thing had not happened. He was in his own bathroom. There

was his towel, there was his washrag, there was the toilet paper, there was the bathtub, and under his feet, soft and warm, was the bathroom rug, red, clean, comfortable. Kevin finished, wiped, flushed, washed his hands like a civilised man and walked into the kitchen.

(Hot Water Music (Hot): 1992: 94-95).

This domestic inventory suggests the sheer ordinariness, but also banality, of Kevin's life. This character derives comfort from the familiar nature of an array of household objects, but Bukowski has introduced an extraordinary event to disrupt the couple's ordinary lives. Kevin proceeds to calmly discuss the accusation with his wife over breakfast. Bukowski continues to set a scene of ordinary domesticity ("Kevin put the toast in. Gwen dished out the bacon and eggs." *(Hot: 95)*). They decide to get together with the aggrieved couple to try and resolve the crisis, and as the story reaches its climax, Kevin is confronted about his drinking:

'Kevin, there's only one thing we would like to know. We're your friends. We've been friends for years. Just one thing. *Why do you drink so much?*'
'Hell, I don't know. I guess, mostly, I just get bored.'
(Hot: 97).

This final line suggests the way Kevin perceives life, and also possibly explains why he had molested his friends' daughters. Bukowski suggests that it is boredom which propels ordinary people to do unpleasant things. Although Kevin finds some comfort in his routinised life, this existence also dissatisfies him to the extent that he resorts to heavy drinking and sexual deviancy.

Earlier in the story, Kevin reflects that, "he wasn't sure if he loved Gwen but living with her was comfortable. She took care of all the details and details were what drove a man crazy." *(Hot: 96)*. But Kevin has become bored nevertheless, and proceeds to manifest this boredom in anti-social ways. Bukowski suggests that Kevin's deviant behaviour results from his acceptance of mediocrity. The writer expresses this idea in an earlier letter to the poet Douglas Blazek, "don't kid yourself - many people want SLAVERY, a job, 2 jobs, anything to keep them running in the cage." *(Letters Vol 1: 249)*. Bukowski wrote this letter when he was working fulltime in the post office, and writing when not at work. Writing allowed Bukowski and his literary self to leave the cage. There is no such avenue of escape for Kevin. Because the story does not actually show Kevin expressing any remorse for the alleged offence, Bukowski is suggesting that his boredom could very well cause him to repeat the crime.

Bukowski does not express sympathy for any of the characters in this story, and its hard tone is consistent throughout the collection. Of the 36 stories, two thirds are set in domestic environments where the central characters are forced to confront the unfulfilling nature of their routinised lives. Russell Harrison notes that, “Bukowski has constructed these stories in such a way that we are enmeshed in the same solipsistic detail as these characters.” (1994: 265). Bukowski focuses on ordinary details, because within them, the bridge between the writer, his characters and the reader closes. Bukowski suggests that we are all caught up in routines, but there is always a possibility of escape, as demonstrated in the fiction by Henry Chinaski. In this sense, the grotesque appears in the stories as a force which obstructs individual freedom and further increases the ordinariness of the ordinary.

The idea that the grotesque is a negative force which engenders feelings of powerlessness in modern society is expressed by Bernard McElroy, cited by Michael Quigley:

In the modern grotesque, we are not invited to ask what power might change a man into an insect or a woman into a machine as some kind of cosmic joke. The attention, rather, is directed to the predicament of the besieged and humiliated self in its struggle with the brutal and brutalising other. As for twentieth century man, a sense of powerlessness in the world without, a fear of collapse of the psyche within, the premonition that the present culture, the only home afforded him, has already embarked irreversibly on the path to [a]...ludicrous demise - these are the spawning grounds of his monsters.

(*Literature and the Grotesque*, 1995: 29).

This passage might be interpreted as a modern response to doubts raised by Clayborough about Kayser’s assertion that humans in the modern world inevitably are confronted with unpleasant and demonic forces which can be dealt with in art. In *Hot Water Music*, characters are often confronted by a brutalising other that insidiously imposes itself on the psyche. This we see in the story “Praying Mantis,” in which Bukowski suggests that material and spiritual impoverishment and violence are closely linked. “Praying Mantis” begins with a description of a cockroach-riddled motel room. The main character Marty has arranged to meet his married lover there. While he is waiting for her, a female neighbour enters his room. Her ragged appearance has evidently resulted from a life of alcoholism (*Hot*: 195-197). After a short conversation with Marty, the woman proceeds to perform oral sex upon him, but her motivation for doing so is revealed as an irrational desire to commit violence:

Then she suddenly bit into his cock, hard. She almost bit him in half. Then still biting she yanked her head up. A piece of the head came off. Marty screamed and rolled over and over on the bed. The blonde stood up and spit. Pieces of flesh and blood spattered on the rug. Then she walked over, opened the door, closed it and was gone.
(*Hot*: 197).

In Bukowski's dry comic style, this hideous incident immediately leaves Marty doubting his feelings towards his lover. He waits for an ambulance while, "next door to the left, the blonde sat in front of her TV set" (*Hot*: 197).

The form which the grotesque takes in Bukowski's writing places it within a modernist tradition of the grotesque in literature alongside such American writers as Henry Miller and Nathanael West, whose writing explores the very idea that modern life is strange and menacing, as noted by Ralph Ciancio in his discussion of West:

Typically, the grotesque presents an estranged world fraught with frightful and ludicrous incongruities: human degradation abounds, disfigurement of an aberrational nature assaults the senses, organic and mechanical elements interpenetrate, the categories of a rational and familiar order fuse, collapse, and finally give way to the absurd.
(*Literature and the Grotesque*: 1995: 1)

These aspects abound in *Hot Water Music* in which the ordinary lives of Bukowski's characters are often disrupted by the manifestation of horror and the absurd, represented by alcoholism, sexual perversion and domestic violence. Significantly, Bukowski's conception of horror also extends to the smallest details of ordinary life which in some way contribute to obstructing freedom. Writing to the poet Ann Menebroker in January 1967, Bukowski states:

it's not the large tragedies that moil us to pieces- we are fucking well ready for those. it's the little scratchings and drippings, the continuous stubbing of the toes and elbows, the car that won't start, the piece of tooth that breaks off as you are biting into a peach, dirty stockings...constipation, insomnia, a dirty newspaper, toothpaste too sweet...these things again and again...tear us to the final pieces.
(*Letters Vol 1*: 285).

In this passage Bukowski refers to the excruciating minutiae of everyday life which cause the common individual as much suffering as far grander political and socio economic events in history. These minutiae are as grotesque to Bukowski as the horrors of random violence and obsessive materialism, because he regards these smaller afflictions as similarly abnormal, and which contribute to his suffering.

As mentioned, the appearance of the grotesque as a critical device has been evident in Bukowski's writing since his earliest poems. The horror of severe alcoholism coupled with material impoverishment is conveyed in such short story collections as *South of No North* and *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*, in which "the oddest element of these stories is their casual almost lighthearted tone. Even the damned seemed resigned to the absurdity of their demise" (Brewer: 1997: 48). This casual tone, which emerges even in the most horrendous of circumstances, is a standard Bukowski device. That he survived his own desperate circumstances through a capacity to laugh at himself and society is indicative of a simple philosophy expressed with little concern about whether a reader might laugh at the same things he does. Horror is inseparable from everyday life in Bukowski's aesthetic, and Chinaski's response, as we have seen in our discussion of *Ham on Rye*, is to slip into drunkenness and material impoverishment. But there is no ultimate escape from the grotesque in Bukowski's writing, and expressions of nihilistic despair are connected to his awareness that this is so. Wolfgang Kayser notes that, "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD [his emphasis]" (1981: 184). In *Hot Water Music* this idea is manifested in socio-economic terms, in that the working poor, and unemployed alcoholics who comprise the majority of the characters in the collection, are alienated from the American dream of individual prosperity and express their feelings of alienation in destructive ways.

But social participation, which essentially means conformity, is a horror within itself. The writer expresses his fear of the consequences of such participation in a 1966 letter to the poet Douglas Blazek, which urges Blazek not to succumb to the misery of factory work, but to continue to write, as it is through the creative act that Blazek will be able to protect himself from the horrible reality of his working life. Bukowski tells Blazek,

without your writing and without your editing...you would be the average American citizen male and he is a horror to behold, he is a sight to make one vomit blood and gut and hope all out, for even when he smiles, even when he is kind, even when he is a winner, he stinks, he is rot...a slab of meat butchered and dressed in clothing.
(*Letters Vol 1*: 248).

This passage suggests a conception of a specifically modern grotesque as it applies to Bukowski's idiosyncratic understanding of the 'eight to five' job, also revealed in the

novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*. The very existence of the 'average citizen male breadwinner' is a nightmarish presence for Bukowski. Conformity thus masks an inner rot which Bukowski expresses in abject terms. This rot is connected in socio-economic terms to wage slavery and the pursuit of material wealth. In this sense, Bukowski is revealing what Tim Libritti refers to as, “the proletarian grotesque,” which, “enables authors to represent the very normal and real horrors and monstrosities of everyday working class life under capitalism” (*Literature and the Grotesque*: 1995: 172). Bukowski does so without romanticising the plight of the working poor, and by representing consumer culture as an absurd ideal to which mainstream American society is willingly subservient.

Depictions of Sex and Consumer Greed.

The autobiographical stories in *Hot Water Music* reflect the subject matter of the novel *Ham On Rye*, which Bukowski was working on around the same time. In one such story titled “Some Mother,” Bukowski writes about adolescent sexual awareness in a typically harsh fashion. Mentioning that the story is set in 1933, Bukowski goes on to portray the narrator as someone whose sexual interest in women has formed at an early age. Obsessing over the mother of one of his school friends, the narrator’s perception of her is revealed as one that is more than a mere teenage crush: “I liked to go to Eddie's place. His mother always sat in a chair with a drink in her hand and she crossed her legs real high and you could see where the stockings ended and where the flesh began”. (*Hot*: 75) As the story climaxes, the narrator and another friend visit the woman and learn that the woman's husband has left her and taken their son. The woman, in a drunken and semi-conscious state, is unaware of the friend making sexual advances towards her as the narrator looks on.

The sexual act depicted in the story is portrayed in a crude and unromantic manner. The mechanical nature of the act itself makes it horrible:

Eugene just stood there staring at her thighs and panties. He stood there a long time then he took out his cock. I heard Eddie's mother moan. She shifted on the bed just a little. Eugene moved closer. Then he touched her thigh with the end of his cock. She moaned again. Then Eugene spurted. He shot his sperm all over her thigh and there seemed to be plenty of it.

You could see it running down her leg. Then Eddie's mother said, 'shit!' and she suddenly sat up in bed. Eugene ran past me out the door and I turned and ran too.
(*Hot: 78*).

The narrator, startled by what he has witnessed, hides in the garage of his house. The sexual act is portrayed as the fulfilment of a sexual fantasy that has become grotesque, because the woman is very nearly raped by his friend.

Although this incident does not appear in either the Sounes or Cherkovski biographies, Bukowski grounds it within Chinaski's experiences in the final passage of the story by turning to Chinaski's difficult relationship with his father. The narrator states:

'I walked back across the street to my place. My old man was waiting on the front porch. He looked angry. 'Listen, I want you to get busy mowing the lawn! *Now!*'
I walked to the garage and pulled out the mower. First I mowed the driveway, then I went out to the front lawn...My old man stood there, looking angry, watching me.
(*Hot: 79*).

Mowing the lawn is depicted as a metonymic representation of the elder Chinaski's dominance over his son. This we have seen in our discussion of the novel *Ham on Rye*. Chinaski thus attempts to escape his father's values by turning to such socially unacceptable pursuits as taking a sexual interest in a schoolfriend's mother.

Elsewhere in the collection, sexuality is equated with deviancy. For example, the story "The Man who Loved Elevators" is about a man who derives satisfaction from engaging in aggressive intercourse with strangers in an elevator in his apartment block. Bukowski's depiction of sex as an instantaneous fulfilment of desire, rather than an expression of love, can also be found in the story "Death of the Father I," in which Chinaski takes his revenge on his dead father by making sexual advances towards his father's girlfriend. In this story and its sequel titled "Death of the Father II," also in the collection, Bukowski mocks the act of bereavement as a normalised response to death. A possible literary precedent to both these stories is Albert Camus' short existential novel, *The Outsider*, in which the central character is condemned in a law court for not displaying enough grief at his mother's funeral. (1983: 86-88) Camus suggests in his novel that anyone who departs from social conventions will be condemned as an outcast. Henry Chinaski is sympathetic to this idea in terms of his own

alienation.

Bukowski begins “Death of the Father I” by having Chinaski disavow any feelings of grief towards his father who has recently died: “My father's funeral was a cold hamburger. I sat across from the funeral parlour in Alhambra and had a coffee. It would be a short drive to the racetrack after it was over.” (*Hot*: 161). Chinaski informs the reader from the very beginning that he is more concerned about the racetrack than his father's funeral. Whilst Chinaski is drinking his coffee he encounters a family friend named Bert who tells him that he'd always hoped Chinaski would marry his daughter, although, “ 'She's going with the nicest guy now, but he doesn't excite her. She seems to go for phonies. I don't understand. But she must like him a little,' he said brightening up, 'because she hides her baby in the closet when he comes by' ” (*Hot*: 161). This darkly comical comment elicits no surprise from the jaded Chinaski, yet the fact that he includes this startling admission informs the reader about the true nature of his father's friend. It suggests that Chinaski made the right choice not to marry Bert's daughter, because he would never want to be associated with anyone who would do such a thing as hiding a baby in a closet to make herself more appealing to a potential suitor. This passage also tells us something of Bukowski's grotesque portrayal of the lives of the working poor which at times is so absurd, that it is also comical.

As the story continues, Chinaski makes it perfectly clear to the reader how he perceives his father: “Somebody was saying what a good man my father had been. I felt like telling them the other part...We stood and filed past the coffin. I was last. Maybe I'll spit on him, I thought.” (*Hot*: 161). Chinaski follows this thought with a comparative one about how he had reacted to his mother's death: “I had buried her the year before, gone to the racetrack and got laid afterwards.” (*Hot*: 161). Both Cherkovski and Sounes mention in their respective biographies that Bukowski had never felt any feelings of affection towards his parents. His father had been violent towards both his mother and himself when he was a child, yet Bukowski could never understand why his mother continued to defend his father despite his aggressive nature, and remained silent when the young Bukowski was regularly beaten for mostly minor infringements.

There is no biographical evidence that Bukowski mourned either of his parents when they died. In a 1963 letter to the novelist John William Corrington,

Bukowski writes,

I know the cancer bit. I remember my mother. She couldn't straighten her legs. womb. gut. She kept telling me all along, 'your father is a great man.' I knew what my father was. She didn't. I took her a rosary on Christmas eve or Christmas day, I can't remember. She was dead.
(*Letters Vol 1: 74*).

This lack of sentimentality also runs through the story written almost 20 years after the letter to Corrington. Bukowski is also careful to ensure that the reader is confronted with Chinaski's disrespectful behaviour. Greeting his father's girlfriend, named Maria, outside the funeral, Bukowski writes,

She put her arms around me and kissed me. I pushed my tongue between her lips. Then I pulled away. 'Here, here,' I said in a loud voice, 'get ahold of yourself!' She kissed me again and this time I worked my tongue deeper into her mouth. My penis was beginning to get hard. Some men and women came up to take her away.
(*Hot: 162*).

Following this encounter, Chinaski drives Maria to his father's house where he tells her that his father was, "an ignorant man. Cruel. Patriotic. Money hungry. A liar. A coward. A cheat." (*Hot: 162*). He then contrasts this description by declaring that, "My only ambition is not be anything at all; it seems the most sensible thing." (*Hot: 163*). In the story, Chinaski ignores socially acceptable standards of behaviour when he salaciously kisses his dead father's girlfriend at the funeral and at his father's house, where he continues to make sexual advances, described in unsparing language: "I reached over and grabbed Maria. I worked her lips open, got my mouth inside of hers and began to suck the air out of her lungs. I spit down her throat and ran my finger up the crack of her ass." (*Hot: 163*). Bukowski replaces sentimentality with a harsher, crueller reality:

'He kissed me gently,' said Maria. 'He loved me.'
'Shit,' I said, 'my mother was underground only a month before he was sucking your nipples and sharing your toilet paper.'
(*Hot: 163*).

Bukowski then concludes the story with Chinaski's remark that they had forgotten to drive to the cemetery to see the burial. All traces of any genuine feelings towards Maria have been replaced by the mechanical nature of the sexual act in which he and Maria proceed to engage. The following morning, Maria notes that, "'You must have fucked me. I can feel your semen running down my leg.'" (*Hot: 165*). Chinaski's concerns,

however, have remained primarily on the race track. After seeing Maria off, he notes, “I looked forward to a good day at the track. I always did better after a day off.” (*Hot*: 165). That the story ends in a self-satisfied manner is consistent with its tone throughout. Chinaski not only takes revenge on his father, but also sets out to demonstrate that people are only interested in satisfying their own desires, himself included. In the story, Bukowski turns his father's funeral into a charade, and by doing so, openly mocks social values and sacred rituals.

This theme is also expressed in this story's sequel, “Death of the Father II.” The main action of the story takes place at Chinaski's father's house. Neighbours proceed to visit Chinaski as he stands watering the garden a week after the funeral. Each of the neighbours who comes to the house comments favourably on his father's possessions. Chinaski starts to give away his father's property, but by the end of the story, the neighbours have been consumed by greed, and commence to strip the house bare. In this story, Bukowski comments on mainstream society's obsession with material goods. The neighbours barely mention his father, but become animated by the possibility of owning his belongings. Chinaski lists each item as it is removed from the house, to suggest the inherent meaninglessness of the objects themselves: “They took the sofa, then the breakfast nook tables and chairs...they took the toaster.” (*Hot*: 168). More people begin to arrive at the house: “The house was getting crowded. The toilet flushed. Somebody knocked a glass from the sink and broke it.” (*Hot*: 169). That Chinaski is aware that the house is being ransacked is revealed when he states, “Somebody rolled up the rug in the front room. After that people began to lose interest. Soon there were only three or four left, then they were all gone. They left me the garden hose, the bed, the refrigerator and stove, and a roll of toilet paper.” (*Hot*: 170). The story concludes with Chinaski returning outside to continue watering the garden.

This story is one of the more insightful that Bukowski wrote in his career. Russell Harrison notes that it, “contains the core of Bukowski's views on authority, the individual and society, and the American Dream.” (1994: 265). It is the existence of hypocritical selfishness and obsession with materialism that Bukowski finds grotesque, and he critiques social conventions in the story by focusing on a small domestic incident which has great significance for him. As Harrison notes generally about the stories in *Hot Water Music*, “such stories are short and focus on a brief, sometimes quite mundane,

moment in someone's life, and take off from that to present larger truths about people and society.” (1994: 268).

The Artist Demystified.

As we have discussed in earlier chapters, writing becomes the ultimate expression of Bukowski's freedom. There is, however, an irony that emerges repeatedly in the work: Bukowski's wilful demystification of the creative act. Bukowski arguably does this in order to separate himself from other artists who might believe that their craft is sacred to the extent that it is removed from ordinary experience. It follows that if Bukowski is not like other writers, then his art is different also. In this section we will look at a number of stories from *Hot Water Music* in which Bukowski's alternative view of the world is applied to the creative act. It is here that we acquire some understanding of Bukowski as the underground literary raconteur, not dissimilar to various musicians in the punk movement of the 1970s.

A portrayal of the artist as nihilist can be found in the story “Less Delicate Than the Locust,” in which Bukowski comically debunks the notion of creativity as a sacred or transcendent act. The story suggests that if it is true that the artist might be, “sensitive to areas of human experience otherwise not even asked about,” (*Chomsky Reader*: 4), the illumination of these areas by an artist whether writer, painter or musician, can sometimes reveal unpleasant realities. We see this in the very first line of the story: “ ‘Balls,’ he said, ‘I’m tired of painting. Let’s go out. I’m tired of the stink of oils, I’m tired of being great. I’m tired of waiting to die. Let’s go out.’ ” (*Hot* : 11). We quickly learn that this character named Jorg shows little interest in the aesthetic significance of the artist's craft. Neither is he interested in fame or critical recognition. As the story unfolds through sharp, witty dialogue between the painter, his partner Arlene, and his painter friend Serge, we also learn that Jorg is utterly contemptuous of society. At one point, Arlene tells him, “ ‘You just don't like people, do you?’ ” (*Hot*: 12). The painter's response tells us much about the unpleasant nature of his character:

Jorg arched an eyebrow at her, didn't answer. Arlene's response to his feelings for the masses was always the same - as if not loving the people revealed an unforgivable shortcoming of the soul. But she was an excellent fuck and pleasant to have around - most of the time.

(*Hot*: 12).

In this story, Bukowski's invented characters provide him with the opportunity to play around with his ideas by attaching someone else's name to them. But Jorg's sentiment might have easily been expressed by Chinaski or Bukowski himself.

The two main characters, both painters, are portrayed as callous, misanthropic and indifferent to human suffering. Bukowski satirises art through their sarcastic view of the creative act. Serge explains to Jorg that his partner has been helping him mix the paint colours: “ ‘Lila. I tell her, ‘Stick it in the blue. Now a bit of green. She’s quite good. Eventually I might even let her work the brushes too, and I’ll just lay around and read magazines’” (*Hot*: 13). Bukowski is rejecting romanticised conceptions of the creative act as one which imitates divine creativity such as that described by David Meakin in *Man and Work*. Meakin remarks that an ascetic interpretation of creativity involves an inner suffering in the individual wherein, “the act of creative work may be seen as an imitation of the act of the Creator, having thus an intimate link with the origin of all things. It is a divine act, a mimesis of the gods and has thereby a kind of transferred spiritual value” (1976: 118).

There is no such mysticism in “Less Delicate Than the Locusts.” Its two main characters do not seek enlightenment through creativity, nor in fact show any interest at all in their chosen professions. The story concludes with the painters leaving a restaurant after having abused the staff. The reader is given a taste of human nastiness in this story, but little else. As Russell Harrison observes of Bukowski himself, “indeed, Bukowski explicitly rejects the idea of his experience as critically or culturally symbolic” (1994: 42). There are a number of other stories in *Hot Water Music* which confirm such a claim, to the extent that it would be difficult indeed to discuss the creative act as ‘imitating the Creator,’ or to regard the creative act as anything other than a struggle that deserves to be satirised.

Bukowski mostly portrays artists in *Hot Water Music* as impoverished alcoholics more concerned with surviving daily life than anything else. In the story “Scream When You Burn,” the main character, Henry, spends his days waiting around for something to happen, rather than exercising the discipline needed to write. There is no implication that the writer in the story is in any way committed as an artist to inquiring into, “the way life is and the way it can best be perceived and expressed.”

(Bradbury, 1992: viii). At the beginning of the story, the narrator observes that the main character has, “no ambition, no talent, no chance. What kept him off the row was raw luck and luck never lasted.” (*Hot*: 17). Henry seems to do little other than drink and gamble, and whatever he does write is solely for financial gain. This character is not atypical in this collection.⁹

Thus, we return to Russell Harrison’s comment that Bukowski explicitly rejects the concept of his experience as critically or culturally symbolic. The writer in “Scream When You Burn” does not regard the creative act as akin to self awareness or spiritual transcendence. The character Henry remarks sardonically at one point: “ ‘Yeah, I’m the hero. The myth. I’m the unspoiled one, the one who hasn’t sold out. My letters are auctioning for \$250 back east...I can’t buy a bag of farts.’” (*Hot*: 19). Creativity as a transcendent act is irrelevant to Henry as long as he continues to suffer the indignities of material poverty.

We learn that this character only understands suffering in a material sense, as he muses on the writing of Albert Camus:

He picked up Camus’ *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*...read some pages. Camus talked about anguish and terror and the miserable existence of man but he talked about it in such a comfortable and flowery way...that one got the feeling that things never affected him or his writing. In other words, things might have well have been fine...Humanity may have been suffering but not him. A wise man perhaps, but Henry preferred someone who screamed when they burned.
(*Hot*: 18).

Interestingly, Bukowski often mentioned in letters his admiration of Albert Camus’ novel *The Outsider*, and like Camus, Bukowski writes about the ‘anguish and the terror and the miserable existence of man.’ However, an essential difference between the two writers is the manner in which these issues are explored. Bukowski writes of ordinary sufferings with simplicity and directness, and without attaching any grand metaphysical significance. In the story, Henry is critical of Camus’ writing because, although he expresses ideas towards which Henry is sympathetic, he does so in a needlessly complex manner, so that the writer’s intent becomes obscured.

Existential suffering, as Henry would invariably have discovered from

9

See the stories “A Couple of Gigolos” (pp.25-31), “A Working Day” (pp.99-107), “Head Job” (pp.113-

reading Camus, occurs within one's inner self, which Henry counters with the blunt statement, "You can't live off your soul. You can't pay the rent with your soul" (*Hot*: 20). The story concludes with Henry's observation that, "I wanted to be a writer and now I'm a writer and what does it all mean?" (*Hot*: 23). Writing does not offer any salvation for Henry in either a material or metaphysical sense. This open-ended conclusion suggests that Henry will continue to drink to the detriment of his health, and worry over the state of his finances. Likewise, he will continue to lead a mundane existence without any sense of hope or transformation.

Such a lifestyle is similarly portrayed in the story, "The Great Poet," in which the narrator tells of his meeting with a poet named Bernard Stachman who has "taught at many universities...had won all the prizes, including the Nobel Prize" (*Hot*: 31). This opening description might lead the reader to surmise that when the narrator visits the world famous poet, their meeting will be conducted in a book lined study or comfortable office on a University campus. However, like many Bukowski characters, artist or otherwise, the poet lives in destitution: "I opened the door and walked in. Bernard Stachman was in bed. The smell of vomit, wine, urine, shit and decaying food was in the air. I began to gag. I ran to the bathroom, vomited, then came out." (*Hot*: 31). The poet then proceeds to urinate into an empty wine bottle. This abject portrayal of a supposedly celebrated writer reveals Bukowski's efforts to subvert, in a darkly comical manner, the high regard with which one would normally hold a writer who had achieved such a rare distinction.

In this sense, the great poet of the story's title is portrayed in no more flattering terms than Bukowski portrays any of his characters in the collection. In this particular story, however, Bukowski's literary revolt is demonstrated through his portrayal of the poet as a grotesque figure who has little to offer in the way of wisdom:

'What is your advice to young writers?'
 'Drink, fuck and smoke plenty of cigarettes.' ...
 'What is the impulse that makes you create a poem?'
 'What makes you take a shit?'
 (*Hot*: 33).

The poet shows little interest in reflecting on what the artist can reveal about the human state. Although this character is a writer, there is nothing particularly special about him.

121) and "Spider" (pp.155-161) for similarly cynical views about the sacredness of the creative act.

He is in fact an impoverished alcoholic who just happens to be a writer - much like Bukowski himself in his younger years. Bukowski's views about literature are communicated through this grotesque depiction of the poet as a character incapable of offering any insights whatsoever into the literary craft. Bukowski invites his readers to laugh along with him at the preposterousness of the idea that a writer who has won the most esteemed literary award, the Nobel Prize, lives in drunken squalor and displays little interest in his chosen literary profession.

Bukowski's alternative views about the artistic profession also emerge in the autobiographical story, "In and Out and Over," in which he writes about the unpleasantness of reading his poetry in public. Bukowski suggests that an artist's integrity is compromised in this respect, because public readings have little in common with the solitary motivations for writing poetry in the first instance. In the early 1970s, at the urging of acquaintances, Bukowski began giving poetry readings, but as he insisted from then onwards, he did so only out of financial necessity, rather than to fulfil a wish to communicate to an audience through a forum other than writing itself. There exists little evidence to dispute his claim.

Bukowski expresses Chinaski's distaste for poetry readings in the opening lines of the story: "The problem with an 11 a.m. arrival and an 8 p.m. poetry reading is that it sometimes reduces a man to something they lead on stage only to be looked at, jibed at, knocked down, which is what they want" (*Hot*: 125). The reading itself is hardly described, but after it is over, Chinaski makes the simple point that "it is over - I had hustled my ass." (*Hot*: 125). Bukowski's story humorously avoids any meaningful discussion of art, particularly in his portrayal of a post-reading party held by academics from the University where he has read, at which he is expected to pontificate about literature in order to justify his chosen aesthetic position. Bukowski portrays the subsequent questioning as a harangue from which there is little chance of escape:

Professor Kragmatz got me in the breakfast nook, began asking questions as the groupies slithered about. No, I told him, no, well, yes, parts of T S Eliot were good. Pound, yes, well we were finding out that Pound was not quite what we thought. No, I couldn't think of any outstanding American poets, sorry... Yes, I know about the red wheelbarrow in the rain.
(*Hot*: 126).

In this passage, Bukowski is equating a number of significant modernist poets with the

intellectual credentials of the person who has cornered him in the breakfast nook, and who is asking questions one might expect a late 20th century poet to adequately address.

Significantly, although the story begins with a poetry reading, this is not its focus. Bukowski dispenses with the reading itself and the subsequent brief and unilluminating literary discussion in the first quarter. The remainder of the story is taken up with delays encountered at various airports as the weary poet makes his way back home to his girlfriend in Los Angeles. In an airport bar, the poet strikes up a conversation with two men focused on Chinaski's sardonic statement that there is nothing wrong with war:

One of them turned to me. 'What do you think of war?'

'There's nothing wrong with war,' I said.

'Oh, yeah? Yeah?'

'Yeah. When you get into a taxi, that's war. When you buy a loaf of bread, that's war. When you buy a whore, that's war. Sometimes I need bread, taxis and whores.'

'Hey, you guys,' said the man, 'here's a guy who likes war.'

(Hot: 128).

Aside from the blatantly antagonistic approach of the poet, suggested particularly by his confrontational remark about 'whores,' this exchange can be read as a satirical subversion of accepted moral values. Much like Bukowski's portrayal of the poet Bernard Stachman as an impoverished alcoholic in the story "The Great Poet," Bukowski does not portray Chinaski as a writer emboldened with wisdom to impart. Thus, particular emphasis in the statement quoted above is placed on the everyday struggle for survival, that takes place in a society hostile to those lacking material wealth. For the two men in the airport bar, war is a grand historical narrative. Bukowski's conception of war is concerned with the struggle to survive everyday life. This explains his satirical disdain towards artists who would mystify creativity in such a way that it comes to be perceived as something removed from ordinary experience.

Chinaski subsequently reflects not on what he had experienced in either the poetry reading or its aftermath, but on commonplace fears:

We floated into LA International. Amy, I love you. I hope my car starts. I hope the sink isn't plugged up...I'm glad I don't know anything. I'm glad I haven't been murdered. When I look at my hands and they are still on my wrists, I think to myself, I am lucky.

(Hot: 129).

These thoughts are presented as equal concerns, and the story concludes with Chinaski

and his girlfriend arriving at their house to be greeted by their pet dog. No further thoughts on the creative act are offered. Bukowski is content to simply express Chinaski's distaste towards the routines one must put oneself through in order to survive. Consistent with Chinaski's personality in his later years, it is thus appropriate that the story ends with the poet returning to the safety and solitude of his Los Angeles house.

Russell Harrison notes about the two collections of short stories Bukowski wrote in the 1980s, *Hot Water Music* and *Septuagenarian Stew* (1990) that, "a worldview of a certain scope is effectively dramatised without recourse to abstract philosophising." (1994: 265). Bukowski's stories in *Hot Water Music* are dramatised by the depiction of the relentless struggle of individual characters to survive in a hostile society. The characters in these stories occupy a particular social environment with which Bukowski himself was familiar. Bukowski invites scorn from critics and the public at large by portraying explicit sexuality and domestic violence in a casual manner without offering any moral judgement, and it is in this way that Bukowski's aesthetic is projected through his portrayal of American society as grotesque.

However, the story "In and Out and Over" in this collection registers a significant change in Chinaski's personal circumstances as does the novel *Women*. Chinaski is now identified as a writer by profession, although by Bukowski's own admission, a writer of the underground (the opening line of the story "How to Get Published" in the collection reads: "Having been an underground writer all my life..." (*Hot*: 149).

As we have seen in our discussion of the novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*, Chinaski's identity was formerly defined by his status as a blue collar worker. Bukowski's aesthetic incorporates this aspect of Chinaski's life in order to convey an impression that his anti-hero is an ordinary person who works in ordinary jobs, but also happens to be a writer. Such a portrayal is intended to demystify the creative act in such a way that Bukowski's readers will distinguish his writing from most other literary works. But in the novel *Women* and the story "In and Out and Over," Chinaski has become increasingly confident about his vocation as a writer, representing the culmination of his quest for freedom. But this does not mean that Chinaski's struggle to come to terms with the absurdity of the world has ended. Thus, we will see in our discussion of the novel *Hollywood*, the unusual situation of Chinaski's entry into the

world of commercial movie making, resulting in increasing reflection on the hardships of his younger years when he had attempted to defy the absurd through drinking and poverty.

In each autobiographical novel, poem and short story, Bukowski's aesthetic manifests itself through the anti-hero Chinaski, regardless of this character's personal circumstances. We thus learn in *Hollywood* that although Chinaski no longer entertains the possibility of placing a knife against his throat, as we see in one particular scene from *Post Office (PO: 192)*, he nevertheless uses the opportunity of writing a screenplay for a Hollywood film to turn his earlier suffering into a digestible aesthetic form which suggests why Bukowski became engaged with artistic expression in the first place.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOLLYWOOD - A NON-CONFORMIST IN A STRANGE WORLD.

Hollywood is Charles Bukowski's fifth novel, published by Black Sparrow Press in 1989. Bukowski wrote the first draft shortly after the commercial release of the film *Barfly* in 1987 for which he had written the screenplay. Consistent with his previous four novels, Bukowski's style throughout is direct and simple. The novel is divided into 46 short, tightly structured chapters which focus on the absurdity of the Hollywood fantasy world that Chinaski briefly travels through. It commences with Chinaski receiving an offer from a French film director named Jon Pinchot [Barbet Schroeder] to write a screenplay, and concludes with the commercial release of the film referred to in the novel as, "The Dance of Jim Beam." Each chapter consists of absurd character portraits and scenarios, focused upon the commercial film industry, and narrated by Chinaski who adopts the manner of a cool observer.

The main action of the film itself takes place in an unnamed bar where the central character named Henry, spends most of his time drinking, sparring with Eddie the bartender, and philosophising about life in a manner entirely consistent with Chinaski's persona. Henry also occasionally writes poetry, but drinks far more than he writes. However, Henry redeems himself through a willingness to talk openly about the unfortunate circumstances of his own life. He sees nothing shameful about the life of the barfly because this existence represents a staunch individuality. The barfly is under no obligation to conform to social conventions and is consequently free. This belief explains the bond that forms between Henry and a woman he meets in the bar named Wanda. Despite difficulties caused by poverty and drunkenness, the relationship survives because both characters remain true to themselves by never pretending to be what they are not. Although Henry is given the opportunity to escape poverty by an editor who becomes interested in his writing, the film ends with this character content to remain in the bar where he feels most comfortable.

The novel is about the circumstances surrounding the making of the film. This chapter will discuss Bukowski's alternative aesthetic revealed through Chinaski's sardonic response to the artificial world of the commercial film industry. In the novel,

Bukowski uses a rather unusual event in his life to accentuate, rather than soften, his alternative world view. An older Chinaski subsequently contrasts his relatively normal domestic life with the surreal, absurd world of Hollywood, and discovers that this ordinary life is ultimately preferable to the superficial glamour of the film industry. Bukowski thus compares and contrasts realism and fantasy, so that his readers can distinguish between the reality of Bukowski's experiences reflected in the older Chinaski who is writing the screenplay in the novel, and the artistic artifice that a Hollywood film represents. Bukowski's critique is aimed at those who are unwilling to separate fantasy from reality.

Jean-Francois Duval notes about Bukowski's perceptions of the commercial film industry that:

In *Hollywood*, he lets fly like small left and right hooks an endless list of cutting remarks at this specifically American art form, linked more than any other to the American way of life. The disabused blows that Buk (sic) inflicted on the world of cinema were in a way meant for the American dream in its entirety.
(2002: 110).

In the novel, Bukowski satirises Hollywood in order to expose the absurdity of placing value in illusions endlessly generated by such an illusory entity as the film industry, which the writer equates with other social illusions such as consumerism and the perceived value of the day-job. He does this by portraying Chinaski as a participant in an absurd sequence of events that take place following his writing of a screenplay about the hardships, drunkenness and violence of his earlier life.

If Bukowski had never written a screenplay, the novel itself would not have appeared, therefore its origins begin in 1979, when Bukowski signed a contract with the French film director Barbet Schroeder to write a screenplay about his youth. Neeli Cherkovski notes that Bukowski,

knew instinctively how to proceed, focusing on two particular periods of his life, and melding them into a coherent whole: His years in Philadelphia in the early forties, and his first few years haunting the dives on Alvarado street in Los Angeles.
(1997: 303).

Bukowski wrote the screenplay quickly, recalling the days he had spent hanging around bars, and the various people he had encountered in these bars, most of whom were alcoholics whose main purpose in life was drinking. The central relationship in the

screenplay is between Henry and a woman named Wanda Wilcox, whom Bukowski based on Jane Cooney Baker with whom he had become intimate in the 1950s, and who had already been the subject of a number of stories and poems, as well as appearing in the novels *Post Office* and *Factotum* (Brewer: 1997: 305).

The subject matter of the screenplay is consistent with the autobiographical nature of most of Bukowski's writing. It deals with a period in his early twenties, when he had already decided to become a professional writer, but had temporarily forsaken writing for experience, travelling around North America, sleeping in flophouses, drinking heavily and working in an assortment of odd jobs. Much of the action in the screenplay takes place in an unnamed and unassuming suburban bar in Los Angeles within an unspecified time period. However the themes and subject matter of the screenplay correspond with Bukowski's short stay in Philadelphia when he took up residency in one particular bar, as discussed in both the Cherkovski and Sounes biographies, and in *Factotum*. In that novel, the bar in which Chinaski spent much of his time is described as follows: "You could smell the odor of urine, shit and vomit of half a century as it came up through the floor into the bar from the restrooms below." (*F*: 47) However, this smell does not deter Chinaski from entering. Bukowski thus depicts Chinaski embracing what might be considered repulsive to someone with more refined tastes.

As we have discussed, in *Factotum*, Chinaski has an ongoing, yet turbulent, relationship with a woman named Jan, an alcoholic who shuns employment and criticises Chinaski for seeking work. Both Sounes and Cherkovski, identify Jan as Jane Cooney Baker, who as mentioned, is also the character Wanda in *Barfly*. Because Baker was Bukowski's first real love, and because she generally shared Chinaski's outsider values, she occupies a prominent place in Bukowski's writing, and is a central character in the screenplay. Bukowski reflects on his relationship with her on a number of occasions in *Hollywood*, and refuses to cast judgement on the anti-social, drunken lifestyles of either Chinaski or Wanda. He is content simply to portray the life of a barfly as one that is free. The novel is littered with sardonic observations about the contrasts that exist between the life of the barfly, and that of the more refined artist-types who inhabit the Hollywood world. Moreover, the creative act as one that serves commercial purposes, is presented in the novel as conflicting with the source of Bukowski's own creative impulses.

In the opening chapter, Chinaski and his faithful wife Sarah meet in quick

succession a host of eccentric Hollywood-bred artists who, as Chinaski observes, are seemingly incapable of engaging with the real world. It is thus one of the ironies of the novel that Bukowski would have agreed to write a screenplay based on his own underprivileged experiences with the knowledge that these experiences would be transformed through the stylistic artifice of commercial film making. Biographer Neeli Cherkovski notes that, "Hank knew very well how Hollywood glamorised even seedy characters. He kept this in mind as he wrote, not wanting to lose the desperation he and Jane [Cooney Baker] had shared. As in his books, he avoided romantic flourishes preferring a slice of life." (1997: 304). Bukowski seemingly undertook the project in order to channel his creativity into a new area. We shall see that he portrays Chinaski in the novel as emerging from the process with his literary integrity intact, because he comes to realise that the film industry only ever offers momentary distractions from the endless struggle for survival in the real world. Bukowski contrasts the simulated reality of Hollywood films, with his portrayal of Chinaski's own struggle to make sense of the absurdity of the society in which he lives, depicted as ongoing in this novel. The novel also allows the reader to observe the transformation of Chinaski's raw and unromantic screenplay into a polished mainstream movie.

The contrast between Chinaski, the grizzled old drinker, and the commercial film industry is ongoing in the novel, and provides much of its dark humour. On the opening page, Chinaski and Sarah pay their first visit to Jon Pinchot [Barbet Schroeder] following his request for Chinaski to write a screenplay:

We were at the door. I knocked. It opened to this small slim delicate type, you smelled artistry all over him. You could see he had been born to create, to create grand things totally unhindered, never bothered by such petty things as toothache, self doubt, lousy luck. He was one of those who looked like a genius. I looked like a dishwasher so these types always pissed me a bit.

(Hollywood (H): 1989: 9-10).

From the very beginning, Chinaski describes himself in a self deprecating manner to distinguish himself from the people he encounters in the Hollywood scene in terms of such personal vanities as concern over one's appearance. This portrayal suggests, therefore, that there are also differences in the way he perceives the world. Bukowski often makes distinctions between the surface appearances of individuals who adopt certain social and artistic roles, but who never produce anything of intrinsic value, and

those who derive genuine pleasure from more mundane pastimes like drinking and betting on horses. As we have discussed, Bukowski is particularly critical of writers who act and create according to social expectations, but who never actually create anything of artistic value beyond linguistic wordplay. He rejects a way of life synonymous with a too comfortable lifestyle which enables the artist of refined taste to spend time developing a clever and inaccessible style, but who is incapable of expressing any meaningful insight into ordinary existence.

After this not atypical opening, each subsequent chapter of the novel records like a diary each stage in the process that writing a screenplay and its transformation into a commercial movie undergoes, yet always filtered through Chinaski's alternative view of the world. As the narrative progresses, Chinaski is introduced to a wide variety of people who have removed themselves from the struggle of everyday life because of their status in the film industry, and who have attained respect from mainstream American society for having done so.

This contrast between Chinaski the underground writer, and those from the film industry with whom he increasingly comes into contact, emerges quite clearly early in the novel in the following exchange between Chinaski and the avant-film director Jon-Luc Modard [Jean-Luc Godard]:

'I've read your shit', he [Modard] said. "Best thing about it, it's so simple. You have a case of brain damage, no?"

'I might. I lost almost all the blood in my body in 1957. I was in the basement of a charity ward for two days before some crazy intern with a conscience found me. I think, maybe, I lost a lot of things then, more mental than physical.'

'It's one of his favourite stories', said Sarah. 'I love him, but you've had no idea, how many times I've had to listen to that story.'

'I love you too Sarah', I said, 'but somehow the telling of old stories, again and again, seems to bring them closer to what they were supposed to be.'
(*H*: 33).

In this passage, Chinaski is remarking on the broader thematic concerns of his writing. He refers to a defining experience in his life which took place in the charity ward of a Los Angeles hospital. This experience, as we have seen, marked Bukowski's transformation from unrepentant alcoholic, to unrepentant alcoholic who decides to devote his life to writing. Because Bukowski and his literary self spend so much time writing their memories down, the expressed belief that the constant retelling of past

experiences 'brings them closer to what they were supposed to be', suggests that the retelling offers a psychological comfort which tells us something about Bukowski's literary aesthetic. That is, Chinaski is able to re-live the past without having once again to experience past suffering. He can thus write about himself with the safety of distance and better comprehend past experiences through the mediated act of writing in an uncomplicated aesthetic form. This explains the re-appearance of an already written about experience (see introduction) in Chinaski's discussion with the French avant-garde film director Modard.

The act of self engagement and reflection is a central theme of *Hollywood*. Although the novel covers a period of Chinaski's life that extends from the early to mid 1980s, Bukowski condenses his narrative into a much shorter time frame. Brewer notes that, "this technique allows the author to isolate his themes." (1997: 170). The novel is divided into 46 short chapters of no more than six pages each. In each of these chapters Chinaski describes encounters with Hollywood actors, producers, and assorted hangers-on, and contrasts these encounters with his home life where he spends much of his time drinking with his wife or sitting at the typewriter. One might then ask: Have the changes in Chinaski's personal circumstances wrought changes in his personality? One might argue from Bukowski's portrayal of Chinaski in this novel, that Chinaski's view of the world has changed little, suggesting a consistency to his personality revealed in each one of Bukowski's five autobiographical novels.

In chapter five, Bukowski describes Chinaski drinking in a Los Angeles bar called Musso's. Chinaski comments on how the bar has changed from when he used to drink there:

I liked the bar at Musso's, bar just as bar, but I didn't like the room it was in. It was known as the 'New Room'. The 'Old Room' was on the other side and I preferred to eat there. It was darker and quieter...Some of the ladies I brought there were of ill-repute and as we drank on and on, often loud arguments began, replete with cursing and spilling of drinks, calls for more to drink.

(*H*: 24).

Chinaski contrasts his younger life, which is the life that he writes about in the screenplay, with that of the mature writer who continues to drink in the same bar but under considerably different circumstances. However, the Chinaski of old, whose behaviour communicated a fundamental conflict with society, is nevertheless still present

in the mature Chinaski, thus suggesting a consistency in the nature of Chinaski's identity in each of the novels. We see this when Chinaski runs into a potential producer of the film for which he is shortly to write the screenplay. The producer tells him that he is currently involved in a film about the life of the writer Mack Derouac [Jack Kerouac] which is to be called 'The Heart's Song'. Chinaski laughs at this title which upsets the producer. The outcome of this brief incident suggests that Chinaski will not resort to false praise in order to effect an outcome beneficial to him.

Chinaski's encounter with the film producer also sets up the opportunity for him to make a typically sardonic remark about Jack Kerouac himself. Thus, upon telling his wife about his encounter with the film producer, Chinaski remarks that "Pheasant came over and he told me about this movie he produced. It's about a writer who couldn't write but who got famous because he looked like a rodeo rider." (*H*: 26). Bukowski always enjoyed a dig at the Beats, but he also takes the opportunity to comment on Chinaski's self-obsession, as if suggesting he is aware that Kerouac was similarly obsessed with turning his own life into fiction, thus hinting at a grudging acceptance of Kerouac's work. Chinaski invents an even more absurd title for the film which he then tells his wife who responds by saying: " 'You just wanted his movie to be about *you*.' 'That's it! I'll write a screenplay about myself.' " (*H*: 27). This is a direct, although tongue-in-cheek admission, that Chinaski is only ever interested in writing about himself. As the novel progresses, the reader thus learns that Chinaski becomes focused on his earlier life once again in order to try and bring together memories of his life and the depiction of this life on the page.

Following his decision, Chinaski sits at his typewriter at the beginning of chapter seven to begin writing the screenplay. The novel is subsequently divided into sections in the way we have previously described. A chapter in which Chinaski is at home writing about the screenplay is followed or preceded by others in which Chinaski ventures from his home and becomes involved in the machinations of the film industry. But regardless of what Chinaski happens to be doing at any particular moment in the novel, his alternative view of the world remains. In this way, Bukowski projects his inflammatory views into a surreal and often comical series of events comprising the main action of the novel.

These views are also typically about how Chinaski perceives literature.

Where Chinaski departs from the literary canon is spelt out more directly in his conversation with the filmmaker Modard:

I had genius pushed at me all through school: Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Ibsen, G.B Shaw, Chekov, all those dullards. And worse, Mark Twain, Hawthorne, the Bronte sisters, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, it all just laid on you like a slab of cement, and you wanted to get out and away, they were like heavy stupid parents insisting upon regulations and the ways that would make even the dead cringe.
(*H*: 33).

Although the general subject matter of *Hollywood* is not standard fare in Bukowski's oeuvre, the writer nevertheless goes to the effort of continuing thematic links between it and earlier work. However, Bukowski is also quick to remind his readers that Chinaski's personal circumstances have changed as he has matured as a writer. These changing circumstances comprise the differing subject matter in each of the novels, even though his basic beliefs about literature and society are unchanged. This constitutes an irony in the novel which we shall pay closer attention to elsewhere.

The consequences of Chinaski's changing fortunes are revealed in a passage which follows his conversation with the film maker Modard. Reflecting on his surroundings, a Beverly Hills hotel room, Chinaski notes that it is, "a magic world. I liked it because I hadn't seen anything like it before. It was senseless and perfect and safe." (*H*: 34). This observation about how Chinaski regards the unfamiliarity of his new surroundings is possibly intended for his regular readers who would be aware of how his personal circumstances have changed over time. *Hollywood* marks Chinaski's entry into mainstream society via the hyperreal world of the commercial film industry, and the jarring effect this new environment has on his sensibilities is both comical and absurd. Bukowski now portrays a world that would have seemed like an impossible dream for the Chinaski of earlier work. But having entered it, he is nevertheless unwilling to leave the younger, struggling and impoverished Chinaski behind.

Chinaski acknowledges in the short quote above that he has entered a hitherto unexplored environment in the statement, 'I liked it because I hadn't seen anything like it before.' However, he qualifies this observation in the following line by stating that this new world was 'senseless, perfect and safe'. The full stop between the two remarks intends the latter to be emphatically separated from the former. In other words, although Chinaski is acknowledging that there is something appealing about the

opulence of the Beverly Hills hotel room simply because it is unfamiliar to the writer and represents a new experience for him to write about, he is not, nevertheless, claiming that he feels comfortable in this new environment because it is 'senseless and perfect and safe'. Therefore, the tug of war between the artificiality of Hollywood which appeals to Bukowski at one level because this world is strange and unfamiliar to him, and his desire not to subsume his outsider status within Hollywood's unreality, recurs throughout the novel as a bemused Chinaski continues to observe the strangeness of the world he has entered.

Chinaski consequently feels more comfortable when at the typewriter. In a brief witty phone conversation with Jon Pinchot, Chinaski tells him that the screenplay is about, " 'a drunk. He just sits on this barstool, night and day.' " Pinchot asks him: " 'Do you think the people would care about such a man?' 'Listen Jon, if I worried about what the people cared about, I'd never write anything.' " (*H*: 36). Here the reader might reasonably conclude that despite the more comfortable surroundings the writer now finds himself in, his basic beliefs about society and art are intact.

Following this conversation, Chinaski begins to write about his earlier life, reflecting on both the writing process and the memories which inform this process:

I was into it. All you needed was the first line, then everything followed. It was always there, it only needed something to set it running. That bar came back to me. I remembered how you could smell the urinal from wherever you sat. You needed a drink right off to counteract that. And before you went back to that urinal you needed four or five. And the people of that bar, their bodies and faces and voices came back to me. I was there again...The dialogue came and took care of itself. I typed on and on. (*H*: 37).

Chinaski is first and foremost a writer at this stage in his life. His identity is no longer defined by his social status as a worker, as it was in the novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*. But consistent with Bukowski's portrayal of Chinaski in both these novels, the Chinaski of the screenplay is firstly a drinker, then a writer. There is an interesting moment in the film where a potential publisher arrives at the screen character Chinaski's run down flat to take a look at some of his poems. A dishevelled Chinaski opens the door and ushers the well dressed woman to a cupboard which is stuffed full of loose sheets of paper on which he has scrawled poems. Bukowski effectively de-romanticises the creative act in such scenes as this, consistent with his literary aesthetic.

Memories of drinking in bars with an odd assortment of characters are invoked by Chinaski as the screenplay takes shape, and these memories coalesce in the more comfortable domestic surroundings within which the mature Chinaski resides. In the novel, he notes ironically in a phone conversation to his German literary agent that, “within an hour I was 45 thousand dollars richer. 30 years of starvation and rejection were starting to kick in.” (*H*: 38). However, improved financial circumstances have not hindered the memories of the many years he spent in badly furnished rooms, drinking and listening to classical music on his radio, typing out stories and poems by the dozen, and sending them to a multitude of small literary magazines across America. This lifestyle of the younger Chinaski is comically contrasted with the mature writer who has established a literary reputation and can now afford certain luxuries, but is not necessarily comfortable with new opportunities that have been opened up to him.

That new opportunities have been opened up is revealed in chapter eight, when Chinaski is visited by a tax consultant who advises him to invest the money he has earned from sales of his books in order to reduce his taxes. Chinaski is initially suspicious of the advice, noting, “I don't want to buy anything that I can't reach out and touch.” (*H*: 43). He is also wary of changing the small habits he has acquired over the many years of writing which have assisted him to do just that.

The tax consultant asks him,

'What do you type on. A manual?'
 'Yes'.
 'Get an electric. It's tax deductible.'
 'I don't know if I can write on an electric...'
 'You mean you're afraid to change?'...
 'I worry too much about my goddamn soul.'
 (*H*: 43).

If Chinaski modifies his creative routines by investing in technology, he may compromise the artistic integrity which he has spent many years developing. The inference therefore is that by acquiring material possessions, Chinaski is succumbing to the temptations offered to people generally in mainstream society - a temptation he has spent a life avoiding. Moreover, by burdening himself with material objects, the potential arises that these objects will eventually come between himself and the writing.

Having grown up in the depression years, Chinaski has learnt not to take for granted what one already owns. This view explains the comment that 'I don't want to

buy anything I can't reach out and touch'. Therefore, whilst Chinaski is evoking his younger self as he writes the screenplay, he is also confirming that the link between the mature writer and his younger self remains. "All I want to do is type," Chinaski tells the tax consultant, "I don't want to carry around a big load." (*H*: 44). His meeting with the consultant causes Chinaski to reflect: "Are you becoming what you've always hated?" (*H*: 45). The internal struggle between the financially successful Chinaski, and the impoverished younger Chinaski of rooming houses and heavy drinking, imbues the subject matter of the screenplay with a greater significance. By writing about his youth, Chinaski is avoiding becoming 'what he had always hated', because, despite newly acquired material comforts, he is still able to express suspicions he has always held about materialism through the younger Chinaski of the screenplay. What makes *Hollywood* particularly interesting for readers familiar with Bukowski's work in this respect, is that the reader is invited to observe how the cynical Chinaski responds to new opportunities. Thus, as the narrative progresses, the reader learns that Chinaski increasingly comes to rely on those aspects of his life with which he had always felt comfortable; drinking, gambling and writing, which define his ordinariness, and which preserve links between the mature Chinaski and his younger self, who Bukowski portrays in other works.

That Chinaski has entered an unreal world is demonstrated in the way that aspects of his life also become increasingly unreal as his involvement in the commercial side of the screenplay increases. For example, Bukowski introduces an element of the bizarre into the relatively straightforward act of house-hunting. The first house which he and Sarah look at, turns out to be a former residence of the convicted murderer Charles Manson. (*H*: 54). This otherwise normal activity is depicted by Bukowski as one that is surreal and potentially menacing. Charles Manson was the embodiment of a darker under-side of the 1960s counterculture, and the act of house-hunting thus becomes a strange activity for a man in his sixties who was never before able to afford one.

Bukowski consequently contrasts Chinaski's search for a new house by recalling the many years Chinaski spent living in lower class areas of Los Angeles, inhabited by poor immigrants who had missed out on the material rewards enshrined in the economic prosperity of post war America. He notes that the neighbourhood in which he had been living for many years remained one of the poorer in the city. The only significant change was the cultural mix of the people living there, but he had never

considered making the necessary lifestyle adjustments, such as seeking a better paying job, which might enable him to relocate to a more affluent part of the city:

That neighbourhood around Carlton Way near Western Avenue was changing too. It had been almost all lower-class white, but political troubles in Central America and other parts of the world had brought a new type of individual to the neighbourhood...how they survived was unknown. The men were small, thin, silent, unsmiling. Most sat on the porch in their undershirts, slumped forward a bit, occasionally smoking a cigarette. They sat on the porch steps for hours, motionless.
(*H*: 61-62).

In passages such as this, Chinaski adopts the role of an observer, recording what he sees without adding anything further that might suggest he was prepared to discuss the plight of his neighbours in political terms. His depiction of the poverty characterising his neighbourhood is also noticeably free of moral judgement. Chinaski concludes this chapter by informing the reader that he is now ready to move to a more affluent part of the city, but the cynical side of his nature, less noticeable when he is mixing with the alienated and impoverished segments of American society, now returns. When describing the new house that he and Sarah finally purchase, Chinaski notes, "It looked like a damned good place to hide." (*H*: 63). The by now familiar concerns about the effect that ownership of material possessions will have on his writing also re-emerge. Chinaski notes without irony, "Now, after decades, I was a writer with a desk. Yes, I felt the fear, the fear of becoming like *them*...Was I doomed and damned, was I about to be sucked dry?" (*H*: 65).

As Chinaski continues to write the screenplay, the writing process itself - that is, the writer sitting at his desk and banging away on his typewriter - is discussed in greater detail, as he increasingly reflects on his younger years. The act of remembering seems to explain the social, personal and creative dimensions comprising his life, by suggesting where the hardened cynical attitudes of the older Chinaski might have originated. Chinaski thus opens Chapter 16 by musing on what the screenplay is actually about:

I was writing about a young man who wanted to write and drink but most of his success was with the bottle. The young man had been me. While the time had not been an unhappy time, it had been mostly a time of void and waiting. As I typed along the characters in a certain bar returned to me. I saw each face again, the bodies, heard the voices, the conversations...How all this could become a screenplay, I didn't know. I only knew that it was

the only part of my life I hadn't written much about...And I knew there was a whole civilisation of lost souls that lived in and off bars, daily, nightly and forever, until they died. I had never read about this civilisation so I decided to write about it, the way I remembered it. The good old typer kicked along.

(H: 83).

Chinaski is happiest when sitting at the typewriter engaged with his memories. This passage reveals Chinaski's reasoning behind his chosen subject matter which also ties in with the preface Bukowski wrote for John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust*, in which he discusses the kinds of literature which most mattered to him. Chinaski notes that he had never before read about the 'civilisation of lost souls' who spent their lives drinking in bars, an awareness that he seeks to address in the screenplay by forging his own distinct literary path, with the assistance of memories of his own experiences.

Chinaski subsequently continues to contrast the unreal world of the commercial film industry with his own experiences in Los Angeles. The filmmaker Jon Pinchot lacks proper financial backing, but his strong desire to turn Chinaski's screenplay into a movie supercedes any obstacles that the lack of financial security has created. In Chapter 16, Chinaski depicts Pinchot as living in one of the poorer suburbs of Los Angeles which he describes as the Venice ghetto. Whilst driving through the area, Chinaski reflects that: "In a capitalistic society the losers slaved for the winners and you have to have more losers than winners. What did I think? I knew politics would never solve it and there wasn't enough time left to get lucky." (H: 84). Chinaski's suspicion of politics emerges once again. This is because Chinaski is devoted to self-expression beyond all other concerns.

He acknowledges the nature of his literary aesthetic shortly after visiting Pinchot in the Venice ghetto. Back in his new house, in front of the typewriter, Chinaski declares that:

Writing was never work for me. It had been the same for as long as I could remember: Turn on the radio to a classical music station, light a cigarette or a cigar, open the bottle. The typer did the rest. All I had to do was be there. The whole process allowed me to continue when life itself offered very little, when life itself was a horror show...Basically that's why I wrote: to save my ass, to save my ass from the madhouse, from the streets, from myself.

(H: 88).

Chinaski's self-obsession is directly linked to his antagonistic attitude towards critics,

other writers and his readers. As part of his literary counterattack against the society from which he has often expressed his alienation, Chinaski reveals that his readers continue to remain secondary to his own concerns. Upon Pinchot remarking that his readers might abandon the dirty old man of letters after he purchases a BMW, Chinaski dismisses the implication with: "As always, those fuckers will have to judge me on how well I write." (*H*: 89). In order to provide an honest portrayal of his life, Chinaski must be open about his experiences regardless of how contradictory or absurd they might be. Thus, his writing might receive some acceptance if his readers continue to believe in the essential honesty of the writer. Howard Sounes notes that, "Bukowski did not attempt to disguise the fact that he had bought a house and a BMW, removing himself from the low life world he had always written about, but used these symbols of his new found wealth to comic effect." (1998: 191). Because Bukowski claimed that he wasn't concerned about what his readers thought about him, and because he believed in writing honestly about his life experiences, he is thus unconcerned about the writer of the 'low-life' now in early sixties purchasing such a luxury item as a BMW. Such an act might be perceived as yet another illustration of the comic absurdity of Chinaski's life.

In the screenplay, Chinaski parodies the celebration of surface appearances by having a well-to-do literary editor care about the plight of a drunken undiscovered poet by taking an interest in his writing despite his impoverished state. Chinaski is nevertheless more comfortable with Wanda than with the editor who offers an escape from the drunken lifestyle in which he is immersed. But it is the cult of personality which film producers understand. As such, the screenplay is initially incomprehensible to a commercial film mentality. As Chinaski acknowledges, if the screenplay had been about someone famous who also happened to be an alcoholic, its initial reception might have been a better one. But Chinaski has defied the rules. He is content to simply portray alcoholics in their drunken state without offering any way out, or providing any moral judgement.

The one opportunity of escape that is offered to Chinaski in the screenplay - an opportunity to have his writing published by a woman who also expects Chinaski to leave Wanda for her - is ultimately rejected. This thematic concern feeds into the details of Bukowski's own life. In sobering letters from the late 1950s, Bukowski writes in detail about his relationship with Jane Cooney Baker and his efforts to protect her from

the harshness of the environment in which they find themselves, yet is ultimately helpless to prevent her from drinking herself to death. His decision to stick by her is also revealed in the screenplay and film - this outcome reflects Chinaski's view of the world: the life of the barfly is ugly, yet honest and sometimes worthy of respect, whereas commercial success - which comes from pandering to mainstream tastes - is to be avoided whatever the incentives. This is because, as far as Chinaski is concerned, the commercial world is far more absurd than the life of the barfly depicted in the screenplay.

Thus, once the screenplay is finally written, the absurdity of the machinations required to turn it into the film comprises the remainder of the novel. Jon Pinchot informs Chinaski on a number of occasions that the film has been cancelled, only to contact him shortly after to tell him that it is back on. Chinaski recounts seemingly endless meetings with financial backers, producers, and actors who all treat the screenplay as a commodity more so than an emotional and honest account of one's life. One particularly interesting use of metonymy by Bukowski to demonstrate Chinaski's perception of Hollywood as strangely unreal in comparison to the everyday world, appears in the form of a towel that Chinaski finds lying in a bathroom sink at the home of the actor Jack Bledsoe [Mickey Rourke - who plays Chinaski in the film]. For Chinaski, the unusual sight of a towel in a sink also represents the strangeness of the film industry:

Pushed down in the sink was this white towel. One end of it was stuffed into the drain, and the remainder of it hung out over the sink and dropped to the floor. It didn't look good. And it was soaking wet, just soaked through. What was it for? What did it mean? Left over after some orgy? It didn't make sense to me. I'd lived through some shitty nights and days, plenty of them full of anti-meaning, yet I couldn't figure out that giant soaking wet towel. And worse, Jack knew that I was coming by. Why would he leave that thing in there like that? Was it a message?
(*H*: 103).

The oddity of the misplaced towel represents Chinaski's own misplaced feelings about an environment in which he feels awkward. In this chapter, Chinaski continues to ponder the meaning of the towel in the sink, and just before leaving, he asks Bledose about it. Bledsoe replies by denying knowledge of the existence of any towel, and Bukowski concludes Chapter 19 with the straightforward line, "and that was the end of that particular night." (*H*: 104). No resolution is offered, because to be aware of the absurd is to recognise the perpetual meaninglessness of life.

This unusual incident is followed by a party Chinaski and Sarah attend for the birthday of a well respected Hollywood producer at which Chinaski meets the novelist Victor Norman [Norman Mailer]. Chinaski says to Norman as they shake hands, “ ‘the barfly meets the champ’ ” (*H*: 107). This introduction suggests that Chinaski is willing to accept a place for himself within a realm of the 'masculinised' American writer embodied by such people as Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer. The implication is that the barfly is just as tough as the boxer, meaning that the unromantic toughness of Bukowski's writing stems from a hard life spent in bars, rooming houses and factories. Such an implication suggests that were his life to have turned out differently, and were he to have led a more privileged life, then the writing would also have turned out differently.

In the Howard Sounes biography, Mailer recalls his meeting with Bukowski, and that after he became drunk at the party, Bukowski indeed challenged him to a fight (1998: 211-212). Fist fighting also occurs on a number of occasions in the film between Chinaski and a bartender to whom he takes a dislike. The fight sequences are portrayed almost as a ritual to accompany drunkenness as the embittered Chinaski seeks to prove his manhood, more so through physical confrontation, than through writing. At the party, Sarah tells Chinaski, “ ‘Victor Norman came over while you were gone. He says that it's very nice of you that you haven't said anything about his writing’ ” (*H*: 110). Bukowski is alluding in this passage to past criticism of Mailer's writing in letters and poems such as the following remark to the novelist John William Corrington in a 1968 letter: “My heroes are dead and the replacements seem very shoddy indeed. What can I do with Mailer? What can I do with Lowell?” (*Letters Vol 2*: 75).

Literary criticisms aside, the central theme of the novel emerges with greater clarity as Chinaski watches some of the filming which sparks reflections on the links between himself in the present and his younger self. This turns the spotlight on his views about American society generally. When watching the actor Jack Bledsoe play himself, Chinaski reflects that, “I was a little sad that I wasn't young and doing it all over again, drinking and fighting and playing with words...I starved so that I could have time to write. That just isn't done much anymore.” (*H*: 128). Chinaski no longer starves for his art, but the belief in suffering for one's art nevertheless remains as a link between the older writer and his younger self.

Later in the novel, when Chinaski is watching the filming of a fight between the character Chinaski played by Jack Bledsoe and Eddie the bartender, he proceeds to reflect on his own experiences in this harsh and unforgiving environment. “Another thing about those fights. If you didn't belong to the Bartender's 'Club', and you lost, you were left out there with the garbage cans and the rats...To get up then, dizzy, sick, beaten, leaning towards the suicide dream.” (*H*: 186). In another appearance of metonymy, Bukowski uses a wallet to represent his feelings about the world:

You play a game. You try to feel the wallet pressing against your ass without reaching for it. It feels vacant back there. You really don't want to reach with your hand but you do. And the wallet is never there...I became more and more discouraged with humanity.
(*H*: 186).

Although Chinaski constantly reminisces about his youth, he does not depict his earlier years with any particular fondness. Memories are evoked, but they are not tinged with any sense of romanticism.

Nevertheless, the act of remembering emphasises the link with those experiences depicted in the other autobiographical novels which Bukowski includes to provide some explanation for the alternative nature of his art. Thus, as Chinaski continues to watch the filming, reality becomes filtered through an aesthetic prism. Although he is startled by the sight of an actor playing his younger self within a simulated reality, Chinaski continues to reach out to the past. We see this in the following passage:

The door to the room opened and Jack Bledsoe weaved in. Shit, it was the young Chinaski! It was me! I felt a tender aching within me. Youth, you son of a bitch, where did you go? I wanted to be the young drunk again. I wanted to be Jack Bledsoe. But I was just the old guy in the corner, sucking on a beer.
(*H*: 148).

The links and dissonances between the reality of Chinaski's experiences and Bukowski's own, contrasted with the older Chinaski who has become an observer, Bukowski the writer of the novel, and the simulated reality of the film, emerge when the filming takes place in a building that Chinaski claims he had actually lived in 30 years earlier. Chinaski reflects that, “everything that goes around comes around” (*H*: 164) and is amazed that he is standing there 30 years later watching a film being made about himself. However, Chinaski is always aware that he is watching a simulated reality. He notes whilst

watching the actor Francine Bowers [Faye Dunaway] who is playing Chinaski's girlfriend Wanda [Jane Cooney Baker] that, "I knew that it wasn't the same, that it could never be the same. Francine was an actress. Jane had been a mad drunk...But one couldn't expect perfection from a performance. A good imitation would do." (*H*: 171). Watching the filming causes Chinaski to reflect on his portrayal of Chinaski the drunk in the screenplay and the effect one has had on the other. This in turn leads back to Bukowski the author, who peppers the novel with his own thoughts on what all this means for him.

The young Chinaski was predominantly a drinker with aspirations to be a writer, and the writer has consequently fictionalised the drinker. That is, he has turned reality into a simulated reality. This separation, and the significance of it in terms of Chinaski's own capacity to turn his memories into fiction, is a primary concern of the novel. Chinaski believes that by creating art from past experiences, he is able to cling onto some semblance of the real world, and thus avoid becoming trapped in a disengaging Hollywood fantasy. Chinaski subsequently clings onto the reality which his actual self occupies by always reverting back to the pastimes of his everyday existence. Thus, there are a number of occasions in the novel when Chinaski goes to the horse races to escape the filming. Asked in an interview to describe what he does when he is not writing, Chinaski replies, " 'Horses. bet them.' 'Do they help your writing?' 'Yes. They help me forget about it.' " (*H*: 173). Chinaski subsequently recalls that it was Jane who had first introduced him to horse racing. By focusing on this memory, Chinaski is separating the character Wanda from Jane herself, and when he does, the jaded, cynical Chinaski of his worldly experiences returns.

Driving home from the racetrack, Chinaski notes: "Drove back with the working crowd. What a gang they were. Pissed and vicious and broke. In a hurry to get home to fuck if possible, to look at tv, to get to sleep early in order to do the same thing next day all over again." (*H*: 178). Here the contrast is stark. Chinaski momentarily departs from the simulated reality embodied by the film industry, and rejoins the everyday world which has always horrified him, but which also reminds him that the unreal world of the film industry only ever offers a momentary distraction.

The novel thus concludes with Chinaski contemplating a future removed from his recent experiences with the film industry, which, nevertheless, remain fresh in his mind. He attends the test screenings of the film, and the after-release parties, but he

accepts that now the movie has been made, it is time to focus again on writing. The experience with making the film comprises a part of his life that will be inevitably turned into fictional form, revealed on the final page of the novel:

'What are you going to do now?' Sarah asked...
 'Oh, hell, I'll write a novel about writing the screenplay and making the movie.'...
 'What are you going to call it?'
 '*Hollywood.*'
 '*Hollywood?*'
 'Yes...'
 And this is it.
 (*H*: 239).

This is not the first time Bukowski has ended a novel this way. As we have seen, he concludes his first novel *Post Office* in a similar manner: “In the morning it was morning and I was still alive. Maybe I'll write a novel, I thought. And then I did.” (1997: 196). In such statements, the link between Chinaski, the fictional character who embodies Bukowski's literary aesthetic and the author's own experiences are reinforced. Each of his novels covers a particular period of Chinaski's life, and each involves Bukowski recalling memories of either the recent past, as he did when he wrote *Post Office*, *Hollywood* and *Women*, or the distant past which we find in *Factotum* and *Ham on Rye*. But even when working on a novel, Bukowski is also churning out short stories and poems. Neeli Cherkovski notes that throughout the time the film was being made, “Hank remained prolific as a poet and short story writer. He surrendered none of his independence during his work with Schroeder.” (1997: 312).

Despite his brush with commercialism, Bukowski is keen to emphasise that Chinaski is a writer of alternative literature. There is a comical moment in the novel when a financial backer asks Jon Pinchot if the film could be classified as an art film. When Jon replies that it could be, Chinaski observes: “Harry Friedman leapt up from his couch, ran over to Jon. 'AN ART FILM! AN ART FILM! THEN YOU WILL WORK FOR NOTHING!' ” (*H*: 116). *Barfly* can be considered an art film simply because Bukowski makes no moral judgements about those who spend their lives drinking in bars in either the screenplay or the novel. He is incapable of doing so, because this would mean that he is making moral assumptions about his own behaviour which he has consistently refused to do throughout his career. By evoking memories, Bukowski

draws together the past experiences he writes about and the motivations which lie behind his rejection of artistic commercialism. Chinaski ultimately comes out at the end of the novel untainted by the movie making machine because he consistently rejects the rules which a commercial artist is expected to abide by if he or she is wants to succeed at creating a work acceptable to mainstream tastes. Bukowski portrays Chinaski in *Hollywood*, as content to partake of ordinary life because therein lies a stability that negates absurdities found in broader society. So too, the movie-making machine of Hollywood, geared towards the creation of neatly resolved fantasies, is portrayed by Chinaski as chaotic and absurd often to comical effect.

An example of this absurdity appears in Chapter 25, in which Bukowski reveals the desperate lengths director Jon Pinchot is willing to go to in order to make the movie, despite increasingly negative responses from financial backers. After purchasing an electric chainsaw, Pinchot walks with Chinaski into the office of the lawyer representing a finance company named Firepower, and threatens to cut off a finger unless he obtains release from an unsuitable contract. Chinaski maintains a calm and deadpan manner throughout, which lends the scene its humour:

'Where's your plug?' Jon asked.

'Plug?'

'For this...' Jon pulled the towel away revealing the Black and Decker.

'Please Mr Pinchot...'

'Where's the plug? Never mind, I see it...'

Jon walked over and plugged the Black and Decker into the wall.

'You must understand,' said Zutnick, 'that if I had known you were going to bring that instrument I would have arranged to turn off the electricity.'"

(H: 129).

While this conversation is taking place, Chinaski sits next to Pinchot calmly drinking coffee. As the exchange between Pinchot and Zutnick becomes more heated, Chinaski maintains his composure and asks for more coffee:

'Zutnick glared at me, hit the intercom.

'Another cup of coffee, Rose. Black...'

'Like in Black and Decker,' I said'.

(H: 130).

Unable to make sense of the money and fame driven focus of the film industry, Chinaski decides to sit back and go along for the ride, adopting the role of observer while madness swirls around him. Bukowski thus expects that absurd occurrences will be

commonplace in an absurd world. His own concerns are presented as almost mundane compared to those of film industry financiers and celebrities, yet infinitely more desirable. Consequently, Chinaski always returns to commonplace routines within a settled domestic environment he would rather inhabit. Thus, shortly after the 'Black and Decker' incident, Chinaski observes:

So there I was sitting around typing up poems and sending them out to the little magazines. For some reason, the short story wasn't arriving on the typer, and I didn't like that but I couldn't force it, so there I was playing with the poem...The horses ran, the wine still poured and Sarah did some beautiful work in the garden.
(*H*: 140).

This passage encapsulates an essential aspect of Bukowski's art: A writer should never strive to become a public figure or a personality to be revered, but should simply focus on writing, along with working at overcoming the many small obstacles to freedom repeatedly occurring in everyday life, and which come between the writer and his or her writing.

In this sense, the act of writing can be likened to a boxing match whereby Bukowski spars with the rest of the world. Chinaski discusses writing in these terms towards the end of the novel:

I liked to watch the fights. Somehow it reminded me of writing. You needed the same thing, talents guts and condition. Only the condition was mental, spiritual. You were never a writer. You had to become a writer each time you sat in front of the machine. It wasn't hard once you sat down in front of the machine. What was hard sometimes was finding that chair and sitting in it. Sometimes you couldn't sit in it. Like everybody else in the world, for you, things got in the way: small troubles, big troubles, continuous slammings and bangings. You had to be in condition to endure what was trying to kill you.
(*H*: 217).

Chinaski's avenue of escape from the 'continuous slammings and bangings,' exists as quiet domesticity with his wife. Ironically, this sentiment is expressed in a novel about his experiences with Hollywood. But Chinaski ultimately survives this experience with his views about humanity unchanged, even though his personal circumstances have changed considerably at this stage in his life. It is the interference of humanity in his everyday life that raises Bukowski's ire. This we see in the opening paragraph of Chapter 40 in the novel:

I went back to the racetrack. At times I wondered what I was doing out there. And at times I knew. For one it allowed me to view large numbers of people at their worst, and this kept me in touch with the reality of what humanity consisted of. The greed, the fear, the anger were all there. (H: 202).

In the world of Hollywood, Chinaski finds these unpleasant aspects about people repeated and accentuated, which justifies his retreat into domestic solitude with his wife and cats, and most importantly, his typewriter. As Gay Brewer notes in his discussion of the novel, “the creative act is preeminent in Bukowski, the central index of survival.” (1997: 171). His retreat from the glamour of Hollywood is defined by a return to ordinariness, signified in the novel by the solace he finds in writing. When writing, Chinaski is able to block out the greed, fear and anger characterising the world outside his front door.

Aubrey Malone notes about *Hollywood* that the novel presents a “laconic perspective on the deal-making ethos that permeates Tinseltown, and the parasites and hangers-on that buzz around the fringes of the industry.” (2003: 148). Chinaski appears content to regularly pass comment on the ‘parasites and hangers-on’ that permeate the Hollywood social scene. His biting remarks provide most of the novel’s entertainment. In this chapter we have seen that Chinaski’s alternative world view is inflamed by what he perceives as an inherent falseness in the film world. Malone notes that, “in the end his main achievement is to portray Hollywood as a banal rather than a decadent place.” (2003: 150). *Hollywood* exemplifies Bukowski’s aesthetic, because it connects the life experiences of the younger Chinaski with Bukowski’s life-long quest to overcome the absurd, which the elder Chinaski is always striving for regardless of his personal circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Engraved on Bukowski's tombstone are the words 'Don't Try' (Duval, 2002: 131). In a 1992 letter to the editor Maxwell Gaddis, Bukowski offers a simple explanation about what these words signified: "Well, it means if the stuff doesn't jump on you and make you do it, forget it, in writing and everything else." (*Letters Vol 3*: 225). For Bukowski, there was little distinction between the way he approached the creative act and the way he approached life in general. These words can be explained thus: One must reject the temptation to simply go along with the crowd for the sake of wanting to appear to be like everybody else. To do so is absurd, because it signifies a denial of the human capacity for self expression. The central tenet of Bukowski's art is the idea that one can only respond to adversity by taking responsibility for one's own actions, even if doing so results in a conflict with society.

The words 'Don't Try' also suggest that one should never submerge the actual nature of his or her identity. Subsequently, a writer should never force the writing, but let it come naturally. If a writer discovers that he or she is not very good at writing, then it's best to move on to something else. Neither should the writer focus too much on developing theories to explain why he or she writes. In a 1980 letter to an admirer of his poetry, Bukowski writes, "I don't try, I just type, and if I say any more than that, I'm trying." (*Letters Vol 3*: 21). In its simplest form, this philosophy can be translated as: Don't try, do. Bukowski practiced this belief throughout his career. After leaving the post office in 1970, until his death in 1994, Bukowski wrote continuously, and remained obsessively devoted to the basic themes first articulated in his earliest poetry from the 1950s. What is particularly fascinating about Bukowski's life and writing is how interconnected the two actually are. The reader who delves into the poetry, short stories and novels is given the life of one individual, reflected in the personality and experiences of Henry Chinaski. Bukowski writes about Chinaski's life as series of connected events which are both amusing and horrific. And he wrote continuously about this life.

Bukowski often depicts the society in which he lives as fraught with perils endangering individual freedom, and these dangers are represented as a series of small yet deadly obstacles which obstruct Chinaski's freedom, whether it is the person who sits

too closely to him at the race track or the stubbing of a toe as he gets out of the bath. But Bukowski is always aware of a darker side to ordinary life. Many of the stories in *Hot Water Music* are set in ordinary suburban homes, but these are environments not dissimilar to those found in a David Lynch film, where hidden traumas and potential dangers are revealed if one scratches below the surface. Bukowski's aim is to expose the seemingly comfortable suburban lifestyle that is an integral part of the American Dream, as one that is not necessarily the idyllic utopia that might be seen on television sitcoms and in advertising. Behind the closed doors of Bukowski's suburbia in this collection of short stories, one finds violence, sexual deviancy and social malcontents who have become bored and disillusioned with the world. For Bukowski, this is a more honest portrayal of suburban America.

It is through an honest attempt at self-expression projected through Henry Chinaski's personality and life experiences, that Bukowski believes he will be saved from a life of mediocrity and subservience, regardless of how bleak his subject matter turns out to be. Bukowski's art, in and of itself, represents one individual's struggle to be free from the absurd. Much like his creator, Chinaski finds solace in alcohol and prefers solitude to the company of people, but he is also a fighter whose weapons are cynicism and humour manifested in the stylistically simple, yet raw and fiery nature of Bukowski's writing.

Bukowski decided at an early age that the only way to save himself from disappearing altogether was to express himself as forcefully as he could in poetry and prose. As he entered his sixties in the early 1980s, he began to reflect on his past achievements as a writer of alternative fiction, and these reflections clearly emerge through a closer examination of his earlier life in the novel *Ham on Rye* which attempts to explain the source of his alternative view of the world. In this novel, Chinaski becomes increasingly aware that there is a falsity to a life consisting of regular employment, a house in the suburbs, raising a family and accumulating material possessions over a lifetime. Chinaski subsequently believes that, "the Chinaski bloodline had been thinned by a series of peasant-servants who had surrendered their real lives for fractional and illusory gains" (*Ham*: 214). This observation follows Chinaski's father's assertion that it is through the accumulation of material possessions that one earns the respect of others. Throughout the novel, Chinaski questions why one would ever need

the respect of others, particularly as most people in mainstream America have succumbed to 'fractional and illusory gains'. For Bukowski, a worthwhile existence is one where the individual is completely free from outside pressures to conform, thus accounting for Chinaski's regular indulgence in alcohol and gambling.

The conclusion Bukowski draws from Chinaski's relationship with his father is a simple one. His father's aggression towards others as a way of compensating for his own failures is absurd, therefore the social values in which his father adamantly believes must also be absurd. This is the starting point for Chinaski's gradual withdrawal from society, concomitant with his discovery of alcohol as a way of shielding himself from the absurd, and his discovery of literature where he learns there are a small number of writers who feel the same way about life as he does - but only a small number. By the end of the novel, Chinaski is living in a rooming house in a poor district of Los Angeles seemingly without any prospects in conventional terms, yet he has freed himself from his father's domineering influence and other social pressures he had experienced when he was at school and College. In material terms, Chinaski owns little, but he is also free.

For many years, Chinaski struggled with a series of menial jobs (written about in the novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*) and a number of volatile sexual relationships with women once he has established himself as a writer (the novel *Women*). In these works, Chinaski derives satisfaction from writing, drinking, gambling, and living a simple life. By the time we get to that part of Bukowski's life written about in *Hollywood*, Chinaski's personal circumstances have changed considerably. In this novel, Chinaski adopts the self confident tone of one who has struggled for much of his life, but by remaining true to his convictions, has not only survived poverty and drunkenness, but also achieved a small amount of success along the way. *Hollywood* gives Bukowski's readers some insight into the life of the writer in the 1980s, a time when he had not worked in any job for the previous decade. What this novel tells us above all else through its sardonic tone, is that Bukowski's changing fortunes had done little to dull his basic views about the world. There is a consistency to the expression of his world view which allows the reader to acquire a basic understanding of Henry Chinaski's personality, shaped through a stoic and determined self-assertiveness.

Bukowski is by no means alone in this respect. In his discussion of Jack Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose style, John Tytell quotes from jazz musician Charlie Parker

who was reputedly remarking on what it meant for him to create art. Parker said: “If you don't live it...it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But man, there's no boundary line to art.” (1976: 144). Parker was referring to the idea that a work of art should be moulded from one's personal experience. This has often been said of the jazz improviser, whose music represents an emotional outpouring derived from his own experiences. Similarly, about Kerouac, Tytell notes that, “like Henry Miller, Kerouac was uninterested in the ideal of 'literary' perfection, or in a fictitious 'order' that had little relation to the flux of reality.” (1976: 141). Tytell uses this statement as an introduction to a discussion about Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose style, generally regarded as Kerouac's greatest literary achievement, which can be explained as reality transformed through a spontaneous outpouring of the writer's inner consciousness. Such prose experimentation reached its zenith in the novels *The Subterraneans* and *Visions of Cody*. Bukowski's writing style can be summed up quite concisely in contrast to the many hundreds of pages that have been written about Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose. More than any other writer, Bukowski's style resembles that of Ernest Hemingway in its simplicity and directness. Bukowski's aim in this respect was to avoid confusing his readers with aesthetic complexity, that he himself had rejected in his own reading, in order to accentuate the realist nature of his writing. However, like Kerouac, Bukowski was very much engaged with turning life experiences into art.

In *Ham on Rye* we learn of Chinaski's excitement upon discovering the Los Angeles public library. However, although he read prodigiously and widely, he became discouraged when he was unable to discover literature which reflected his own experiences - as he states in his preface to John Fante's *Ask the Dust*: “you were left staring at rows and rows of exceedingly dull books...Why didn't anybody say something? Why didn't anybody scream out?” (1980: 5). This alternative view of literature recurs throughout Bukowski's writing. It suggests that Bukowski did not believe, as Harold Bloom argues, that the great canonical writers set out to create, “a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange.” (1996: 3). Bukowski might claim that the great canonical writers set out to create 'a mode of originality' that rendered the writing simply incomprehensible to the average reader.

Bukowski's portrayal of America as grotesque, the emphasis he places on

the sexual act - which he devotes particular attention to in the novel *Women* and short story collection *Hot Water Music* - along with the many re-tellings of events that he considered significant in his life, such as the outbreak of severe acne, his troubled relationship with his parents and his discovery of literature, are the catalysts for the development of Henry Chinaski's persona, which is always situated in Bukowski's awareness of the absurdity of the world.

Bukowski's publishing history is also tied to his views about society and literature in general. This history can be summed up as a long slow struggle to have his early poems accepted by small and now mostly forgotten 'little' literary magazines. This particular publishing avenue very much approximated the grass roots forms of publishing in the punk era of the 1970s, when information about bands was spread through crudely done-up fanzines with small print runs. Bukowski's low-key approach to publishing is a significant aspect of his alternative aesthetic. His views about the literary scene and his relationship to it emerge quite clearly in such stories as "In and Out and Over" from *Hot Water Music*, in which Bukowski portrays poetry readings as a con-game and a hustle. In the story, Chinaski would much rather stay at home with his typewriter than promote his personality in such a fashion. He therefore believes that the primary role of the writer is to write and not to develop a public persona. This we also see in the novel *Hollywood* in which Chinaski does not end up being embraced by the film industry in any real sense, nor does he wish at any stage to be embraced by it.

Bukowski's Influence.

Gay Brewer notes about Bukowski's writing that, "his comments and work nearly always lead back to the writing act itself, a preemptive, conciliatory, and regenerative ritual that renders life livable. He expressed no interest in schools, movements or explicit ideologies." (1997: 9). An interesting contrast in this respect, are the three major Beat writers Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, who in the early 1940s formulated a loose collection of literary ideals which they entitled 'The New Vision' (Watson, 1995: 40). The New Vision was a philosophical manifesto of sorts which expanded upon an initial idea that: "Uncensored self-expression is the seed of creativity." (1995: 40). We have argued in this essay that Bukowski also thoroughly believed in this

idea and promoted it through the thoughts and actions of Henry Chinaski. However, Bukowski never theorised about his writing, which suggests the reasoning behind his statement that the Beats, “talked too much - about themselves. And they went for the media, the limelight.” (Brewer: 9). Therefore, according to Bukowski, it is up to the reader to form an opinion about the relative value of Chinaski's uninhibited self expression without the assistance of an authorial statement of intent.

Bukowski does share some affinity with a number of other writers who were contemporaries. Those most relevant to our discussion are the Realist writers of the 1970s such as Richard Ford and Tobias Wolff who have been identified by some critics as reviving realism in literature in response to the self reflexive experimental fiction of so-called post modernist writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut and John Barth. Malcolm Bradbury notes that, “the term 'Dirty Realism'...is the kind of writing to which [Tom] Wolfe gave the name 'K-Mart realism.' It refers to a flat form of writing, hyper detailed and socially specific, that did much to provide the tone for American fictional writing during the Eighties.” (1981: 268). A writer of particular importance in this respect is the short story writer and poet Raymond Carver who wrote in a sparse, aesthetically simple style which had the effect of increasing the intensity of hidden and sometimes disturbing aspects of the lives of ordinary people living in suburban America. In Carver stories his, “characters lead unheroic lives where things are frequently left unspoken - everything being implied through the minutiae of the story rather than being said.” (Calcutt and Shepard: 1998: 53). There are some significant similarities between Carver and Bukowski, particularly as both writers created stories about ordinary people whose lives are often shaped by desperate circumstances beyond their control. Carver, however, demonstrates a remarkable ability to introduce multiple voices into a single story, unlike Bukowski who is much more self obsessed, and writes mostly from a singular perspective.

Some important links between Carver and Bukowski can be found in the disturbed landscape that is the setting for many Carver stories, which Adam Meyer describes as 'Carver Country'. In his critical analysis of Carver's work, Meyer notes that Carver's characters are, “primarily employed, when they are employed at all, as blue-collar workers - waitresses, mill or factory workers.” (1995: 21). There is an ordinariness to them which is also true of Bukowski's characters in *Hot Water Music*.

The lives of Carver's characters are, “filled with failure, deterioration, disenchantment and despair.” (1995: 21). In Carver stories the personal conflicts of his characters are often directly linked to their unfulfilling socio-economic circumstances. Carver's greatest literary achievement is his belief in realism as a valid literary form, also very much Bukowski's domain. One could also draw some superficial links between Bukowski and a writer from the late 1980s such as Brett Easton Ellis who, in each of his novels, creates characters whose nihilistic view of the world has resulted from a disillusionment with the hollowness of capitalism. Ellis' characters belong to the sociologically defined Generation X, a social group who have seemingly become disenchanted with the materialist values of their parents, and are thus highly cynical about the capitalist society in which they live.

Dirty Realism as a recognisable genre took off in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A number of younger Australian writers had novels published around this time, and although they did not deliberately set out to create a specific literary movement, there are nevertheless certain thematic and stylistic similarities with Bukowski, in particular a shared focus on characters who live on the fringes of society and who engage in anti social behaviour. In an article on the topic, Murray Waldren notes that particular thematic concerns are, “physical and spiritual violence, copious, preferably sleazy sex, drugs, desperation.” Waldren is also aware that there are literary precedents, “It’s not a new literary genre - Henry Miller was a master, William Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg all dabbled there, so did Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver.” (1995: 13). In his article Waldren refers to such writers as Edward Berridge, Andrew McGahan and Christos Tsiolkas whose novel *Loaded* was eventually turned into a well received movie. In an interview to promote his novel *Last Drinks*, McGahan, whose first novel *Praise* won the Vogel literary award in 1991, states that, “*Praise* grew out of trying to imitate Bukowski. Badly.” (Elliot: 2000: 10).

In the Waldren article, both Berridge and McGahan talk about experiences working in dead-end jobs and becoming disillusioned with the idyllic vision of Australia as the lucky country. In this sense there are some similarities with Bukowski's own dystopic views about American society. In her interview with Waldren, novelist Justine Ettler notes that the bleak and violent tone of her novel *The River Ophelia* is closely linked to an awareness that: “My experience of life has warped my understanding of the

world...it's given me a skewed view of how it operates.” (1995: 14). Waldren does note that at the time he conducted his interview with Ettler, she was completing a PhD in contemporary American literature and concludes that, “the leather-jacketed gamin-cropped author appears incongruously miscast as the face behind such raw, explicit work.” (1995: 14). This assessment raises a doubt about the extent to which Bukowski’s art and the writing from this younger generation of Australian writers are compatible. One might suspect that Ettler's academic ambition would grate with the obstinately non-academic Bukowski, leaving her open to criticism from the grizzled old writer that she is just like all the others who would never accept that a, “great poet never knows what he is, he's a dime from the edge, but there's nothing holy about it. it's a job. like mopping a bar floor (sic).” (*Letters Vol 2*: 180).

However, there are hints of alienation in the life experiences of some of these younger Australian writers which influenced their writing. In his article, Murray Waldren notes that Edward Berridge, whose short story collection *Lives of the Saints* focuses on the sexually desperate and misanthropic lives of habitual drug users, criminals and blue collar workers, had himself experienced an unfulfilled and disillusioned youth: “He was a punk in the eighties, expelled from school pre-HSC, a burger griller at McDonalds and sometimes bank clerk.” (1995: 15). Similarly, Andrew McGahan's experiences working in a suburban Brisbane bottle shop formed the basis of *Praise*, a novel whose central character is mostly fatalistic and self-destructive. Bukowski would agree that a writer's experiences should ultimately shape the tone, style and thematic concerns of the writing itself. In this respect, he would have been well pleased with his literary children. Ultimately, the Australian grunge writers belonged to a literary trend that has since faded away. In contrast, Bukowski stuck to his themes across four decades of creativity.

The Artist.

Neeli Cherkovski's biography of Bukowski ends with a definitive statement from the writer: “I think about it a lot. Maybe it was the luck of the gods or just the fact that I kept working. I never pretended to be more than I was, a guy doing a job...end of statement.’” (1991: 326). Bukowski had written so much about Chinaski’s

life when he made this remark, there is little reason to doubt his sincerity. This phrase invites further thought on the relationship between art and the real world with respect to Bukowski's writing. Although Bukowski did not write his idiosyncratic, realist literature with any overt political agenda in mind, he did nevertheless approach his writing with a specific literary goal: He wrote in a simplified manner so that his work could be appreciated by the casual reader. Bukowski's writing is more conversational than lyrical. This is because he believed that aesthetic complexity created a wedge between art and reality.

We thus return to a significant influence on Charles Bukowski's writing, the self-obsessed, semi-autobiographical fiction of Henry Miller. Biographer Mary Dearborn notes that although Miller transcribed a passage from Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* when writing an early draft of his first published novel *Tropic of Cancer*:

more likely, however, he included the passage as a gesture against Joyce, whose work annoyed him immensely. *Ulysses*, Joyce's epic of the man-on-the-street could best be understood in terms of elitist literary conventions, he charged; Miller in some ways was writing a proletarian *Ulysses*, and perhaps he used Joyce's words to hint as much to his readers. (1991: 152).

Miller was possibly responding to the central character in Joyce's *Finnegans's Wake*, named HCE (Here Comes Everybody). Joyce's novel is virtually incomprehensible to the average reader not equipped with the intellectual capacity to decipher Joyce's literary puzzles. Miller set out to avoid the experimental/modernist complexities of Joyce's novel. The narrative flow of *Tropic of Cancer* is assisted by the colloquial language of everyday speech, including a liberal amount of profanity, so better to capture the self-expression of the character Henry Miller in a form more comprehensible to his readers.

Bukowski further simplifies Miller's aesthetic intent. He writes in letters about his dissatisfaction with Miller's surreal transgressions. His own literary aim was to make his writing as clear and understandable as possible in order to preserve the simple rhythm of his narratives. In other words, he deliberately avoided using 'word tricks' which might confuse his readers. He thus envisaged that what he looked for in literature, his readers did also. This is why Bukowski forsake aesthetic complexity in his writing. That he continued to do so in a forty year career is Bukowski's greatest literary achievement.

Bukowski provides an essential clue concerning the nature of his alternative aesthetic in *Hollywood* when Chinaski states that the constant re-telling of stories brings them closer to what they were supposed to be. In other words, the re-telling of stories allows Bukowski, through his persona Henry Chinaski, to make greater sense of the disturbing and unusual aspects of his own life. We have discussed some of these aspects in this essay. Moreover, the sympathetic reader learns enough about the life of the anti-hero Chinaski to be able to identify with at least some aspects of his character, in particular, the nature of Chinaski's struggle.

Struggle is the dominant motif in each of Bukowski's autobiographical novels. Henry Chinaski's struggle is alleviated somewhat in two later novels *Women* and *Hollywood*, in which he is depicted as having achieved some success as a writer, contributing to a more relaxed lifestyle in his later years, particularly in *Hollywood* in which the overall tone of that work is marginally more subdued than in Bukowski's first two novels *Post Office* and *Factotum*. It could be said of *Post Office* that Bukowski wrote it to see if he could write a novel. Before Bukowski wrote *Post Office* he had produced a large number of poems and short stories, but seemed less interested in lengthier prose.

In a letter to the poet Douglas Blazek in 1964, Bukowski suggests that a novel would not hold his attention over a longer span of time, unlike poetry and short stories which he was able to write very quickly, projecting a sharp immediacy as a consequence. In the letter Bukowski states, "write a book? a novel? I am too lazy, too sick, and such a waste of words, and they wouldn't print it, so why not break it down into poetic toothaches, all not so cumbersome, and I doubt I could stick to the subject..." (*Letters Vol 1*: 114). It is also likely that Bukowski simply did not have the time and energy that writing a novel requires. When he resigned from the post office in 1970 with the intention of making a living from writing, attempting a novel must have seemed more appealing. Hence, Bukowski bashed out a draft of *Post Office* in a matter of weeks (Cherkovski: 224). Bukowski's swift writing of the novel is reflected in the stark presentation of its central theme: the absurdity of work.

Each of the autobiographical novels following *Post Office* is distinguished by a greater attention to detail, and plot and thematic expansion. The novels and short story collections published in the 1980s also suggest a more reflective Bukowski,

particularly in terms of a greater focus placed on Chinaski's youth, yet the sharpness and simplicity of his style, present in his earliest stories and poems remained, although less consciously artless. Nevertheless, stylistic issues aside, struggle remains the one dominant theme unifying the autobiographical novels and stories. Struggle and its alleviation is manifested in the experiences of Henry Chinaski which are mostly ordinary, but also unusual at times, such as Chinaski's excessive focus on sex in the novel *Women*, and his encounter with the commercial film industry in the novel *Hollywood*.

It is the ongoing vacillation between the ordinary and the strange, represented in those experiences that Bukowski selected over others when mapping out Chinaski's life, which makes his autobiographical fiction so interesting to read. Chinaski stands apart from other literary characters who have originated from their creator's own personalities, because of the intentional recurrence of such aspects of his lifestyle as chronic drunkenness, gambling, ongoing obsession with sex, outright rejection of the day-job and distaste for the literature of the canon. The presence of such factors, along with Bukowski's preference for stylistic simplicity, explains both the cult or underground nature of Bukowski's writing and the outsider personality of Henry Chinaski, who suffers in the novels as a consequence of his awareness that the world is absurd, as is his life at times. This awareness originates with a series of harrowing experiences in Chinaski's youth which shaped his life until his creator passed away at the age of 74 and Chinaski along with him.

Bukowski's autobiographical novels are enlightening in these respects, but his writing is also entertaining. Bukowski's humour is often difficult to detect because he portrays Henry Chinaski's absurd experiences in a deadpan manner. This is so, whether the tone of the novel is more lighthearted as is the case with *Women* and *Hollywood*, or considerably darker as we see in *Post Office*, *Factotum* and *Ham on Rye*. There is something dryly comical about Bukowski portraying Chinaski as the victim of a woman's voracious sexual appetite in *Women*, yet one needs to be aware of the nature of Chinaski's personality before the humour apparent in such a portrayal is revealed. Thus, humour in Bukowski's work exists below the surface of his narratives, but is never too difficult to reach. This is because all Bukowski's writing, whether a poem, short story, or novel, is easy to read. What makes Bukowski's writing aesthetically pleasing, above and beyond its central themes, is its simplicity, its readability.

Chinaski's quest for freedom is depicted by Bukowski as a series of adventures his anti-hero embarks upon where he lurches from one absurd situation to the next without ever losing sight of his goal to defy absurdity through articulating his alternative view of the world. Bukowski keeps his readers entertained with lurid tales of Chinaski's drunken exploits, but always within the context of Chinaski's struggles and suffering as a consequence of a painful childhood that always remained in the shadows.

Arguably, art may be appreciated more significantly when something is known about the intentions of the artist when creating a particular work, and enough information exists for a work of art to be placed in its proper historical and social context. It may assist the reader who is interested in exploring Bukowski's autobiographical novels, to be aware that each one is concerned with presenting one individual's experience of the world. No matter how the narrative of each autobiographical novel unfolds, Chinaski always shares his discovery that the world is a strange, alienating and absurd place. He eventually decides that by turning to writing, he is able to share this discovery with others.

That Bukowski chose to write about Chinaski's life in such a frank and open manner is a major factor contributing to his reputation as a writer of the literary underground - that is, a writer of alternative fiction. As one of the working poor in America for much of his life, Bukowski often struggled to survive daily life with his sanity and physical health intact. However, he always faced the challenges presented to him with a fiery determination. Writing almost daily for four decades, Bukowski amassed a body of work that is amusing, confronting, and often bleak, but always fascinating.

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