

**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.