

University of Pardubice  
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Ideals of counterculture in the works of Charles Bukowski

Daniel Drake

Bachelor thesis

2018

Univerzita Pardubice  
Fakulta filozofická  
Akademický rok: 2016/2017

## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

Jméno a příjmení. **Daniel Drake**  
Osobní číslo: **H15268**  
Studijní program. **B7310 Filologie**  
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**  
Název tématu. **Ideály kontrakultury v díle Charlese Bukowského**  
Zadávací katedra. **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

### Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í

Poetiku Charlese Bukowského lze, mimo jiné, chápat jako pokus o vytvoření proti-prostředí, jež má čtenáře záměrně vyprovokovat k novému nahlížení okolního světa. Jaké předpoklady k tomu Bukowského vedly a co vše lze zahrnout pod označení kontrakultura v Americe v prvních dekádách po druhé světové válce, bude předmětem této práce. Výběr primární literatury je na autorovi práce, stěžejní pozornost však bude věnována Bukowského rané prosaické a esejistické tvorbě.

Rozsah grafických prací.

Rozsah pracovní zprávy.

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná**

Jazyk zpracování bakalářské práce: **Angličtina**

Seznam odborné literatury:

Bukowski, Charles. *Absence hrdiny* Praha: Argo, 2014.

Bukowski, Charles. *Pobryndané spisy* Praha: Argo,

Bukowski, Charles. *Nejkrásnější ženská ve městě*. Praha: Argo, 2007

Duval, Jean-François *Bukowski a beatníci*. Praha. Pragma, 2014.

Guziur, Jakub *Bukowski, beatníci a modernisté?* In: *Host*, roč. XXXI, č. 8 , 2015, s. 55-59

Gray, Timothy *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Community* Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2007

*Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, (eds.)

Peter Braunstein; Michael William Doyle. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Gair, Christopher. *The American Counterculture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007


Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

**Mgr. Michal Kleprlík, Ph.D.**

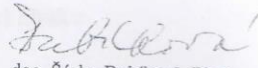
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **30. dubna 2017**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **31 března 2018**

  
prof. PhDr. Karel Rýdl, CSc.  
děkan

L.S.

  
doc. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D.  
vedoucí katedry

V Pardubicích dne 31 října 2017

Prohlašuji:

Tuto práci jsem vypracoval samostatně. Veškeré literární prameny a informace, které jsem v práci využil, jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

Byl jsem seznámen s tím, že se na moji práci vztahují práva a povinnosti vyplývající ze zákona č. 121/2000 Sb., autorský zákon, zejména se skutečností, že Univerzita Pardubice má právo na uzavření licenční smlouvy o užití této práce jako školního díla podle § 60 odst. 1 autorského zákona, a s tím, že pokud dojde k užití této práce mnou nebo bude poskytnuta licence o užití jinému subjektu, je Univerzita Pardubice oprávněna ode mne požadovat přiměřený příspěvek na úhradu nákladů, které na vytvoření díla vynaložila, a to podle okolností až do jejich skutečné výše.

Souhlasím s prezenčním zpřístupněním své práce v Univerzitní knihovně Univerzity Pardubice.

V Pardubicích dne 3. 4. 2018

Daniel Drake

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am using this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Mgr. Michal Kleprlík, Ph.D. for his help while I was writing this thesis.

## TITLE

The ideals of counterculture in the works of Charles Bukowski

## ANNOTATION

This thesis deals with the counterculture period in the United States of America. It defines the term and divides it into respective movements. It describes the different approaches to literature taken by the different movements and, on the basis of the information uncovered, categorises Charles Bukowski. The paper then analyses Bukowski's stories and poems in order to discover the counterculture features that he implemented into his work.

## KEY WORDS

counterculture, Bukowski, Charles, Beats

## NÁZEV PRÁCE

Ideály kontrakultury v díle Charlese Bukowského

## ANOTACE

Tato práce pojednává o období kontrakultury ve Spojených státech Amerických. Definuje kontrakulturu jako pojem a rozděluje ji na příslušná hnutí. Popisuje odlišné přístupy k literatuře, které tato hnutí praktikovala, a na základě zjištěných informací kategorizuje Charlese Bukowského. Práce poté analyzuje Bukowského povídky a básně za účelem objevení kontrakulturních rysů, které do svých děl implementoval.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

kontrakultura, Bukowski, Charles, beatníci

# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	8
1 COUNTERCULTURE.....	10
1.1 THE BEATS .....	11
1.2 HIPPIES .....	13
1.3 PUNK.....	14
1.4 CATEGORISING CHARLES BUKOWSKI .....	14
2 COUNTERCULTURE IDEALS IN THE WORK OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI .....	17
2.1 THE REASON BEHIND REASON .....	17
2.2 DINOSAURIA, WE.....	19
2.3 BREAK-IN.....	24
3 POETICS IN THE WORKS OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI.....	28
3.1 ANGER.....	28
3.2 HONESTY AND DIRECTNESS .....	31
3.3 COMMONNESS.....	33
3.4 DESPAIR .....	36
4 LITERARY CRITICISM OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI .....	39
CONCLUSION.....	43
RESUMÉ .....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48

## INTRODUCTION

In May 2017, the Brno Conservatory forbade one of their students from performing in a prestigious elocutionary competition simply because the student chose a poem by an underground figure called Egon Bondy. The principal of the Conservatory explained his decision by saying that Bondy's poems were profoundly profane; he even went on to punish the teacher that helped the student to prepare for the competition. Bondy's work used to be on the official blacklist during the communist regime, and the decision of the Conservatory suggests that society is still not ready for absolutely free speech. The American equivalent of Egon Bondy is Charles Bukowski.

Charles Bukowski has always been a difficult artist to understand and even more difficult to categorise. In schools, teachers either talk about him as being part of the "Beat generation" or do not talk about him at all. His politically-incorrect, flippant vocabulary has always made him a subject difficult to teach. He gave himself the title of "dirty old man"; some call him an anarchist, some an anti-establishment hero. So what exactly was Bukowski? What was his role in the counterculture phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and what type of messages was he trying to get across? This paper will attempt to answer these and many more questions by analysing Bukowski's work, pointing out the counterculture ideas that he had and putting them into context. Although Bukowski's (and Bondy's for that matter) critics are right when they say that his work is simply too vulgar, this paper will prove that the reasons behind the use of such language were valid and legitimate. Today, we live in a world of political correctness; a world where some type of art is frowned upon as unworthy of discussion and in some cases even forbidden. This thesis will try to prove that there is more to Charles Bukowski than just vulgarity and despair.

I decided to choose this topic because Bukowski's work, as well as the work of many other counterculture writers, deeply fascinates me. Unconventional, controversial and juicy literature is dear to me and Charles Bukowski had the gift of being able to provide all of these features.

The first chapter looks at the term "counterculture", defines it and breaks it down into four social and literary movements. Based on the information researched about these movements, it then looks at which niche Charles Bukowski might fit. Chapter two looks at Bukowski's work from a philosophical point of view, raising points about similarities with Camus and other absurdists, solely based on literary analysis. The selected works, or extracts from them, were chosen on the basis of their containing expressions of social resistance, class warfare, political



activism and other traits of counterculture ideals. The extracts in chapter two were taken from *Reason Behind Reason*, *Dinosauria*, *We*, and finally *Break-In*.

Chapter three discusses the poetics of Bukowski's style and especially the infamous vulgar way of writing that was so specific to him. This chapter approaches the taboo of vulgarity and tries to find possible explanations for why it was necessary for him to use such vile language. Four reasons are identified and presented: anger, honesty, commonness, and despair. The order of presentation was not decided at random; rather, just as in chapter two, the extracts were chosen carefully to illustrate and support all the points raised. *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town* was the perfect partner for this, as was the collection of stories and essays constructed by David Stephen Calonne called *Absence of the Hero*.

In order to end this introduction on a whimsical note, it is necessary to understand that the German-born writer despised academia and vice-versa – it had no respect for him. This is why I thought it would be rather ironic to write an entire academic paper on him and his work. Moreover, Bukowski did not like analysing his own work. In an interview with Jean-Francois Duval, he said: “That’s for philosophers to play with. Let anyone devote oneself to it.” So here I am.

# 1 COUNTERCULTURE

This chapter discusses the types of counterculture movements in America during the 20th century. Also, it focuses on the question of which of those movements Charles Bukowski belonged to.

So, what exactly is counterculture? What does it mean? The word is clearly a compound of two words “counter” and culture”. Merriam Webster defines the word as “a culture with values and mores that run counter to those of established society”.<sup>1</sup> The term itself is often attributed to Theodore Roszak, the author of *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. As the name of the book suggests, the term “counterculture” is often applied to a specific group that could be labelled as “young liberal lefties”, owing to the age and political ideology of most of the people associated that movement. There is no generally accepted timeline as to when this movement was socially active as there was no centralised authority in charge that would make counterculture unitary. In the preface of the book mentioned above, Roszak explains the trouble that comes with attempting to describe this complex period in the history of the USA. “It would surely be convenient if these perversely ectoplasmic Zeitgeists were card-carrying movements, with a headquarters, an executive board, and a file of official manifestoes. But of course, they aren't.”<sup>2</sup>

Not only is this term used for literary purposes, but it is also a matter of philosophy, psychology, sociology and even religion. Even though most of us would associate *counterculture* with 1960s America, Roszak believes that counterculture, in general, was identifiable in the period from 1942 until 1972.<sup>3</sup>

When one looks closely at the ideals of the sixties counterculture, one will find similarities with today’s American society. Just as George McGovern won over the young generation when running for president as the Democratic nominee in 1972, Bernie Sanders managed to do the same thing in 2016. Some say that the sixties movement was just about young “losers” with unwashed hair taking LSD and marijuana.<sup>4</sup> Some go even further, and criticise the period for not bringing anything positive to society. But both assumptions are simply not true. As Roszak

---

<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster dictionary: counterculture. Merriam-Webster [online]. Merriam-Webster, 2018 [cit. 2018-03-27]. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counterculture>

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1969), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Charles University: Prague, 2016), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Harris, *The Flowering of the Hippies*, The Atlantic, September 1967, 1.

correctly explains in his famous book, the counterculture protest influenced and probably will continue to influence many generations to come. In the following extract, Roszak reveals how counterculture movements in the fifties and sixties influenced their successors that one hears so much about in the modern era.

[T]he environmental movement would never have had such success were it not for those who were willing to think about the limits of the city industrial society ... the feminist movement would never have existed were it not for the courage of women that stood up to patriarchalist institutions and the chauvinism of their husbands and boyfriends ... the liberation of homosexuals would never have arisen were it not for those that weren't afraid to deconstruct stereotypes.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the American counterculture played a massive part in forming the world we now live in. To this day, many counterculture figures, such as Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Allen Ginsberg and John Lennon, are heroes for the young generation desperately searching for its identity.

Moving onto the division of the period into subgroups, academics differ in their opinions. Timothy Leary, an American psychologist and one of the biggest counterculture icons, divided alternative culture into four periods. The Beats, Hippies, Punk and Cybernauts.<sup>6</sup>

The Beats (1944-1959), Hippies (1959-1975), Punk (1975-1990), Cybernauts (1990-2005).

As the conclusive aim of the first chapter is to categorise Charles Bukowski, and as from a time perspective the Cybernauts are irrelevant, only the first three categories are described in the following text.

## 1.1 THE BEATS

The Beat Generation – often simply referred to as *The Beats* or *Beatniks* – was a cultural and literary movement in 1950s America. Although it mainly revolved around Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, the term generally encompasses many other artists. Even though many of the representatives of this so-called generation didn't like to be associated with the name, academics and journalists liked and still do like to pigeon-hole writers into particular categories. Allegedly, the name came about in a conversation between one of the main figures

---

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Charles University: Prague, 2016), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats*, (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 19.

of this movement, Jack Kerouac, and his close friend, later considered to be the author of the first Beat book, John C. Holmes. They were discussing another of these denominations, “The Lost Generation”. In *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*, Allen Ginsberg writes the following:

Kerouac discouraged the notion of a coherent generation and said, “Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation!” They discussed whether it was a “found” generation, which Kerouac sometimes referred to, or “angelic” generation, or various other epithets. But Kerouac waved away the question and said “beat generation!” not meaning to name the generation but to un-name it.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from this, the word can also have the connotation “weary”. The aim that Beatniks held was clear. Inspired by such thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, they promoted something that could be described as “self-reliance”. Regarding this way of life, the Beats followed the categorical imperative, and therefore not only promoted this but practised it just as much.

Often with the help of drugs and alcohol,<sup>8</sup> the Beats tried to escape from the unjust (and what they considered “meaningless”) world and write about the true, raw things that life brought. Referring to Walt Whitman, the Beats advocated the utter and complete rejection of social conformity and consumerism. In addition to that, their intention was to shock all readers with the obscenity, and often rawness of the sexual content depicted in their work. As was explained in the introduction to this thesis, there is no unitarism to American counterculture, and the Beats are no different. What more, they are probably the most diverse group of writers in the history of American literature. Yet Jack Kerouac did once write what was later considered to be something like a “Beat manifesto”.

Blow as deep as you want-write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2017). 2.

<sup>8</sup> John Long, *Drugs and the 'Beats': The Role of Drugs in the Lives and Writings of Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg* (Texas: Virtualbookworm.com, 2005), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Kerouac, “*Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*”[online]. In: 19-Sep-2013 [cit. 2018-03-27]. Available at: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/kerouac-spontaneous.html>, assessed on January 1, 2018.

The content of this manifesto defined the poetics followed by the Beats and was essentially what distinguished them from other movements and genres. Another feature that made them very different to the other two described in this chapter was that they were barely politically involved. Dr Bruce Conforth, an expert in counterculture subcultures, considered the prominent Beatnik Jack Kerouac the most apolitical writer that one could ever meet. Dr Conforth concluded that being “marginally apolitical” is essential for becoming a successful cultural subgroup.<sup>10</sup> However, this argument can hardly be applied to the following movement.

## 1.2 HIPPIES

The Hippies, also called “Yippies” were another counterculture movement, which came right after the Beatniks. They are described as impartial, peace-loving, tolerant, anti-intellectual, intuitive and mysterious.<sup>11</sup> Opinions of experts differ as to whether Hippies constituted a successor movement to the Beats or whether they were in fact two completely separate, mutually exclusive groups.

However, some relation and similarities between this movement and the previously mentioned one are clear. For instance, the term “hippie” is derived from the word “hipster”, which was a denotation that had been originally used for the Beats.

Yet there is one major difference between the two movements. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Beats thought and expressed themselves in a very dark way; they wrote in a fairly self-centred style and although they did care about breaking the “status quo”, they were not that interested in letting the whole world know about themselves. It was a movement revolving mainly around artists, and one would not be able to spot a Beatnik on the street simply by looking at him.

The Hippies, on the other hand, were very outgoing and outspoken, and even though they portrayed their community as peace-loving, some might oppose that and suggest that they were, in fact, aggressive in putting their point across. Their dress code was infamously distinctive and is very popular even in today’s world. Unlike the Beats, they were very politically involved. As Britannica states, “Hippies advocated nonviolence and love, a popular phrase being ‘Make love, not war,’ for which they were sometimes called ‘flower children.’” They promoted openness

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul Hiebert, “*What We’re Missing Out On: A Conversation About Beats, Hippies, and Punks*”, Flavorwire, March 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats* (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 19.

and tolerance as alternatives to the restrictions and regimentation they saw in middle-class society.”<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 PUNK

Another very popular counterculture movement in the late 70’s was Punk. A subculture originally founded in the UK made its way to the United States fairly quickly. As with most other subculture movements, the ideology here was not unanimous either. Generally, the views of punk followers started from being simply anti-establishment but eventually went all the way up to libertarianism and core anarchism.

The main platform of this subculture was music, with groups as the Sex Pistols and the Ramones making a name for themselves in the industry with such iconic songs as “God Save the Queen” and “Blitzkrieg Pop” respectively.

Punk literature was not that common, with Leary describing it as “murky, melancholic, destructive, pessimistic and refusing western culture”.<sup>13</sup> This sad, almost nihilistic view was demonstrated and summed up by Sex Pistols’ above-mentioned song “God Save the Queen”, which was actually first called “No Future”. This self-explanatory slogan then became somewhat of a motto for punks. Punk writers, just like the Beats, were known for being very open and explicit about sex and its taboo-related topics. Some of the most famous Punk writers include Patti Smith, Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, and Sam McPheeters. Punk themes were often expressed through anger and vulgarity, as they considered these two features to enable them to demand the impossible and make themselves heard.

### 1.4 CATEGORISING CHARLES BUKOWSKI

Charles Bukowski was born in 1920 and died in 1994. The very first story written by him was published in Slate and was called *Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip*, which was just a short text that he wrote at the age of 23. However, he published his first proper poetry collection *Flower, Fist, and Bestial Wail* in 1960 and continued writing until his death. Therefore, from

---

<sup>12</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, “Hippie”[online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hippie>, assessed on November 22, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats*, (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 19.

the time perspective, it is possible to consider him a part of each of the four periods, respectively. The question is: where does he stand from the literary point of view?<sup>14</sup>

In schools, Bukowski is usually taught as being a member of the Beat generation. Strictly speaking, given the classification of the three main American counterculture periods, it is possible to argue that such a practice is not entirely correct. In an interview for *Paris Métro* in 1978, Bukowski admitted that he harmonises with the punk era much more than with the Beat generation.<sup>15</sup> Those “punk” views, such as pessimism and scruffiness can be seen in most of Bukowski’s works. In Mike Mills’ indie movie *20<sup>th</sup> Century Women*, the main protagonist – an adolescent boy – keeps justifying his mother’s strange behaviour with the phrase “don’t mind her, she grew up during the Depression.” As Bukowski did too, this is something that might have formed his gloomy view of life as well.

So, is Bukowski a Beat or not? And if not, what makes him different? The common ground that both the Beats and Bukowski share is disillusionment with the American dream and disgust with the consumerist society. Bukowski never insisted on art being “pretty-pretty”. He wanted his works to reflect what life and the world really was. Therefore, when he made his characters members of the lowest group on the social-economic scale, he was not trying to push any ulterior motives; he simply depicted what “the land of freedom” was actually like. This is a major difference between Bukowski and, say, Kerouac. The Beats wanted their protagonists to be “hardscrabble losers” and wanted to glorify them. Bukowski, on the other hand, considered himself to be one of those losers, and unlike the Beats, he was born into a poor family and had to grow up doing the kind of scruffy, blue-collar, low-grade jobs that the Beats later – by way of affectation – celebrated. Bukowski presents the readers with the real world but has no ambition of finding a solution to its problems, such as poverty or injustice. This is why some academics are reluctant to class Bukowski as a counterculture figure, alongside the likes of Ginsberg or Cassady. The official Beats demanded change, and some – especially Ginsberg – were fiery activists and participated in all kinds of political and social movements. Kerouac, Cassady and other Beats also held spiritual beliefs and practised Zen Buddhism. Bukowski, on the other hand, was not religious and never explicitly spoke out on any religious or philosophical subjects. The writer Gerard Locklin, Bukowski’s contemporary, has even said that Bukowski is very good at depicting the real life of the lower class but terribly pathetic when

---

<sup>14</sup> “Literary point of view” in terms of the different counterculture movements. For genre categorisation, see chapter 3.4.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats* (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 21.

being “waxing pseudopoetic or pseudophilosophical”.<sup>16</sup> More arguments for not labelling Bukowski as a Beat writer come with his constant criticism of them. Despite being an admirer of Ginsberg’s early work, Charles Bukowski called into question the authenticity of the Beats. Allegedly, Bukowski excoriated the Beats for being too full of themselves and caring more about fame than the actual writing.<sup>17</sup> In a famous interview with Jean-Francois Duval, he said: “Better beat someone, then being beat.” Nevertheless, the fact is that Kerouac’s *On The Road* is considered to be one of the best novels of modern time<sup>18</sup> and unlike Bukowski’s pessimist literature, inspired and continues to inspire many young individuals to “get up and do something”. Whether that “something” is fighting the system that beats you or simply travelling the world is up to each and every one reader. By contrast, in *Bukowski and the Beats*, Charles Bukowski explicitly says that his biggest ambition in life was to “win bets on horse racing”.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, he was not interested in making the world a better place or inspiring his fellow citizens, as Kerouac was. As Giovanni Di Stefano concludes in his paper, and as has been demonstrated in the previous paragraph, Bukowski’s solution is to abandon the whole concept of work and instead to continue to resist the establishment until it collapses.<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed exploration of this belief, please see chapter four. This evidently anarchist ideal is what places Bukowski among punk artists, whose philosophy and moral beliefs are described in the following chapter.

---

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Locklin, *Charles Bukowski: A Sure Bet*. (Sudbury: Water Row Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>17</sup> Gene Brewer, *Charles Bukowski*. (London: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Robert McCrum, “*The 100 Best Novels*”[online], available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/02/100-best-novels-no-76-on-the-road-jack-kerouac>, assessed on January 1, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats*, (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 169.

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Di Stefano, “*Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness of Work in Charles Bukowski*”, *World Futures*, July 25, 2017.



## 2 COUNTERCULTURE IDEALS IN THE WORK OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI

Even though Charles Bukowski did not intend to insert a deeper level into his work, one simply cannot ignore the philosophical format of his writing. Bukowski's inclination towards the nihilistic beliefs of the punk subculture could, from today's point of view, be considered fairly existentialistic. Bukowski explores the meaning of life very well in his short story *The Reason Behind Reason*.

### 2.1 THE REASON BEHIND REASON

In this story, Bukowski's early version of his alter ego, Chelaski, a young baseball player, is just in the middle of an important match. In the first part, his team is fielding, and Chelaski hopes that the ball doesn't fly at him. Every time the ball flies in the opposite direction, he sighs. Feeling outside the action, his eyes wander off to the crowd.

What did they want done? It ran through his mind again: what did they want done? Suddenly he was terrified and didn't know the reason.<sup>21</sup>

Chelaski doubts his purpose in the game. Both his baseball purpose and life purpose. He feels as if he does not quite belong. The next time the ball is struck, it flies towards him.

The ball came into his glove. It entered his glove, and he felt the strong pressure and pleasant push of the catch. He threw the ball to second, holding the runner on first. It was a good throw, and Chelaski was amazed; it had seemed as if the ball had gone there because it was supposed to. His terror left a little; *he was getting away with it*.<sup>22</sup>

This metaphorical sequence clearly exposes Bukowski's view on life. He thinks of life as just playing an allocated role. Being terribly bad at it but *getting away with it*. He does not believe in himself, so when he manages to accomplish something, he does not quite trust it was him that caused that. This is a psychological concept called the "impostor syndrome." It was coined by Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne A. Imes in their joint work "The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention."<sup>23</sup> In this break-through paper,

---

<sup>21</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Absence of the Hero*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 2010), 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Pauline Rose Clance; Suzanne Ament Imes, *The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention*, (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 1978), 1.

these two renowned psychoanalysts explain that people suffering from this syndrome tend to deny their own accomplishments and attribute their success to pure luck. Impostors also have extremely low self-confidence, which results in their doing only whatever is required by their superiors, afraid of taking risks themselves. It is obvious that Bukowski could not have known the term “impostor syndrome”, as *Reason Behind Reason* had been published before the two psychologists even started college. This fact just goes to show what a clever writer Bukowski was, choosing ever-present topics to implement in his short stories.

Next, the story continues with Chelaski moving on to batting. He misses the first pitch but connects with the second one well. The crowd and his teammates shout “run!” but he doesn’t move. People throw cushions at him and he simply looks at them questioningly. He is out.

Chelaski walked to the dugout as the noise continued. The team was taking to the field, Hull replacing him in the outfield.<sup>24</sup>

Bukowski concludes the story on a pessimistic note, indicating that no matter what you have done in your life, you can always be replaced. He indicates that people make up the reasons for justifying their existence. Again, this can be interpreted as a form of existentialism, where Chelaski is trying to make sense of life (or in this case, the match), but fails. Of course, Camus famously concluded that if one keeps searching for the meaning of life, one will never be truly happy. On the contrary, one simply must accept that life is absurd in order to “really live”. In this particular story, Bukowski does not go as far as Camus by creating philosophical mantras, but certainly adds an interesting insight into the matter.

---

<sup>24</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Absence of the Hero*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 2010), 3.

## 2.2 DINOSAURIA, WE

Another great example of Bukowski's nihilism is his poem *Dinosauria, We*.

Although the title does not suggest great intellectual work, this poem is quite easily Bukowski's best counterculture piece. In fact, there is no other poem that would so explicitly criticise society and the establishment as *Dinosauria, We* does.

Dinosauria, We  
Born like this  
Into this  
As the chalk faces smile  
As Mrs. Death laughs  
As the elevators break  
As political landscapes dissolve  
As the supermarket bag boy holds a college degree  
As the oily fish spit out their oily prey  
As the sun is masked  
We are  
Born like this  
Into this  
Into these carefully mad wars  
Into the sight of broken factory windows of emptiness  
Into bars where people no longer speak to each other  
Into fist fights that end as shootings and knifings  
Born into this  
Into hospitals which are so expensive that it's cheaper to die  
Into lawyers who charge so much it's cheaper to plead guilty  
Into a country where the jails are full and the madhouses closed  
Into a place where the masses elevate fools into rich heroes  
Born into this

Walking and living through this  
Dying because of this  
Muted because of this  
Castrated  
Debauched  
Disinherited  
Because of this  
Fooled by this  
Used by this  
Pissed on by this  
Made crazy and sick by this  
Made violent  
Made inhuman  
By this  
The heart is blackened  
The fingers reach for the throat  
The gun  
The knife  
The bomb  
The fingers reach toward an unresponsive god  
The fingers reach for the bottle  
The pill  
The powder  
We are born into this sorrowful deadliness  
We are born into a government 60 years in debt  
That soon will be unable to even pay the interest on that debt  
And the banks will burn  
Money will be useless

There will be open and unpunished murder in the streets  
It will be guns and roving mobs  
Land will be useless  
Food will become a diminishing return  
Nuclear power will be taken over by the many  
Explosions will continually shake the earth  
Radiated robot men will stalk each other  
The rich and the chosen will watch from space platforms  
Dante's Inferno will be made to look like a children's playground  
The sun will not be seen and it will always be night  
Trees will die  
All vegetation will die  
Radiated men will eat the flesh of radiated men  
The sea will be poisoned  
The lakes and rivers will vanish  
Rain will be the new gold  
The rotting bodies of men and animals will stink in the dark wind  
The last few survivors will be overtaken by new and hideous diseases  
And the space platforms will be destroyed by attrition  
The petering out of supplies  
The natural effect of general decay  
And there will be the most beautiful silence never heard  
Born out of that.  
The sun still hidden there  
Awaiting the next chapter.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Run With the Hunted*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 492.

The first thing to remember is that the poem, just like most of Bukowski's poems, refuses to follow any patterns – that is to say, either linguistic patterns or structural patterns. The writer uses free verse in order to convey his message without any restrictions and indicates through the lack of commas that the poem is intended to be read in a constant, rushed rhythm. This already could be considered a counterculture feature, as Bukowski's version of free verse runs counter to the poetic standard.

To create a driving rhythm that can catch the reader's eye, Bukowski often uses anaphoras, such as “born” or “the”, and – most importantly “into” – when enumerating his subjects. This makes the poem more emotional as it visualises the writer's need to get his message, – or in this case prophecy – across.

The poem itself can be interpreted as a warning, prophecy or social critique. The very first line, which continues to repeat itself through the entire text, informs the readers that they are all “born like this” and can do nothing about it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this correlates well with the punk “no future” approach to life. This already is a very pessimistic note that the writer starts on, and he follows it up with the phrase “Into this.” What does Bukowski mean by “this” though? Does he mean the world? It seems so, and given the gloomy mood of the entire poem, he considers this world to be in a rather depressing state.

In the next couple of lines, using anaphora again, Bukowski describes this depressing and declining world through metaphors criticising corporate industries for polluting our planet and “fake people” for not fighting against it. It is interesting that despite having a lot to say about this issue, Bukowski's poem is not a call to action. Thus, it differs from other counterculture poems such as Bob Dylan's song *The Times Are A-Changing*, which tackles the same issue but in a manner that directly addresses his audience.

The following nine lines – all beginning with another anaphora “into” – each list a problem that troubled the United States at that time. What is interesting from the 2018 point of view is that not much has changed since Bukowski wrote this poem. America still takes part in ridiculous foreign wars, still has hospitals that are virtually inaccessible for the middle class, and still has major problems with mass shootings and knifings. All of this is of course to the happiness of a character mentioned in the beginning – Mrs Death. She (and it is very interesting that it is a “she”) is the only one benefiting from all of this, as she can take many dead souls home with her.

What makes this poem prophetic are two noteworthy lines in this section: “Into bars where people no longer speak to each other” and “Into a place where the masses elevate fools into rich heroes”. It seems strange to think that both of these – what we could now call phenomena of our century – were already visible in Bukowski’s lifetime. Bars, which Bukowski saw as venues for socialising and remonstrating about the establishment, were now according to him occupied by voiceless depressed men and women without any motivation. One could analogically replace bars with a different venue, but Bukowski’s alcoholic way of life made him choose bars. This feature is even more apparent in today’s world with the rise of social media and smart phones shifting the purpose of spending time in bars and pubs to soul-less staring into mobile screens.

Moreover, the second line is prescient owing to the fact that the way our free market works; indeed, it sometimes results in untalented, unskilled buffoons gaining a lot of media attention and therefore a substantial amount of wealth. Even though he meant this line as a dig at rich politicians forgetting to care about the poor people that elected them, if we take Bukowski’s word “heroes” and change it to a word more appropriate for today – “influencers” – it can be proved that nothing has changed. According to research conducted by CBS News,<sup>26</sup> the most influential personas for the young generation emerge from social media platforms. It is not difficult to deduce whether Bukowski would have approved of these influencers.

Bukowski then explains that people are dying muted because the system is dysfunctional and there is no other option. It is also clear that the writer is angry because he was never asked whether he wanted to take part in this (referring to the very beginning of the poem) and complains that *this* makes him inhuman, horrible. He mentions this feeling in the interview with Duval: “No one chooses or decides. We just think that we decide. It is all chosen and decided for us. By some elementary ignorant power called life ...”<sup>27</sup>

“The fingers reach toward an unresponsive god”. Once again, this sentence is an obvious reference to Albert Camus’ philosophy of the Absurd, which had influenced Bukowski a lot. In the most acclaimed work by this French philosopher, Camus presents several ways to escape the “absurd” – the seeming meaninglessness of life. One of the approaches, according to Camus, is to turn to God<sup>28</sup> and undertake something, which is usually referred to as a “leap of faith”. Another approach that Camus presented was distraction, meaning one could not turn to God

---

<sup>26</sup> Top social media influencers of 2018. *CBC NEWS* [online]. Available at: <https://www.cbcnews.com/pictures/social-media-influencers-influential-2018/>, assessed on March 27, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats*, (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 182.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Random House, 1955), 34.

but to other pleasures of life, such as food, drink, drugs or sex. Bukowski also reflects on that in the following lines, “The pill The powder”.

The rest of the poem then seems to serve as a sort of dystopian prophecy for our world. Bukowski describes how the economy will break down, which will eventually lead to utter anarchy and something that he likens to “Dante’s Inferno.” He expects that the future will see the natural resources of our planet dying, probably because of the actions of the oil barons that he mentions in the first part. The Earth will become a polluted, uninhabitable place, where people suffer from incurable diseases and the wealthy are the only ones to escape this apocalypse by flying off to space. This particular prediction of Bukowski’s goes well hand in hand with SpaceX announcing in 2017 that it plans on taking people to Mars by 2024.<sup>29</sup> Needless to say, the fee for such a trip will be so high that indeed only “rich and the chosen” will be able to go.

*Dinosauria, We* ends on a fascinating note. Bukowski concludes that in the very end, even the privileged members of society in space will die out due to their running out of supplies and that the only thing left on Earth will be “the most beautiful silence never heard”. Only after the extinction of humanity will there be silence and peace. Silence and peace that no one will be left to hear. Humans, according to Bukowski, will eventually end up just like dinosaurs – gone forever. This analogy is, of course, the reason for naming the poem *Dinosauria, We*, as first went the dinosaurs and then humanity. The author believes that the only thing accompanying silence at that point will be the Sun. Hidden due to consequences of human action, but still there. “Awaiting the next chapter.”

Considering what he wrote in this poem, and what is going to be discussed later on in other works, Bukowski can be placed on the left side of the political spectrum. He was a strong critic of the upper class, their dominant role in society and their natural privilege, as is clear from the following short story.

### 2.3 BREAK-IN

This short story, written by Bukowski for *Hustler* in 1979, depicts two burglars, Harry and Eddie, breaking in a rich person’s house. The fact that *Break-In* was published in this periodical,

---

<sup>29</sup> Brad Jones, “Elon Musk is Officially Sending Humans to Mars in 2024” [online], Available at: <https://futurism.com/elon-musk-is-officially-sending-humans-to-mars-in-2024/>, Assessed on February 18, 2018.



founded by Larry Flynt and considered to be fairly profane, is peculiar because the word “hustler” is often a synonym for “thief”.<sup>30</sup> What originally starts as an ordinary tale of two outcasts simply trying to steal a bit of money quickly turns into a series of nasty and horrifying events. Harry, who embodies dominance, has total power over his simple acquaintance Eddie, who can only speak when Harry lets him and does whatever Harry tells him to do. When these two crooks discover that the house they are breaking into is not vacant, they decide to find the inhabitants and terrorise them. The house is occupied by a wealthy news reporter Tom Maxson and his much younger partner, Nana. It is not clear whether Harry had known this before he picked this particular house for the robbery, but from the abomination he clearly feels for Tom and Nana, it is possible to guess that he had.

The extracts below have been chosen to illustrate the theme, as well as Bukowski’s counterculture ideals.

She was dressed in a light-green negligee. Harry walked around and broke one of the shoulder straps. He grabbed one of the woman's breasts and pulled it out. “Nice, ain't it?” he said to me. Then he slapped her across the face, hard.

“You address me with respect, whore!” Harry said. Then he walked around and sat Tom Maxson back up. “And you: I told you I don't play.”

Maxson revived. “You've got the gun; that's all you've got.”

“You fool. That's all I need. Now I'm gonna get some cooperation from you and your whore or it's going to get worse.”

“You cheap punk!” Maxson said.

This extract demonstrates well what the vibe of the entire story is. Tom represents the upper class – a direct symbol of the establishment, as he reads the news for living. Harry and his friend on the other hand, come from a lower-class background and therefore symbolise the poor – a class that Bukowski considered to be terrorised and oppressed. Tom considers them both to be “cheap punks” – a term that Bukowski himself identified with a lot. Whereas Tom used it to express his contempt for both of the burglars, Harry seemed to be proud of being one.

Harry then tells Eddie to go and kiss Nana so that Tom feels humiliated. Eddie finds himself in an unusual situation as he describes Nana as being the most beautiful woman he has ever seen

---

<sup>30</sup> Hustler. *Ethymonline* [online]. [cit. 2018-03-27]. Available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/hustler>

but his sense of morality tells him he does not have the right. He apologises to Nana and kisses her, which leads to him getting an erection.

“Look, Maxson,” said Harry, “your wife gave my man a hard-on! How the hell are we supposed to get any work done around here? We came for cash and jewellery.”

“You wise-ass punks make me sick. You're no better than maggots.”

“And what have you got? The six o'clock news. What's so big about that? Political pull and an asshole public. Anybody can read the news. I make the news.”<sup>31</sup>

Harry has the need to show dominance over everyone. He is already in charge of Eddie and gaining power over an innocent woman was not hard either. Tom Maxson is a powerful man, both influence-wise and strength-wise, but in Harry's opinion (and probably Bukowski's as well, for that matter) he made his name and fortune in an unjust world, to the detriment of people like himself and Eddie. “What's so big about that? ... Anybody can read the news. I make the news.” The use of the word “make” is essential for understanding this story, as it clearly establishes the power that Harry has, despite being just a burglar. He has no respect for Tom nor for his work. He even calls him a “hero”, which is a direct reference to *Dinosauria, We*, where Bukowski criticised the masses for elevating “rich heroes” to power and money.

By now, the main theme of this short story – class warfare – is evident. Bukowski dissolves the relationship between these two classes with a theme that Di Stefano calls the “rigidly asymmetric dualism.”<sup>32</sup> Harry and Eddie, as members of the working class, overpower Tom and Nana, two people living off the perks of capitalism.

“Nana,” said Harry, “I like that name, ‘Nana.’ That's class, Class an ass. That's what the rich get while we get the scrubwomen.”

“Why don't you join the Communist Party?” asked Maxson.

“Man, I don't care to Wait Centuries for something that might not finally work. I want it now.”

“Look, Harry,” I said, “all we're doing is standing around and holding conversations with these people. That doesn't get us anything. I don't care what they think. Let's get the loot and split. The longer we stay, the sooner we draw the heat.”

“Now, Eddie,” he answered, “that's the first good bit of sense I've heard you speak in five or six years.”

---

<sup>31</sup> Charles Bukowski, “*Break-In*”, *Hustler*, March 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanni Di Stefano, “*Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness of Work in Charles Bukowski*”, *World Futures*, July 25, 2017.

“I don't care,” said Maxson. “You're just the weak feeding off of the strong. If I weren't here, you'd hardly exist. You remind me of people who go around assassinating political and spiritual leaders. It's the worst kind of cowardice; it's the easiest thing to do with the least talent available. It comes from hatred and envy; it comes from rancor and bitterness and ultimate stupidity; it comes from the lowest scale of the human ladder; it stinks and it reeks and it makes me ashamed to belong to the same tribe.”

“Boy,” said Harry, “that was some speech. Even piss can't stop your flow of bullshit. You're one spoiled turd. You realize how many people there are on this earth without a chance? Because of where and how they were born? Because they had no education? Because they never had anything and never will have and nobody gives a fuck, and you marry the best body you can find, your age be damned?”<sup>33</sup>

This extract contains the escalation of the entire story and shows the ideological clash between the two societal groups, which are obviously at opposite poles to each other. Bukowski projected his feelings towards the establishment and capitalism as a whole into the character of Harry. When he expresses his disapproval of the way society is run, he is labelled a communist. Going back to the point made earlier about Bernie Sanders being a counterculture icon of today, there is a direct parallel to be seen between Bukowski and Sanders. The American establishment tended to (and still tends to) stamp anyone as a “communist” or “Marxist” if he or she shows any kind of displeasure with the status quo. Of course, Bukowski did not identify himself as a Marxist and makes fun of the idea in the line following Tom's question, adding that he demands change “now.” The establishment – or Maxson in this case – sees the matter differently, saying that Harry/Bukowski needs Maxson/the establishment to exist; otherwise he would not exist either. Maxson, of course, forgets to add that the same rule applies to himself as well, as in a capitalist society both classes are mutually dependant.

The rest of the story is less meaningful and more scatological. As the purpose of this chapter is to explore the philosophy and the attitude of Charles Bukowski, there is no need to comment on the remainder. In a nutshell, Harry rapes Nana in front of Maxson while Eddie masturbates, and then they both leave without even stealing anything. The story ends on a bizarre note: seeing both of the burglars off to the theatre. The almost ludicrous mundaneness of the ending suggests that this (i.e. engaging in objectively horrible actions) is something that the two outcasts do on a regular basis without having any moral compunction about it.

---

<sup>33</sup> Charles Bukowski, “*Break-In*”, *Hustler*, March 1979.

### 3 POETICS IN THE WORKS OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI

“I never pump up my vulgarity. I wait for it to arrive in its own terms.”<sup>34</sup>

Throughout his career, Charles Bukowski was often disdained for the style of writing he used – especially for the profane words and lecherous sentences. As David Charlson writes in his dissertation from 1995, the vulgarity that catches one’s eye only masks a deeper purpose.<sup>35</sup> But does it really? Were critics and academics not right after all, when they considered him disgusting and not worthy of reading? This chapter examines whether Bukowski used the theme of obscenity to express a deeper message, or simply swore for the sake of swearing. Moreover, it is essential to note that the order of these themes is not random, but rather follows the succession of emotions that Bukowski experienced when writing his stories.

#### 3.1 ANGER

To understand why Charles Bukowski always felt the need to express himself in such a vulgar way, one must understand what the writer’s life was like, and especially what kind of upbringing he had.

Young Charles was born to German migrants and spent most of his childhood in Cleveland. Bukowski senior was an ex-soldier, and – according to *Ham on Rye*, the novel widely considered to be Bukowski’s autobiography – was a very cruel and angry man. This book also presents Charles’ father in a dark light, depicting him as abusing young Charles, as well Mrs Bukowski, both mentally and physically. “Who *is* that horrible man? Every time he comes in here there’s an argument”, one of the characters describes Bukowski’s father in the novel. Charles was also forbidden to attend the local pre-school, resulting in him being very isolated for most of his early childhood. Later, when he finally started going to school, he was often bullied for his strange behaviour, German accent and especially for his extreme condition of acne vulgaris, which the doctors were unable to cure. It is therefore clear that Bukowski did not have a smooth upbringing and it is understandable that the emotions he developed throughout his adolescence were carried across into his writing.

---

<sup>34</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Women* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1978), 115.

<sup>35</sup> David Charlson, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 1995), 8.

The first reason for his using vulgarity, therefore, is anger. It can be said that he used his art to “get back” – albeit indirectly – at some of the people that had wounded him in the past. Bukowski even obliquely admitted to his father being a major trigger for his unsavoury vocabulary in a poem called *vulgarity*. In this poem, he writes about his mother-in-law not liking the poetry that he wrote, calling it “dirty” and “ugly”.

“why doesn't he grow up? why does he keep writing about those things!: vomit and sex and crap and all those UGLY things?”<sup>36</sup>

Here, Bukowski uses Linda's<sup>37</sup> mother to represent the general public. He describes how “poor” Linda tried to defend him in front of her mother but how the whole conversation just ending in a heated argument. Below, one can see the way Bukowski justifies his vulgar vocabulary and profane topics.

... but I'm sincere when I say that  
when I hear people say that I write  
about vulgar things  
I think they might be right  
but I'm not sure.  
I wish Linda's mother could have met  
my father,  
they could have gotten together and  
never crapped, puked, cursed or  
fucked,  
they would have been totally sane  
totally  
justified.  
shit,

---

<sup>36</sup> Charles Bukowski, “*vulgarity*” [online], Bukowskiforum.net, Assed on January 23, 2018. *Last modified on March 23, 2017.* <https://bukowski.net/manuscripts/displaymanuscript.php?show=poeM1984-02-29-vulgarity.jpg&workid=4448>

<sup>37</sup> Linda King was Bukowski's biggest love, but they never official married.

yeah.  
and since this is no place to  
end a poem  
let me say  
that for my sake and  
yours  
lets be glad  
anyhow  
for  
shit  
piss  
puke  
fuck  
shit shit shit shit shit  
and that the readers  
buy the books  
not the critics  
who get them  
free  
up the  
ass  
ass ass ass ass ass  
ass.<sup>38</sup>

The end of the poem is very thought-provoking as it presents the readers with two messages. One, Bukowski believes that had anyone, including his mother in law, met Leonard Bukowski – his father – they would have written in the exact same way. Or, alternatively, they would at least have understood. Second, the world, according to Bukowski, simply is full of “shit”,

---

<sup>38</sup> Charles Bukowski, “*vulgarity*”, Bukowskiforum.net, Assed on January 23, 2018.

“piss”, “puke” and “ass” and it is precisely this that makes the world not boring. Finally, Bukowski concludes that it is the readers who are the only people that should judge his work, not the critics. This fallacy (dubbed *ergo decodo*, often translated as “then go off”) could be figuratively summed up as “if you don’t like, don’t buy it”. It is the only time that Bukowski ever showed any sign of being touched by anyone’s criticism and exposed his incapability and unwillingness to respond to such critics. Fortunately, anyone having trouble understanding Bukowski’s constant use of vulgar words can continue reading and thus discover the following reason/theme, which has been named “honesty and directness”.

### 3.2 HONESTY AND DIRECTNESS

Some dermatologists suggest that acne is mainly stress-related,<sup>39</sup> which makes it likely that the physical beatings by his father resulted in Bukowski’s scarred appearance. Charlson explains that having been bullied about his looks, Bukowski eventually learned to live with the way he was and developed a liking of writing about the human body with no limits whatsoever. It is interesting that not many people seemed to praise Bukowski for the choice of this topic, as nowadays writing about accepting yourself would be considered honourable, not profane. Charlson goes on to say that: “... the stories reveal a man aiming either to tell the whole truth about himself and the world or shock the whole world or both.” Considering everything aforementioned about Bukowski’s lack of interest in what people thought about him, it is improbable that his intention was to shock the world, as that would require him to care about someone’s feeling of shock. It is more likely that he simply enjoyed writing honestly about what he felt in a very direct way, which has led to him being likened to Ernest Hemingway, a writer celebrated for the invention of the “Iceberg Theory”.

This theory, also called the “theory of omission”, states that the writer can leave out information that he knows because the reader will manage to deduce it by himself. It is called the iceberg theory because Hemingway believed that classical prose only explains 10-20% of the plot directly, which is about the same percentage of an iceberg that is visible floating in the ocean. According to Hemingway, the other 80-90% is unnecessary for the progress of the plot. Hemingway also explained that only truly gifted writers can use this style as it requires the artist to have a strong connection with his audience. There is no doubt that Bukowski certainly had this connection, having a core fan base (described by Charlson as “everyday intelligent

---

<sup>39</sup> Hustler. *Facingacne* [online]. Available at: <https://www.facingacne.com/top-acne-causes/>

people<sup>40</sup>) that kept attending his public readings all the way throughout his career. Although Bukowski never explicitly admitted using this way of writing, he often criticised renowned writers like Tolstoy and Shakespeare for saying too little in too many words,<sup>41</sup> which correlates with the iceberg theory well. Charlson believes that the times in which Bukowski lived enabled him to take Hemingway's style to a higher level – “the humorous and profane.”<sup>42</sup>

This assumption is true mainly because of the fact that Bukowski started publishing nearly ten years after the *Howl* trial, after which writing about taboo sexual subjects became less frowned upon. It may be that this is why Ginsberg was the only Beatnik for whom Bukowski had some sort of respect – although his respect was limited only to the early work of the famous queer poet.

To illustrate the iceberg theory, as followed by Bukowski (intentionally or not) see the following extract from a short story called *Love, Love, Love*. In this story, we see Chucky, a man in his twenties still living with his parents, with seemingly no ambition in life. The story is incredibly straightforward and was clearly written with a particular audience in mind.

My father walks down the hall. He wears leather slippers that knock on the floor. He walks into the bathroom. “Gosh, what’s all this water on the floor? Did you spill all this water on the floor?” he asks my mother.

“What water?”

He opens the door and walks into my room. “Did you spill all that water on the floor?” “Yes,” I say, “I cupped my hands and tossed it around.”

He begins to shout...

My brother George tells his war experiences: “They blew the paratroop alarm and I thought, my God, the Japs are coming. Well. I thought, I’ve got my C-rations, I’ve got my .45, my dum-dums, I’ve got a bottle of Stateside, and I thought, well, I’m all set. I’ll go down to the field and take a C-47 the hell out of here...”

My brother George is missing all night and phones me in the morning: “Chuck. Chuck. ‘m all cut up. I have a big scar over my eye. I’ve got a black eye. Blood all over me. My coat is ruined. Got drunk with a man who had scars all over the inside of his mouth from sticking pins in it. Said pin was merely a matter of control. Blacked out, don’t remember what happened. I’m in Hollywood. What day is this?”

We are at the dinner table, except for George. My mother sits in her big house gown and puts a potato in her mouth.<sup>43</sup>

This extract – and the story as a whole – can be considered chaotic at first glance, but with the knowledge of Bukowski's life and his other work, it stops feeling that way very soon. It is

---

<sup>40</sup> David Charlson, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 1995), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats*, (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 144.

<sup>42</sup> David Charlson, *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 1995), 17.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Absence of the Hero*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 2010), 6.



almost as though each of Bukowski's stories, or poems is a piece of a mosaic that you can appreciate fully only if you try to put the whole patchwork together. Hemingway's iceberg method serves well for this purpose.

One might consider the comparison to Hemingway made in this chapter far-fetched, but the aim of this paper is to justify Bukowski as a major counterculture icon who used various artistic techniques in his writing. Dismissing him simply as an "ugly", "vulgar" writer without even attempting to look under the skin of his work would constitute an injustice.

### 3.3 COMMONNESS

The third reason for Bukowski's use of vulgar words is ordinariness, or even better – commonness. It is not an accident that etymologically, the English word *vulgarity* comes from the Latin *vulgaris*, which originally meant *common*.<sup>44</sup> This meaning is less known nowadays, and the word is rarely used in this sense. It was not until 1774 that this term gained its present-day connotation. As is clear from the much-cited interview with Jean-Francois Duval, Bukowski hung on to the traditional Latin meaning. When confronted with accusations that his vocabulary is incredibly crude, he interrupts the interviewer and says: "I prefer the term common. I always try to write clearly so that people understand what I'm saying. So that I know what I'm saying."<sup>45</sup>

This correlates with the arguments advanced in the previous chapter in the sense that Bukowski was mainly concerned about whether he himself liked his own writing. He goes on to explain that he likes writing to be raw and true. Classical literature, in his opinion, is too artificial and therefore vague. When Duval raises the question of whether it is necessary to be so brutal in his stories, Bukowski's answer enables one to allocate him to a particular literary genre.

"I just depict the reality. When it's rotten and brutal, then my work will also be about decay and violence. I don't want it to be that way. But I can't portray it differently."<sup>46</sup>

This fairly pessimistic approach was coined as "dirty realism" by Bill Bufford.<sup>47</sup> He described it as a very minimalistic way of writing often depicting seemingly boring and banal activities mostly carried out by what Martin Hilský once called "people on the edge of society". Writers that Bufford considered to be dirty realists wrote in a simple way, trying to avoid poetic tools

---

<sup>44</sup> Vulgarity. *Ethymonline* [online]. [cit. 2018-03-27]. Available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/vulgarity>

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Francois Duval, *Bukowski and the Beats* (Prague: PRAGMA, 2014), 156.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> Bill Bufford, *Editorial*. *Granta* 8 (1983): 4-5.

such as adverbs, metaphors, and similes. Although this genre was never officially acknowledged – and what is more, critics and academics made little connection between dirty realism and Bukowski – taking into account chapter one of this paper, it is perceptible that the traits in Bukowski’s work and his general punk views on life correlate well with this subgenre of realism. In a 2008 publication, literary critic and journalist Michael Hemmingson described dirty realism in detail and named Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver as its two biggest exponents. Hemmingson explained that both writers had more in common than academics would want to admit, from their personal lives all the way to the style of their writing. He illustrated this by noting that the mundanity of drinking in bars – an activity that one would normally consider fun – was depicted by both Bukowski and Carver as a way of fighting depression, fear and other negative emotions.<sup>48</sup> The similarities between the two, such as their common views on women, work and vulgarity, are definitely interesting and are worthy of reading about in Hemmingson’s book, but this section shall only explore the first-mentioned writer.

The best work that depicts the theme of commonness described in this sub-chapter is Bukowski’s collection of short stories *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town* from 1983. He wrote these stories during a period of life when he was unemployed and by his own words “unemployable.” The characters portrayed in this collection are all outcasts; alcoholics, junkies, prostitutes, gamblers, etc. It is arguably Bukowski’s most controversial publication, as he truly unchains his lecherous mind and writes about several sexual taboo subjects that eventually lead to some extraordinarily fantastical plots. It is difficult to pick an extract that is not too vulgar to be included in an academic paper, but vulgar enough to demonstrate the theme of commonness.

Before introducing the selected extract, it should be noted that the text was carefully chosen solely for the purpose of illustrating the theme of commonness; in no way was it intended to offend the reader of this thesis. This extract comes from Bukowski’s short story *25 Bums in Rags*, which was published in the aforementioned collection. The story shows Hank Bukowski, a gambler – more specifically horseplayer – in a situation of severe financial stringency. At the beginning of the story, he goes to the races and loses 500 dollars. Because he lives a pseudo-luxurious lifestyle, with a financially demanding girlfriend Kathy, he decides to do the unthinkable and find himself a job as newspaper delivery guy. Once he gets told what to do, he

---

<sup>48</sup> Michael Hemmingson, *The Dirty Realism Duo*, (USA: The Borgo Press, 2008), 45.

is shocked because the boss decides to allocate him his own neighbourhood to do his paper round in.

“Kathy! Kathy!”

“oh, Hank ... everything all right?”

the dog ran on in and I petted him.

“you know what those sons of bitches DID?”

“what?”

“they gave me my *own* neighbourhood to deliver papers in!”

“oh. well, it’s not nice but I don’t think the people will mind.”

“don’t you understand? I’ve built this REP! I’m the hustler! I can’t be seen with a bag of shit on my back!”

“oh, I don’t think you have all that REP! it’s just in your head.”

“listen, are you going to give me a lot of shit? you’ve had your ass in this warm bed while I’ve been out there with a lot of cocksuckers!”

“don’t be angry. I’ve got to pee. wait a minute.”

I waited out there while she took her sleepy female piss. god, they were SLOW! the cunt was a very inefficient pissing machine. dick had it all beat.<sup>49</sup>

After one overcomes the initial distaste that comes from reading the words written, one can see what Bukowski meant by *common*. He was determined to present ordinary life as it truly was, with everything that belonged to it, including such horrible words seen above. Obviously, it was necessary to make the central characters of this story lower-class, because they are precisely the group of people that tends to use this kind of language.

The story is clearly autobiographical, and many traits of Bukowski’s actual life that have been presented in this thesis are visible. For example, his utter repulsion for work, his love of alcohol and horse-racing, the “No Future” and “Don’t Try”<sup>50</sup> philosophies – all of these features are adressed in this short story. Not limited by any restrictions, Bukowski managed to squeeze all of the things mentioned into ten pages of writing. Martin Hilský’s term “people of the edge of society” is more than appropriate here, as the story presents a world of poor citizens fighting their everyday battle for survival. However, it is surprising to think that Bukowski would care about his reputation among his neighbours as he did not pay any interest to their opinions when it came to his literary work.

From an aesthetic point of view, this extract supports not only the topic of this sub-chapter (Bukowski uses colloquial language and abbreviations that might be understandable only to a certain social group); it also supports the argument made in chapter 2.2 about Bukowski not

---

<sup>49</sup> Charles Bukowski, *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1970), 98.

<sup>50</sup> The “Don’t Try” philosophy was an offshoot of the punk ideal of “No Future”. Bukowski had this motto carved out on his grave.

following the rules of correct English grammar. The absence of capital letters at the beginning of each sentence certainly caught the eye of more than one reader. This feature is quite repetitive throughout Bukowski's work, although it can be seen mostly in his poems. The reason for what in literary circles is called "de-capitalisation" is that poets like Bukowski believed that poetry is a form of art meant to be presented orally, not in written form. It was simply another way of rebelling against the mainstream poets and academia. It is also why he made most of his living and most of his fans by travelling around the States giving public readings. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the only de-capitalised parts are uses of direct speech by the characters, because that, again, indicates oral presentation. Bukowski tended to play around with words in direct speech a lot in order to make it more believable – for example, by using CAPITALS or *italics*. The aesthetics of direct speech, as used by Bukowski, could make for a chapter on its own but is irrelevant for the purpose of this thesis.

### 3.4 DESPAIR

Finally, the last theme that Bukowski expressed by using vulgar vocabulary is despair. The motif of despair is closely interlinked with all of the previous themes as it is something that arises from the social-political context of the time that he lived in. The feeling of despair is undeniably a by-product of the Great Depression, a time, when the unemployment rate was strikingly high, hundreds of thousands of people were homeless and even more had lack of a sufficient amount of food. "This tragedy put the United States into a state of failure with businesses and citizens looking for the government's help,"<sup>51</sup> writes Emily Brubaker of Eagle Times Bulletin. By now, it is clear that Charles Bukowski certainly did not feel like the government was likely to help, which was precisely what led him, and millions of others, to despair. The order of motifs presented in this chapter is not at random, but structured in a way that shows Bukowski's shift in thinking. First, he was angry, then he tried to present his emotions directly and honestly, then he justified his behaviour as being that of an ordinary man; but all eventually led to despair. This final subject is usually expressed by a certain level of casualness, or rather disinterest. Once more, to see what is meant by this argument, let us turn to *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*, and this time directly to the eponymous short story.

In this core story of the collection, an unnamed character – but presumably Hank – falls in love with Cass, who is, of course, the most beautiful woman in town. Already, this description of

---

<sup>51</sup> Emily Brubaker, "The Great Depression: A Time of Despair", Eagle Times Bulletin, October 8, 2016.

the essential plot suggests a different climate to the scene, as Bukowski rarely let his characters fall in love or talk about women in a purely kind way. Cass is the *femme fatale* of the town but behaves in a bizarre way, one that neither Hank nor the readers has got to see before in Bukowski's stories. She leads men on, but never lets them do anything sexual to her, and by constantly cutting herself she refuses to acknowledge her beauty. She explains this in the second part of the story:

“... people think beauty is the only thing I have. But beauty is nothing, beauty won't stay. You don't know how lucky you are to be ugly, because if people like you then you know it's for something else.”<sup>52</sup>

Hank enjoys a pleasant period of time with Cass and feels good about his new relationship. The story ends on a despairing note ... where else but in a bar.

I sat and waited for Cass. The hours went by. After I was fairly drunk the bartender said to me, “I'm sorry about your girl friend.”

“What is it? I asked.

“I'm sorry. Didn't you know?”

“No.”

“Suicide. She was buried yesterday.”

“Buried?” I asked. It seemed as if she would walk through the doorway at any moment. How could she be gone?

“Her sisters buried her.”

“A suicide? Mind telling me how?”

“She cut her throat.”

“I see. Give me another drink.”

I drank until closing time. Cass the most beautiful of 5 sisters, the most beautiful in town. I managed to drive to my place and I kept thinking, I should have *insisted* she stay with me instead of accepting that “no.” Everything about her had indicated that she had cared. I had simply been too offhand about it, lazy, too unconcerned. I deserved my death and hers. I was a dog. No, why blame the dogs? I got up and found a bottle of wine and drank from it heavily. Cass the most beautiful girl in town was dead at 20.

Outside somebody honked their automobile horn. They were very loud and persistent. I set the bottle down and screamed out: “GOD DAMN YOU, YOU SON OF A BITCH, SHUT UP!”

The night kept coming on in and there was nothing I could do.<sup>53</sup>

The feeling of despair and the overall hopelessness is quite clear from this extract. One would expect Hank to react to the message of his girlfriend killing herself in a more expressive way, yet he simply sits there and orders another drink. Bukowski sends a powerful message through

---

<sup>52</sup> Charles Bukowski, *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1970), 12.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Bukowski, *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1970), 13.

the ending of this story, showing what lower-class people have to deal with on a daily basis. In the previous sub-chapter it was poverty and famine; in this extract, it is the loss of someone beloved – what is more, to suicide. Bukowski considers these problems to be the direct faults of the establishment, to which, as mentioned, people look for hope, but none comes. And therefore, just as in *Dinosauria, We*, people were left to “turn to the pill, to the bottle”. Although Hank does not show his emotions explicitly, it is clear from his inner monologue that he is hurt by the loss of Cass. Thus, the choice of words in the very last segment gets to feel a lot more powerful. It is crucial to note that Bukowski decided to use the word “screamed” to lead up to the vulgar shouting, and did not do this arbitrarily. The word *scream*, according to MacMillan dictionary means to “to make a loud high cry because you are hurt, frightened, or excited”. It goes without saying, the final scream of utter despair was actually not at the person honking the automobile horn. The final scream was at the unfairness of the world, at the system and at the establishment.

The final scream well embodies the purpose of this chapter, as well as concluding the counterculture ideals that Charles Bukowski put in his work through the use of vulgarisms, or as they should now be properly called: *common* words.

## 4 LITERARY CRITICISM OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI

There have not been many critical works written on Charles Bukowski and the few that have been authored by scholars and academics intended for scholars and academics, rather than for the general public. Putting aside biographies and interviews, four major academic works and one minor one have been published up until 2018. Hugh Bernard Fox Jr., one of the founders of the Pushcart Prize, was the very first writer ever to publish a critical study of Charles Bukowski in a publication he simply called *Charles Bukowski: A Critical and Bibliographical Study*. Almost 25 years later, Russell Harrison analysed Bukowski's approach to the American Dream and social critique in general in his book *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*. Then in 2005, David Charlson took a different approach and studied the gender issue and iconoclasm in *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*. In 2013, Paul Clements explored the German-born writer from the point of view of an outcast and outsider in *Charles Bukowski, Outsider Literature, and the Beat Movement*. Lastly, a lesser-known work, familiar probably only to the fieriest of Bukowski's followers, M. J. Poynter's *Bukowski and the Beats*,<sup>54</sup> proclaims itself to be focused on the proletarianisation of post-war America and American class warfare.

Each of these writers made very good points about various subjects in their work, but for the sake of this thesis, M. J. Poynter's essay will be discussed in this chapter, as it deals with the "degradation and exploitation of America's working class", which, in a sense, is conformable to counterculture. The following text will also serve as a preface to the final conclusion of this paper, as it covers some of the questions that were raised in the introduction.

M. J. Poynter's take on Bukowski, in the form of an extended essay, is full of thought-provoking points, as well as many contradictions. Poynter approaches the "Bukowski issue" within the context of a proletarian America struggling with class warfare – which, as illustrated in this paper, is a perfectly valid aim. However, Poynter starts by stating that Bukowski considered society in the sixties as "suffering from a collective psychosis" and that the signs of this would then go on to cause the Cold War.<sup>55</sup> Regrettably, the writer does not elaborate on these signs, so what first seemed to be an interesting point turns out to be a pointless statement. The most problematic issue with Poynter's *Bukowski and the Beats* is the constant urge to connect Charles Bukowski with one particular movement of the counterculture period in America. As was

---

<sup>54</sup> Not to confuse M. J. Poynter's book with the same-titled book often cited in this paper by Jean-Francois Duval.

<sup>55</sup> M. J. Poynter, *Bukowski and the Beats: An Extended Essay on the Life and Work of Charles Bukowski*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 5.

concluded in chapter 1.4 and later elaborated throughout chapter 2, the attempt at this affiliation is predominantly incorrect and lacks any kind of evidence. Bukowski looked down on Kerouac and the others and explicitly stated that he felt closer to punk colleagues. What is shocking, however, is that Poynter knows this and yet keeps clutching at straws in an attempt to deny this. In chapter three of his essay, he suggests that Bukowski and Kerouac have “much in common” and gives the example of them both being heavy drinkers.<sup>56</sup> However true that may be, many counterculture writers (and looking at the history of literature, many male writers in general) had problems with alcohol, but one would be ludicrous to make connections between two writers simply on the basis of addiction. In the final paragraph of the chapter dedicated to Bukowski being a Beat, Poynter comes to the conclusion that Bukowski must be a Beat because his work “reflects many values of counterculture idealism.”<sup>57</sup> Disregarding the fact that there was more than counterculture movement (as mentioned in chapter one) than just the Beats, and not respecting Bukowski’s wish not to be associated with the group around Kerouac, Poynter nevertheless goes onto label Bukowski as an “Honorary Beat.” To justify this label, he claims that Bukowski found a place in the hearts of the Beat Generation. It is unclear as to where he obtained this information; however if one pays a visit to the “Mecca” of Bukowski fandom – [bukowskiforum.com](http://bukowskiforum.com) – one will soon realise that his fans tirelessly resent this epithet and dismiss any kind of labels that are attributed to their favourite writer.

The most interesting part of Poynter’s essay is the last chapter, entitled “The Proletarianization of Post-War America.” In this section of the book, he opens up the context of the troubles that working-class members had to go through, including the causes and the consequences. Among the causes he mentions the Second World War and the Depression, which are two obvious reasons, but also the Ford idea of assembly line working. This concept of work was hugely criticised by Bukowski throughout his work but is mainly visible in his famous novel *Factotum*. According to Poynter, Bukowski concluded that doing this type of blue-collar job in a stressful environment where bosses keep pushing their employees to work harder eventually leads to a feeling of total despair.<sup>58</sup> Poynter correctly points out that this feeling, where workers did not aspire to prosper because they knew they were trapped was an unprecedented disavowal of the American dream – an ideal that the United States of America was built on. As mentioned in chapter one, regarding Bukowski’s inclination towards the punk ideals, his answer to this impasse was to abolish the concept of work as a whole. As Bukowski’s characters all approach

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 52.



labour simply as a means of obtaining money and therefore surviving, it would be interesting to see what Charles Bukowski would think of the idea of an unconditional basic income. The theory of the government giving everyone a guaranteed, and most importantly, a liveable amount of money would completely erase the link between work and survival. Proponents of unconditional basic income, or “UBI”, claim that people would still want to work, but would work for the joy that comes from it, rather than for need of money. Even though UBI is not a 21<sup>st</sup>-century idea, and the roots can be traced all the way back to people like Bertrand Russell and even Thomas Paine, it is not documented whether Bukowski ever considered this revolutionary approach to state welfare. Having said that, UBI deals with every point of criticism he ever made about labour, so it is not unlikely that he would like the sound of it. To demonstrate this, one only needs to look at the extract from *Factotum* that Poynter used in his last extract.

I remember how my father used to come home each night and talk about his job to my mother. The job talk began when he entered the door, continued over the dinner table, and ended in the bedroom where my father would scream “Lights Out!” at 8 p.m., so he could get his rest and his full strength for the job the next day. There was no other subject except the job.<sup>59</sup>

Poynter uses this extract to support his argument about Bukowski wanting to abolish labour as a concept. Despite his point being true, what Poynter fails to explore is the real reason behind it. This particular memory recalled by the proletarian writer stored in *Factotum* is less a moan by “a lazy drunk”, and more a critique of the fact that jobs became the only thing left in people’s lives. The only filling of their regular day as well as the only subject of conversation. This problem is just one of many often cited by those who argue for the implementation of UBI into the welfare system of the USA, as well as anywhere else.

There are many issues I have with Poynter’s essay. With all of them in mind, it is still fair to say that there remains an agreement between the two of us on the fact that Charles Bukowski’s work was and still is relevant, however we choose to classify him as a writer. In the conclusion of *Bukowski and the Beats*, Poynter explains that American society in Bukowski’s time became separated into two very much uneven and unequal parts disconnected by what he calls “economic apartheid.” What remains worrying is the fact that it does not look as if the deep divide between the two groups is on the way to being bridged. Just as was concluded in chapter

---

<sup>59</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Factotum*, (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd, 1996), 17.

2.2 using literary analysis of *Dinosauria*, *We*, Poynter acknowledges Bukowski as a timeless writer with prophetic views on where mankind is heading.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed the ideals of counterculture that Charles Bukowski held during his life and, most importantly, that he projected in his work. Chapter one laid out the terminology connected to counterculture in general and divided the period into four main movements: *the Beats, Hippies, Punk and Cybernauts*. In terms of time, Bukowski could have been a member of the first three, so this chapter explored these in more detail. Based on the information gathered, the final part of chapter one categorised Bukowski as a punk writer, thus dismissing the often-constructed connections between him and the so-called Beat generation. Chapter two dealt with the topic of counterculture ideals itself, analysing two short stories and one poem for different reasons. Many themes were noted, such as the philosophy of the absurd, a critique of capitalism and technological progress, and the topic of class warfare and nihilism. Chapter three explored the poetics used in Bukowski's work and attempted to find the reason or reasons for his frequent usage of vulgarity. Four reasons were unearthed, and all were illustrated with the use of respective extracts. Firstly, the theme of anger was demonstrated with a poem taken from an anthology called *Run With the Hunted*. Next, honesty and directness, plus the similar writing style shared with Hemingway, were illustrated by reference to *Love, Love, Love*. Thirdly, the theme of commonness (and its kindred genre of dirty realism) was examined via the short story *25 Bums in Rags*. And finally, the subject of despair was illustrated via one of the most famous stories Bukowski ever wrote: *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*. In the final part of this thesis, M.J. Poynter's critical essay on Bukowski's work was discussed. Chapter four looked at some of the possible misinterpretations that Poynter came up with but also acknowledges his fair and intriguing points, such as his remarks on the proletarianisation of America. It also noted that Poynter unfortunately missed the point with Bukowski's view on work, as well as failing to find conclusive evidence that this underground hero should be regarded as what he calls an "Honorary Beat." In conclusion, it is hoped that this paper will help regular readers, as well as academics, to look under the skin of an indubitable counterculture icon and therefore to take him more seriously.

## RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá fenoménem kontrakultury ve Spojených státech amerických a především pak rolí a ideály Charlese Bukowského. Bukowskému nebylo v akademických kruzích dosud věnováno příliš pozornosti, a když ano, tak spíše v pejorativní rovině. Počátky kontrakultury se datují do poloviny padesátých let 20. století a její konec se odhaduje na přelom milénia. Pojem je sice velice rozmanitý, ale vzhledem ke kontextu práce byl rozdělen na tři periody, respektive tři konkrétní hnutí: beatníci, hippies a punk. Beatníci tvořili zejména v 50. letech a ze všech tří hnutí byli nejvíce literárně aktivní. Název pochází z anglického slova „beat“, volně přeloženo jako „zbitý“ nebo ještě lépe „unavený“. Umělci soustředující se okolo této generace prosazovali naprosté oproštění se od materiálního světa, čehož dosahovali zejména praktikováním zen-buddhismu či užíváním rekreačních drog. Ve svých dílech používali velice hrubý slovník a nebáli se otevírat tabuizovaná sexuální témata. Tento způsob života se snažili zpopularizovat a vyzývali k němu i své čtenáře.

Hnutí hippies bylo na rozdíl od svých předchůdců podstatně političtější a velice nevšední ve své sebezpřetaci. Své hlavní poselství předávali heslem „Milujte se, neválcete“ a také svým charakteristickým barevným oblečením.

A za třetí, punk je definován jako zásadní protipól hippies. Punkové umění je známé svou ponurostí až depresivností. Spisovatelé hlásící se k tomuto směru se netajili anarchistickými názory, které se přirozeně také projevíly ve vulgárním slovníku. Filosofickou biblí punkerů se stala píseň „God Save the Queen“ od kapely Sex Pistols, ve které je opakovaně vyjádřeno, že tehdejší generace nemá žádnou budoucnost.

Na základě charakteristiky těchto tří hnutí je závěr první kapitoly věnován kategorizaci Charlese Bukowského. Jelikož je Bukowski nejčastěji zmiňován jako zástupce beatníků, a je o něm takto i vyučováno ve školách, nabízí se otázka, je-li tomu opravdu tak. Možná je proto překvapením, že největší podobnost byla nalezena s punkem. S touto původně britskou subkulturou ho pojí zejména kritický pohled na establishment a naprostá absence životních ambic.

Zařazení Bukowského mezi reprezentanty punku vede ke druhé kapitole, která se věnuje konkrétním ideálům kontrakultury, které byly nalezeny literární analýzou jeho děl. Byly vybrány tři rozmanité texty; dvě povídky a jedna báseň. Jako první je analyzována povídka *Smysl nesmyslu*, ve které Bukowského alter-ego Chelaski zažívá existencionální krizi. Na vybraných ukázkách je ilustrována Bukowského evidentní inklinace k filosofickému směru,

jehož představitelem byl Albert Camus, tedy k absurdismu. Z ukázek je také vyvozeno, že Bukowski trpěl syndromem „podvodníka“ a zoufal si nad tím, jak je v životě každý nahraditelný. Druhá podkapitola se zabývá Bukowského nejslavnější básní *Dinosauria, We*. V ukázkách je ilustrována například tvrdá kritika kapitalismu a směru, kterým lidstvo kráčí. To vše Bukowski demonstroval na podobnosti lidstva a dinosaurů – odtud název básně. Analýza dále zasazuje báseň do kontextu doby, ve které byla napsána, a nachází paralely s událostmi současnosti. Tématem třetí podkapitoly je třídní boj, který Bukowski ilustroval ve velmi temné povídce *Vloupání*. V ní autor popisuje dva zlodějíčky, kteří se rozhodnou vyloupit dům bohaté televizní hvězdy, ale od původního plánu brzy upustí. Střetnutí dvou naprosto odlišných sociálních skupin neboli *class warfare*, zde vytváří prostor pro důkladnou analýzu anarchistické kontrakultury.

Třetí kapitola se věnuje naprosto zásadnímu tématu, a to poetice Bukowského děl; konkrétně nalézá odpověď na otázku, proč Bukowski pro umělecké vyjádření používal tolik vulgárních výrazů. Jedná se o klíčové téma, jelikož, jak bylo nastíněno v úvodu práce, společnost ještě nedospěla do stádia tolerování absolutní svobody slova. Tato bakalářská práce se tudíž snaží ospravedlnit Bukowského slovník pomocí literární analýzy a studováním kulturně-historického kontextu kontrakulturní doby. Výsledkem rozboru jsou čtyři navzájem propojené důvody: zlost, přímočarost, obyčejnost, zoufalost.

Téma zlosti je velice komplexní, jelikož je pro jeho pochopení nutné znát zázemí, ve kterém Bukowski vyrůstal, především pak osobu jeho otce. Popis dospívání Charlese Bukowského vede k porozumění pocitu zlosti, který si v sobě uchoval celý život. Zlost, jakožto ideální příklad punkerského ideálu, je poté ilustrována v básni *vulgarity*. V ní je zobrazena Bukowského tchýně, jakožto zástupkyně ignorantské veřejnosti (případně akademie), jak kritizuje velkou míru sprostých slov.

Druhé kontrakulturní téma, které je u Bukowského nalezeno, bylo pojmenováno jako „upřímnost a přímočarost“. Tyto dvě vlastnosti byly spojeny do jedné kapitoly, protože spolu souvisí více, než by se na první pohled mohlo zdát. Bukowski je velice specifický autor hlavně tím, že svým uměním nikdy neměl ambici šokovat. To je také hlavní důvod, proč není rozumné ho zařazovat mezi beatniky. V této podkapitole je vysvětleno, že Bukowski ke své práci přistupoval jako k upřímnému popisu světa, který se zároveň snažil tlumočit svým čtenářům co nejvíce přímočaře. Na základě tohoto zjištění je nastolena podobnost s Ernestem

Hemingwayem a jeho teorií ledovce. Tento styl psaní je pak ilustrován na ukázce z povídky *Láska, láska, láska*.

Téma obyčejnosti vychází z etymologického rozboru slova „vulgarity“, které pochází z latinského výrazu „vulgaris“, tedy „obyčejný“. Bukowski tvrdil, že vulgární není, ale pouze zobrazuje život obyčejných lidí, kteří přirozeně mluví jiným slovníkem. Pro ilustraci byla vybrána ukázka z krátké povídky *25 odrbanejch vandráků*, ve které autor ukazuje lidi na okraji společnosti vykořisťované nespravedlivě nastaveným trhem. Ukázka také dobře doplňuje předešlé poznatky ohledně punkerské filozofie „No Future“ a „Don't Try“.

Posledním objeveným důvodem pro používání vulgarismů je zoufalství. Mnoho autorů v šedesátých letech bylo zoufalých, což bylo z velké části zapříčiněno obdobím známým jako Velká deprese. Zoufalost se projevovala zejména totálním nezájmem o budoucnost a dění kolem. Bukowski tento pocit nejlépe zobrazil ve sbírce *Nejkrásnější ženská ve městě*, z níž byla stejnojmenná povídka vybrána pro rozbor. Hlavní roli hraje opět Bukowského alter ego, ale to se tentokrát nezmůže na nic jiného, než jen vysedávání po barech a konzumování alkoholu. Motiv zoufalství uzavírá čtveřici nalezených témat a předkládá tak obhajobu pro toleranci Bukowského vulgárních výrazů.

Čtvrtá a zároveň poslední kapitola této práce se věnuje kritickým posudkům Charlese Bukowského. Jak již bylo zmíněno, literární kritici se tomuto americkému undergroundovému spisovateli spíše vyhýbali, a tak literárních posudků bylo napsáno jen málo. M. J. Poynter se ve své „rozšířené eseji“ *Bukowski a beatníci* věnuje proletarizaci Spojených států amerických a propojení Bukowského s literárním kruhem okolo Kerouaca. Vzhledem k tomu, že první kapitola této práce podobnost s beatníky vyvrátila, byla pro kritickou reakci Poynterova kniha ideální.

Z mnoha děl je zřejmé, že Bukowski usoudil, že nemá smysl pracovat. Poynter došel k myšlence, že to je prostě proto, že byl líný a bavilo ho jen pít a sázet na dostihy. Tento závěr je ve čtvrté kapitole důrazně rozporován a jako alternativní vysvětlení je prezentována idea, že Bukowski pouze kritizoval fakt, že chudí lidé museli dělat podřadné práce, aby vůbec přežili. Ekonomická teorie, která zpřetrhává tuto vazbu mezi prací a finanční nutností, se nazývá základní nepodmíněný příjem a dá se předpokládat, že Bukowski by za takového sociálního programu pracoval rád. Kromě tohoto tématu čtvrtá kapitola také rozporuje Poynterovu obsesi se zařazováním Bukowského jako beatníka. Jako podklady pro kritiku Poynterovy eseje slouží všechny tři předchozí kapitoly.

Závěrem lze očekávat, že tato práce přispěje k lepšímu pochopení Charlese Bukowského jako nezpochybnitelné kontrakulturní ikony.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] BREWER, Gene. *Charles Bukowski*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- [2] BRUBAKER, Emily. "The Great Depression: A Time of Despair". *Eagle Times Bulletin*. October, 2016.
- [3] BUFORD, Bill. Editorial. *Granta* 8, 1983.
- [4] BUKOWSKI, Charles. *Absence of the Hero*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2010.
- [5] BUKOWSKI, Charles. "Break-In". *Hustler*, March 1979.
- [6] BUKOWSKI, Charles. *Factotum*. London: Virgin Publishing, 1996.
- [7] BUKOWSKI, Charles. *Run With the Hunted*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- [8] BUKOWSKI, Charles. *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1970.
- [9] BUKOWSKI, Charles. *Women*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1978.
- [10] Bukowskiforum. "vulgarity" Last modified on March 23, 2017.  
<https://bukowski.net/manuscripts/displaymanuscript.php?show=poeem1984-02-29-vulgarity.jpg&workid=4448>
- [11] CAMUS, Albert. *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- [12] CHARLSON, David. *Charles Bukowski: Autobiographer, Gender Critic, Iconoclast*. Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 1995.
- [13] CLEMENTS, Paul. *Charles Bukowski, Outsider Literature, and the Beat Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- [14] DALGIÇ, Mert. "An Attempt to Categorize Charles Bukowski: Outsider Poetry." Unpublished PhD. Diss., Ege University, 2017.
- [15] DI STEFANO, Giovanni. "Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness of Work in Charles Bukowski", *World Futures*, 2017.
- [16] DUVAL, Jean-Francois. *Bukowski and the Beats*. Prague: PRAGMA, 2014.
- [17] Encyclopædia Britannica. "Hippie". Last modified December 28, 2018.
- [18] GAIR, Christopher. *The American Counterculture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- [19] GINSBERG, Allen. *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*. New York: Grove Atlantic, 2017.
- [20] GUZIUR, Jakub. "Bukowski, beatnici a modernisté." *Host* (10), 2015.
- [21] HARRIS, Mark. "The Flowering of the Hippies". *The Atlantic*, September 1967.
- [22] HEMMINGSON, Michael. *The Dirty Realism Duo*. USA: The Borgo Press, 2008.



- [23] HIEBERT, Paul. "What We're Missing Out On: A Conversation About Beats, Hippies, and Punks". Flavorwire, March 2012.
- [24] JONES, Brad. "Elon Musk is Officially Sending Humans to Mars in 2024." Futurism. September 29, 2017. <https://futurism.com/elon-musk-is-officially-sending-humans-to-mars-in-2024/>
- [25] KEROUAC, Jack. "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose". <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/kerouac-spontaneous.html>
- [26] LOCKLIN, Gerard. *Charles Bukowski: A Sure Bet*. Sudbury: Water Row Press, 1996.
- [27] LONG, John. *Drugs and the 'Beats': The Role of Drugs in the Lives and Writings of Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg*. Texas: Virtualbookworm.com, 2005.
- [28] MCCRUM, Robert. "The 100 Best Novels". The Guardian, January 1, 2018.
- [29] POYNTER, M. J. *Bukowski and the Beats*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.
- [30] ROSZAK, Theodore. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969.
- [31] Sex Pistols. "God Save the Queen". *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*. Virgin, A&M, 1977. MP3.
- [32] VAN HOVE, Micah. "So You Want to Be a Writer? Don't Try. Exploring Bukowski's Immortal Philosophy." No Film School, March 23, 2013.