

DEGREE IN ENGLISH STUDIES

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HERO OF THE INGLORIOUS
KIND: BUKOWSKI AND THE
AMERICAN DREAM

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Abstract

Charles Bukowski is, perhaps, one of the most recognizable authors of the second half of the 20th century because of his direct, almost raw form of writing. Nevertheless, one of the major implications of this work has been neglected: his criticism of the philosophical and social construct of the American Dream, one of the first marks of identity of the United States of America, which is still present to this day. In this context, this essay is focused on the analysis of the Bukowskian depiction of the ideal in the novels *Post Office* (1971), and *Factotum* (1975) and on the autobiographical *magnum opus* of the author, *Ham on Rye* (1981). It is argued that the American Dream is portrayed as a source of alienation, victimization, and dehumanization of the character and the working class as a whole via the character of Henry Chinaski, Bukowski's alter ego. To this end, the paper firstly includes the historical and literary framework of Bukowski's works in order to provide the reader a basic understanding of the American Dream, as well as Bukowski's placement in the American literary canon and his own relationship with the Dream inspiring his writings. The analysis of the characterization of the Dream in Bukowskian literature covers the following aspects: a) the topic of isolation, implying the character's rebellion, his individual victimization within the family sphere and the social mainstream, and the victimization of the working class; and b) the character's embracement of the reality of the Dream, which will lead to the auto destructive tendencies of alcoholism and suicide. The major claim of this paper is that through his alter ego, Bukowski exposes the reality of the American Dream as a source of a generalized disillusionment (rather than the prosperity it promises), and in the case of the collective of the working class, a social collapse translated into its dehumanization. Apart from this, this essay also discusses how the character's resistance against the Dream will only result into an existential crisis, related to the conflict between his desire to break with mainstream American values and the need to accept them in order to survive in 20th century American society.

Keywords: Bukowski; American Dream; isolation; victimization.

1. Introduction

The main aim of the present paper will be to conduct a study on a selected bibliography from the American writer Charles Bukowski (1920-1994), focusing on his depiction of the American Dream (in both its classical and contemporary conceptions) as an element responsible for the social alienation, victimization, and even dehumanization of the individual and of the working class, as embodied in the character of Henry Chinaski, Bukowski's own alter ego. This analysis will be framed in the area of American Cultural Studies, given the relevance of the American Dream as one of the main icons of U. S. civilization since the annals of its history, still maintained to this day. The decision to work on this analysis was mainly motivated because of my devotion to Bukowski's literature, as he was the first author criticizing the Dream that I ever read; apart from this, the raw criticism of the Bukowskian works also awakened my curiosity towards literatures of protest within the borders of the American nation. This enriched my understanding of the nation producing the majority of cultural content I consume to this day. In addition, I would like to underline that because of time and space restrictions, I have decided to narrow down the analysis only to three Bukowskian readings, which have provided me with the necessary objects of analysis for my dissertation: the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975) and *Ham On Rye* (1982). The decision to choose these novels among the rest of the work of the author was mainly based on the meticulous testimony they offer about the different aspects of the failed reality of the American Dream.

Secondly, with respect to the content, this paper will consist of two major sections. In the first section, I will establish the framework of the dissertation by offering an overview of the ideal of American Dream, identifying both its classical and modern features. Following this, I will locate Charles Bukowski in the American literary canon for the sake of understanding the literary contexts in which his writings were produced. Finally, I will finish the first section with the revision of some details about the life of the author, but only considering the events that inspired his relationship with the Dream and contextualizing the publications I have chosen for the discussion. The second section of this paper will be devoted to the Bukowskian characterization of the American Dream in the three sources I have previously acknowledged under two of

their major aspects: the isolation of the main protagonist in these three novels and how he embraces reality while facing his disillusionment with the Dream.

2. Historical and Literary Framework

2.1: The American Dream: Classic and Modern Conventions

If there is an inherent property common to any nation along the world, it is necessity to legitimize itself by creating a culture of its own in the form of a source of identity. In the case of a relatively newborn country like the United States of America, the social, political and economic set of principles and notions that the American Dream constitutes could be regarded as such existential key to be legitimized as an independent nation. Behaving as a source of identity as well as an aspiration to achieve by most Americans, the conception of the Dream has evolved during the centuries of existence of the country, adapting some of its notions and philosophies to different specific periods in its history. However, perhaps James Truslow Adams's conception of the Dream in *The Epic of America* (1931) could be regarded as its canonical definition:

But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability and achievement. . . . It is not a dream of a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

By the same token, the American Dream has been recently described as “the idea that any American, with enough resolve and determination, can climb the economic ladder, regardless of where he starts in life.” (Kraus, Davidai and Nussbaum). As we can see, then, the Dream is based on the pursuit for improving one's present situation, aiming at an ideal of success. Nevertheless, the ideal of success of the American Dream is a relative goal, being shaped according to the standards and situations of different periods in

American

history.

Although deeply related to the aim for success, the philosophies of the Dream have included other goals that trace back to the times of the first settlements of what was formerly known as the New World. On the one hand, the Dream constituted a spiritually-based set of values mainly pursued by the Puritans and Separatists, who longed for the religious liberty that the New World promised, as according to Robert C. Hauhart (6-7) due to their prosecution as a result of their religious perspectives. This desire for freedom rapidly combined with the pursuit of “easy-living”, which had also been the main appeal for some settlers arriving to the continent after the Puritans (Hauhart 14). In addition to these ideals, some scholars like Jim Cullen have also identified in this period a strong sense of community-living (22) as another characteristic of the philosophy that was developing in the territory. On the other hand, looking at more terrenal reasons, a desire for economic prosperity, together with the myth of America as a land of opportunity was also developed (Hauhart 4). These sets of goals and values of the New World were later reinforced within the time of the Founders and the official establishment of the nation in the 18th century. In this era, the notion for the desire of the bettering of oneself both economically and socially via hard work started emerging to the front line, being equated to the initial spiritual sense of the Dream through “upward mobility” (Cullen 8); thus, the Dream started to acquire a more individualistic nature, as well as integrating the notion of work as an important construct to achieve what was promised by the ideal.

In brief, we can see how the initial conception of the Dream consisted in a marriage of both the material and the spiritual. Nevertheless, with the passing of the centuries, the Dream has undergone several alterations with regards to some of its conventions. Among this set of changes in the philosophy, perhaps the most important is the accentuation of the terrenal dimension of the Dream, bringing a new form of the mindset based on materialism (Adams 216). As Hauhart has noticed, “it is undeniable that a strong theme of material prosperity, even wealth, pervades many versions of the American Dream” (252). Similarly, other scholars, like Maria N. Ivanova, have as well catalogued the Dream as a force marked by consumerism (329-330).

2.2. Charles Bukowski and the American Dream

Bukowski's own experience with the philosophy of the American Dream was never too positive, being something that he would integrate on his works of literature via the character of Henry Chinaski, his alter ego, based on his actual experiences, opinions and personal traits. In light of this link between the protagonist and the author, I consider pertinent to offer some details of the life of Bukowski for the sake of the better understanding of the conception of the American ideal that is included in his works.

Henry Charles Bukowski (originally named as Heinrich Karl Bukowski) was born in the Weimar Republic in 1920, where his father (American born) and his mother (German born) knew each other. Soon afterwards the family decided to emigrate to the US given the hard circumstances to make a living in this European region, as according to Michael Gray (5). The Bukowskis arrived in the US and settled in Los Angeles, where Bukowski's father, Henry, became a milkman and longed for reaching a better socioeconomic status (M. Gray 6); indeed, the author would be in touch with the Dream and the philosophy of upward mobility from a very early age. Unfortunately for the Bukowskis, despite initially having such intention, they ended being a direct witness of the precarious situation of the lower class during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and young Charles's father lost his job (M. Gray 8). The experiences lived during this critical period in American history for the working class directly influenced *Ham On Rye*, a novel which intimately narrates the infancy of a Henry Chinaski surrounded by economic precarity and people subjugated by the Dream. The years passed and Charles, after having a traumatic experience at school and dropping college, started roaming across the city of Los Angeles and other parts of the country like New Orleans, St. Louis, New York or even Philadelphia (M. Gray 15-18) jumping from one dead-end job to another while trying to launch his career as an author. The recollection of those years is encapsulated in *Factotum*, which offers a grey depiction of the American way of life and the disillusionment of the author with the reality of the Dream. It is in this precise context of ceaseless hirings and firings from multiple jobs where Bukowski would achieve a position as a postman, which provided the author economic stability for some years, apart from being the main basis for the composition of the very first Bukowskian novel: *Post Office* (M. Gray 22).

In conclusion, it is important to underline how the contextualization of the three Bukowskian works share the same atmosphere of the failure of the Dream, which the Chinaski/Bukowski tandem will try to resist, as we will see later.

2.3. Bukowski and Literary Protest in the 20th Century

As opposed to the classic faith on the American Dream and its subsequent mythification *à la* Benjamin Franklin, the harsh reality of American society in the 20th century (especially in light of the Great Depression) was not the adequate atmosphere for any celebration of the philosophy. During this century, some authors initiated a counteraction towards the positive attitudes about the nation and its philosophy, which took form in numerous writings of a generalized disliking and criticizing of the Dream. Some scholars like Richard Gray identify such trend of American writers mainly represented by the writings of the Beat Generation, with authors such as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs (290). It is precisely within this trend of literary protest where Charles Bukowski would fit in, yet as an independent author from the main movement of the Beats. Despite this, Bukowski would share this status of an anti-American independent writer with some of the most relevant authors of 20th century literature, like J. D. Salinger or Henry Miller, among others (R. Gray 290). In fact, the novels of Salinger and Bukowski share some patterns within their composition, especially in the use of an outcast protagonist as a figure of protest (Holden Caulfield and Henry Chinaski, respectively). Furthermore, related to this issue, M. Gray has remarked the author's great liking of the *magnum opus* of the New Yorker, *The Catcher in the Rye* (9), which would underline the connection of the two American authors.

To close this section, and as a preface to the analysis, it is pertinent to mention that Bukowski's contribution to the protest against the ideal in literature is such that Russell Harrison, one of the major authorities in Bukowskian literature, has characterized the writer as "the only major post-War American writer who has denied the efficacy of the American Dream" (13).

3. Hero of the Inglorious Kind: Bukowski and the American Dream

As briefly mentioned in the beginning of the paper, I will devote the following section to the analysis of the Bukowskian depiction and judgement of the American Dream as the source of the social alienation, victimization, and dehumanization of the individual and the working class. Having reached this point, it might be necessary to firstly classify how the construct of the Dream is perceived by the Chinaski/Bukowski tandem in the novels. To this end, I will specifically focus on three passages (each one from the three novels that I will work on), which I consider that illustrate the basic Bukowskian conception of the Dream.

In the first place, I would like to look at an excerpt from the novel *Post Office*:

“ ‘ . . . Look, let’s give it up. Let’s just lay around and make love and take walks and talk a little. Let’s go to the zoo. Let’s look at animals. Let’s drive down and look at the ocean. It’s only 45 minutes. Let’s play games in the arcades. Let’s go to the races, the Art Museum, the boxing matches. Let’s have friends. Let’s laugh.’ ” (57)

When analyzing the excerpt, it is interesting to see how Henry Chinaski perceives the American way of life as a construction of social interaction and consumerism, which, as I mentioned before, is very much in line with the standards of the 20th century materialism in the Dream.

Following this thread, Chinaski details his thoughts on other constructs of the philosophy such as individualism and upward mobility in *Factotum*:

I remembered my New Orleans days, living on two five-cent candy bars a day for weeks at a time in order to have leisure to write. But starvation, unfortunately, didn't improve art. . . . The myth of the starving artist was a hoax. Once you realized that everything was a hoax you got wise and began to bleed and burn your fellow man. I'd build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men, women and children—I'd shove it to them all the way. *I'd show them!* (44).

Considering this passage, Chinaski observes how instead of hard work, the realization of the Dream and upward mobility is achieved through the oppression of other people for the benefit of oneself, breaking with the canonized social escalation of the Dream, yet in a way sympathizing with the idiosyncratic individualism of the philosophy. Apart from this, it is noticeable that, although Chinaski characterizes the potential realization of the Dream through such oppression, he still denounces the ideal because of the unlikelihood of its achievement, addressing the “hoax” and the “myth” it constitutes.

Finally, I would like to focus on an aspect of the Dream which will be present in the novels several times, constituting one of the major forces of alienation and disillusionment for Chinaski: the dogmatic force of the ideal. This excerpt from *Ham on Rye* attests such particular feature, looking at the Dream as an unquestionable philosophy forcibly transmitted from generation to generation instead of as aspiration, but rather as a dogma:

I began eating. It was terrible. I felt as if I were eating *them*, what they believed in, what they were. . . . Meanwhile my father was talking about how good it all tasted, how lucky we were to be eating good food when most of the people in the world, and many even in America, were starving and poor. (41-2)

In conclusion, considering these passages, I would like to underline how through his alter ego Bukowski regarded the Dream basically as a) a false, unachievable ideal; b) a force fueled by consumerism as well as an extreme individualism; and c) a dogmatic entity in which every American should blindly believe.

3.1. Isolation

In this subsection I will discuss the theme of isolation with regards to the Bukowskian literature as a way to resist the American Dream. This alienation is, perhaps, one of the most recurrent topics in Bukowskian literature, as almost every writing of the author includes one form of it in the flesh of the protagonist himself or other collectives.

Bearing this in mind, and in order to offer a more precise analysis of this Bukowskian move, I will separate this subsection into a) the observation of Chinaski's isolation as a rebellious act against the Dream; b) the isolation of the character in the form of a victimization coming from the clash with the Dream and the groups who benefit from it; and c) the isolation and abandonment of the working class as a whole by the Dream and its subsequent victimization and dehumanization.

3.1.1. Rebellion

In Bukowski's novels, the protagonist's isolation often becomes a form of active protest against the ideal of the Dream. In fact, it may be argued that Chinaski self-alienates from his contemporary reality to show his refusal and criticism of the values of the ideal.

The first dimension I would like to analyze is the character's rejection of the community sense of the Dream. Thus, the isolation of the character is present since the very beginning of the novel of *Factotum*, where he evidences a rejection of any social link or interaction: ". . . I was a man who thrived on solitude; without it I was like another man without food or water. . . ." (24). In the same way, the novel showcases how this self-alienation by Chinaski can be extended to other social constructs like love:

" . . . Everybody needs love, it's warped in you."

"People don't need love. What they need is success, in one form or another. It can be love but it needn't be."

"The Bible says, 'Love thy neighbor'"

"That could mean to leave him alone . . .". (91).

Apart from his rejection of the community sphere and love, it is interesting to see how Chinaski also alienates himself from the classic pursuit of success of the Dream. Precisely, as Harrison argues, this is one of the most noticeable features of Bukowski's work: "Bukowski's work everywhere embodies, explicitly or implicitly, a rejection of the ideology of success and power . . ." (14).

Henry Chinaski's refusal to comply with the standards of society is further emphasized in the following passage from the same book:

Then came the Christmas party. . . . There were to be drinks, food, music, dancing. I didn't like parties. I didn't know how to dance and people frightened me, especially people at parties. They attempted to be sexy and gay and witty and although they hoped they were good at it, they weren't. They were bad at it. Their trying so hard only made it worse. (149)

This passage is particularly relevant because the antihero does not only set himself apart from the convention of a party (the community sphere), but he also openly criticizes the people who try to comply with the standards of the community. Furthermore, he seems to be aware of their desire to fit in the sphere, yet he addresses their failure. This move of criticizing the followers of a norm and their effort to be fully integrated within it will be one of the essential features of Chinaski's criticism of the American Dream.

Indeed, the next aspect I would like to discuss is the isolation of Chinaski from the dogmatic dimension of the Dream I previously discussed in his characterization of the ideal, which is particularly present in the autobiographic novel of *Ham on Rye*. This decision to break out from the thread of mythification of the Dream is firstly attested in Chapter 19 in the book, when Chinaski is asked to write a small composition about a speech President Hoover will give in his city. Because of the inability to attend the speech, Chinaski decides to invent his experience providing a discourse that contrasts with the reality of poverty and starvation he is in touch with at all rates: ". . . at home everything was going to be all right, we shouldn't worry, all we had to do was to believe in America. There would be enough jobs for everybody." (82). The invention of such story (which directly addresses the classical convention of the Dream of America as the land of opportunity) is not punished, but celebrated, to the point that it is given as an example for the whole class. Even Chinaski starts to believe in his own story at first: "I drank in my words like a thirsty man. I even began to believe them." (83). However, when being encouraged by the teacher for the last time, the protagonist resorts to the rejection of both the dogmatic ideal as well as of its followers, regarding the whole situation as this: "So, that's what they wanted: lies. Beautiful lies. That's what they needed. People were fools." (84). This view of the conception of the Dream as a myth and the criticism of its followers

in this passage is also discussed by Daniel Bigna, who even argues on how the novel as a whole serves the purpose of the demythification of the American mindset (105). By the same token, the self-alienation from the people following the Dream may be even more explicit in a later passage, where a young Henry Chinaski is about to attend a privileged high school because of the insistence of his father: “I knew why he wanted me to go to Chelsey. The rich kids went there. My father was crazy. He still thought about being rich.” (125). As the passage shows, Chinaski once more separates from the dogma of the Dream by criticizing the attitude of his father, who, despite the situation of his family and low income, still believes in the possibility of upward mobility for his family.

Continuing with the analysis of Chinaski’s self-alienation against the Dream, I will discuss now his isolation with respect to the construct of work, which is the classical key for achieving the upward mobility of the Dream and one of the major objects of criticism in Bukowskian writings. This act against the ideal is particularly present in major works like *Factotum* and *Post Office*, which portray the experience of Chinaski in the sphere of work all across the country; however, it has also been attested in minor works of the author like “Kid Stardust on the Porterhouse” (1967), where, for example, María Carolina Sánchez identified this criticism of the construct (303) through the experiences of the protagonist. Firstly, with respect to *Factotum*, Chinaski adopts a passive and unmotivated attitude towards his position and situation as a member of the working class, deciding to isolate himself from the mainstream of work. We can find a couple of examples of this attitude in Chapter 10, where the protagonist is conscious of his necessity to find a job to pay for his father’s shelter, yet he shields himself from the conventions of the work sphere with his lack of motivation: “I knew that my father would charge me atrocious prices for room, board and laundry . . . but the desire to find a job did not seem to go with me.” (12). This lack of motivation will be openly addressed by Chinaski’s father later on:

‘Well,’ said my father, ‘did you find a job?’

‘No.’

‘Listen, any man who wants work can find work.’

‘Maybe so.’

‘I can hardly believe you’re my son. You don’t have any ambition, you don’t have any get-up-and-go. How the hell are you going to make it in this world?’ (13)

This rebellious attitude with respect to the Dream through the sphere of work has been an object of discussion by scholars like Carl Rhodes, who postulates that through this counteraction against the American conventions of work, the character “is resisting a whole way of living and being” (392). Similarly, Harrison also considers the deliberate nature of the protest against work in the novel (145).

In addition to these examples from *Factotum*, *Post Office* provides more interesting insights of Chinaski’s isolating protest against the working nature of the Dream, as illustrated by the following quotation: “I didn’t go in the next day. I slept until noon. I didn’t phone.” (37). This is a direct example of the isolative protest of the character, who deliberately decides to suspend any contact with his stable position of a postman which he has maintained for “Three and one half years.” (37). Considering the link between the Bukowski/Chinaski tandem and the relevance of this position in Bukowski’s life because of obvious economic reasons (M. Gray 22), this passage also serves as an example of the delicate connection of Bukowski’s fight against the Dream in both his literature and life.

Finally, I would like to comment on how Chinaski, being such a complex character, does not always stay true to his own vindications, manifesting sometimes an inconsistent behaviour. The most pertinent example of such contradictory attitudes may be the way in which Chinaski sometimes aligns with some ideals of the Dream, like the desire of upward mobility or individualism, as attested in this dialogue from the novel *Factotum*, where it is evident that the protagonist is trying to pursue a form of career:

‘Why did you come to New Orleans?’

‘I had too many friends in Los Angeles, friends I felt were hindering my career. I wanted to go where I could concentrate unmolested.’

‘How do we know that you’ll remain with us any length of time?’

‘I might not.’

‘Why?’

‘Your ad stated that there was a future for an ambitious man. If there isn’t any future here then I must leave.’ (4)

Although it may result shocking for the reader to witness such behaviour, this attitude could be explained considering that Bukowski himself was marked by a clash “between comfortable anonymity and partially sublimated longing for recognition.” (M. Gray 4).

3.1.2. *The Victimization of Henry Chinaski*

Henry Chinaski’s isolation as an element of denouncing the American Dream is often a product of a form of victimization of the character by his father, a follower of the Dream (as I explained in the previous section) and the inability to be integrated within the classes benefited by the ideal. As we will see, the Bukowskian treatment of the Dream as an outcasting force will be something that will have a considerable presence in *Factotum* and, in particular, in *Ham on Rye*.

The first idea that I would like to discuss in this part of the section deals with the isolation of the protagonist in his inner circle, focusing on how he is marginalized within his own family, who breaks with the traditional sense of community-living of the American Dream. In some of the passages of the books, Chinaski’s family (and especially, his father) constantly set him apart from the family sphere by leaving him unprotected. This can be seen in an excerpt of Chapter 9 in *Factotum*, which shows a tired Chinaski who, after roaming from job to job, seeks refuge in his parents’ home. Although his mother initially protects him, his father is not willing to give him any type of shelter, regarding him as a *persona non grata* and even trying to treat his own son as a guest rather than as a member of their community: “‘Listen’ he said, ‘if you stay here I am going to charge you room and board plus laundry.’” (11). In addition to this refusal to protect his son, Chinaski’s father is also portrayed attacking the integrity of the Bukowskian protagonist, who is constantly insulted, despised and even physically abused, becoming more isolated from the possibility of community-living. This issue can be observed especially in *Ham on Rye*, given the autobiographical nature of the book, which includes meticulous descriptions of Chinaski’s relationship with his

father and his reality as an outcast within his own family. The first passage I would like to include in this respect is found in Chapter 48 of the book, with Chinaski's father explicitly addressing his opinion towards his own son and alienating him from the family circle in front of his mother: "‘He can't eat,' said my father, 'he can't work, he can't do anything, he's not worth a fuck!'" (217). It is pertinent to notice how the alienation inside the family sphere of the character is motivated because of his failure to respect the canon of the Dream of being a hard worker, something the father is obsessed with. This precise concern of the father with respect to Chinaski's compromise with the philosophies of the family would be in line with Nathan Franklin's reflection on how he "expects his son to succeed where he failed" (10). Yet, he does not result an inspiring force for his son, who will rather reject him because of his obsession with upward mobility. Nevertheless, Chinaski's isolation within his own family does not reach an end here. In fact, the physical abuse by his father, which the author also suffered (M. Gray 8), will constitute the ultimate cause for the victimization of the character in the novel. In this respect, the beatings increase the protagonist's isolation from reality as a whole, underlining his loneliness and marginalization even more:

The first blow inflicted more shock than pain. The second hurt more. Each blow which followed increased the pain. At first I was aware of the walls, the toilet, the tub. Finally I couldn't see anything. . . . After a while it all became just a whirlpool, a jumble . . . (39)

Nevertheless, Chinaski's victimization within the family sphere is not only a product of his unwillingness to comply with the standards of the mindset. Bigna, for instance, has argued that the frustration of Chinaski's father due to his failure to achieve upward mobility is the main source for his abusive behaviour towards his own son (92). A similar point of view has been defended by Harrison: "Frustrated at every turn, resentful of his loss of status, he reacts by administering brutal beatings to his son . . ." (170).

Finally, to close this section, I would like to focus on how Chinaski is also alienated from the mainstream dominated by the class favoured by the ideal. This issue is best showcased in *Ham on Rye*, and it is firstly attested when Chinaski narrates his feelings when arriving to Chelsey High, a center in which the high class has a strong presence:

The first day we rode our bikes to Chelsey and parked them. it was a terrible feeling. Most of those kids, at least the older ones, had their own automobiles, many of them new convertibles. . . . Everybody was nicely dressed, the guys and the girls, they had pullover sweaters, wrist watches and the latest in shoes. They seemed very adult and poised and superior. (125-6)

This passage offers an interesting point of view about the achievement of the Dream, which consists in accumulating material wealth, as according to the possessions of the boys and girls at Chelsey High; this precise characterization of success would be in line with the consumerist nature of the ideal that eventually surpassed its initial spiritualism. However, not only does Chinaski speak about his solitude in terms of lacking the benefit of the Dream, but he also addresses his own isolation from the social mainstream because of his failure to reach the ideal: “They seemed to know something I didn’t know. I was at the bottom again” (126). This victimization in the form of the isolation of the protagonist is also attested later in the book, where Chinaski attends the Senior prom in Chapter 44, and once again complains about his marginalization: “Everybody knew something I didn’t know. The girls looked so good, the boys so handsome” (194).

3.1.3. The Victimization of the Working Class

The role of the Chinaski/Bukowski tandem in addressing the issues of the working class has a significant weight in the novel of *Ham on Rye*. This interest in the situation of the working class may be explained by the author’s awareness with respect to the situation of the collective after his own experience with the work sphere at the time of its composition (Harrison 18). Thus, in the first part of the book, set in the Great Depression of the 1930s, Chinaski (and Bukowski) will provide a direct testimony of the situation of the masses and their connection with the concept of the American Dream. The failure to achieve the ideal will set the working class apart from the ideal of America as the promised land.

Firstly, the character of Henry Chinaski will tackle the demythification of America as a land of opportunity for the working class several times in the early stages of the story, both in terms of the situation of the families of his neighborhood and of his generation. Regarding the situation of his neighborhood, the Bukowskian antihero provides the reader with a depiction that very much contrasts with the promise of opportunity or prosperity in America, as there is not even access to the sphere of work that is necessary for upward mobility:

‘Now, each of you has a father, I’m sure. I think it would be interesting if we found out what each of your father’s does for a living.’

...

It was terrible. All the fathers in my immediate neighborhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job. Gene’s father sat on his front porch all day. All the fathers were without jobs except Chuck’s who worked in a meat plant. (80-1)

On the other hand, the character manifests the isolation of his own generation from the opportunities promised by the philosophy of the Dream during the speech of his graduation day:

‘America is the great land of Opportunity and any man or woman with a desire to do so will succeed . . .’

...

‘. . . a fair society and all those who search for that dream at the end of the rainbow will find . . .’

‘A hairy crawling turd,’ I suggested. (196)

This passage constitutes one of the major claims of *Ham on Rye*: despite all fanaticism, mythification and pursuit of the ideal, Chinaski observes how the Dream is not for everyone, and definitely not for the working class, which is bound to fail in its aspirations for a better life. This idea is directly connected with Chinaski’s considerations about the gap between the high class and the working class, where those benefited by the dream are regarded as the real winners: “. . . I learned that the poor usually stay poor. . . . Wealth meant victory, and victory was the only reality.” (193).

Secondly, the character of Chinaski is also used as a tool for the depiction of the failure of the easy-living dimension of the Dream for the working class, which is isolated in a sphere of precarity and difficulties. This set of harsh conditions as a consequence of the failure of the ideal reaches such extreme levels that they cause a dehumanization of the class, as the following passage illustrates:

People began going to vacant lots where weeds grew. They had learned that some of the weeds could be cooked and eaten. There were fist fights between men in the vacant lots and on street corners. Everybody was angry . . . My father came home one night with a broken arm and two black eyes. (87-8)

The consequences of the failure of the Dream even reach the younger generation, who are also condemned to suffer the same situation of precarity of their parents:

And each boy in the neighborhood had one pair of Sunday pants and one pair of daily pants. When shoes wore out they weren't any new ones. The department stores had soles and heels they sold for 15 or 20 cents along with the glue, and these were glued to the bottoms of the worn out shoes. (88)

Finally, such victimization, as attested by Chinaski, is also a source for the isolation of the younger generation from the community-sense in the form of the same abandonment he himself suffers at home: "We all came from Depression families and most of us were ill-fed . . . Most of us, I think, got little love from our families . . ." (91).

In conclusion, Bukowski characterizes the problems of the American Dream and its negative outcome through a multidimensional approach, actively criticizing features like the classic community-sense and upward mobility, and also the newer philosophy of consumerism. Nevertheless, the Dream is such a rooted mindset within American society that it causes the victimization of the character, as he represents an objection to its dogmatic force. Furthermore, this victimization by the Dream does not only limit to Henry Chinaski as an individual, but it also extends to the working class. In fact, the isolation of this collective from the ideas of opportunity and prosperity of the Dream, together with its deprivation of the easy-living dimension, illustrate how this ideal is a failure and source of dehumanization for those at the bottom of the social scale.

3.2 Henry Chinaski's Embracement of Reality

This second section of the analysis of the depiction of the Dream in Bukowskian literature will be devoted to observing the embracement of reality by the character, a situation that will result in a general disillusionment with the ideal. This reaction will be rooted in the failure of the protagonist to achieve the Dream, as well as in a general feeling of frustration whenever he will try to resist it. In this context, Chinaski will present different strategies for his embracement, but for the sake of a better organization, I will classify them into two closely intertwined categories: a) a refuge in alcoholism; and b) a series of suicidal tendencies.

3.2.1. *Alcoholism*

In order to discuss the role of alcoholism within the embracement of reality of the character, I believe that it is pertinent to observe, first, Bukowski's own experience and fascination for the substance, for his own alcoholism was one of the most prominent characteristics that was transferred into the psychology of his alter ego.

Succumbing to alcohol from an early age (M. Gray 10), Charles Bukowski's addiction was one of the bases maintaining the author's literature, to the point of being his most important source of inspiration and a quintessential ingredient for the making of his work ("Charles Bukowski on why hard liquor doesn't lend itself to writing", 0:00-0:10). Furthermore, the writer prided himself on his addiction, to the point of defending it as a mark of identity:

I think a man can keep on drinking for centuries, he'll never die, especially wine and beer. . . . Be an alcoholic! If you gotta be anything, be an alcoholic. . . . If I hadn't been a drunkard I probably would have committed suicide long ago. . . . I mean, alcohol gives you the release of a dream without the deadness of drugs, you know? . . . I'm all for alcohol, I'll tell you. It's the thing!. ("CHARLES BUKOWSKI marihuana alcohol sub" 00:19-04:30).

The connection in this respect between author and character is precisely present in *Ham on Rye*, where we may see the description of the first time the character tries wine:

I opened the spigot and I opened my mouth. The smelly liquid entered and I swallowed it.

...

I tried some more. It was tasting better. I was feeling better.

...

Why hadn't someone told me? With this, life was great, a man was perfect, nothing could touch him.

...

... I thought, well, now I have found something, I have found something that is going to help me, for a long long time to come. (95-6)

Interestingly, this very passage acts as an omen for how the character precisely uses alcohol as an anesthesia from reality in the rest of his life. Scholars like Bigna agree with this view, arguing how alcohol plays a significant role in Chinaski's embracement of reality in the same novel, and even equating its relieving effect to the one the character finds in writing: "Chinaski eventually turns to writing as a form of escape from the ugly reality of his everyday life. He also discovers alcohol, which serves the same purpose" (93). By the same token, we can see how drinking becomes a powerful instrument to escape from the dimension of work in *Factotum*: "Frankly, I was horrified by life, at what a man had to do simply in order to eat, sleep, and keep himself clothed. So I stayed in bed and drank" (46). This particular passage is very interesting because it exemplifies the idea of how the Dream is a dogmatic force in which one must believe in order to survive. Chinaski will also develop this reflection of his disenchantment with respect to the Dream in *Ham on Rye*, extending his concern not only to working-class men like himself, but to society in general: "I sat back down and poured a glass of wine. . . . We were all in it together. We were all in one big shit pot together. There was no escape. We were all going to be flushed away" (275). Finally, Chinaski's usage of the substance to escape the reality of the Dream is often translated into a lack of motivation to overcome his own misery, setting the drug as one of the main ingredients of his life:

As long as a man had wine and cigarettes he could make it.

...

Maybe I could live by my wits. The eight-hour day was impossible, yet almost everybody submitted to it.

...

I could make it. I could win drinking contests, I could gamble. (264-5)

This type of behaviour is also present later in the book, where Chinaski once again claims to prefer being around alcohol rather than aligning with the working sphere of the Dream:

‘Come on, be a man, join up. Be a Marine.’

...

‘Join up. It’ll give you something to write about.’

‘Becker, there’s always something to write about.’

‘What are you gonna do, then?’

I pointed at my bottle, picked it up. (278-9)

3.2.2. *Suicidal Tendencies*

The Bukowskian antihero also shows a series of suicidal tendencies because of his disillusionment with the reality of the Dream. This desire of taking his own life is attested several times in the novels, and, as I will discuss below, it keeps a close connection with the perception of the work sphere related to the Dream and the promise of prosperity.

In the first place, there is evidence of a young Henry Chinaski starting to manifest these suicidal thoughts in *Ham on Rye*:

At the age of 25 most people were finished. A whole god-damned nation of assholes driving automobiles, eating, having babies . . .

. . . I had no interest in anything. I had no idea how I was going to escape. At least the others had some taste for life. They seemed to understand something that I didn't understand. . . . I just wanted to get away from them. But there was no place to go. Suicide? Jesus Christ, just more work (174-5).

As the passage illustrates, Chinaski reacts with a lack of motivation to his discontent with the reality of the Dream, especially with respect to the decadent force it constitutes for American citizens (as seen in how he considers that “most people are finished”). His disliking of the features of the ideal, however, evolves into a victimization of himself and the consideration of committing suicide, seeing as how the Dream works for other people, as attested in the reference about the “taste” of those benefited by the Dream and their “understanding” of something he is not aware of.

Secondly, as I stated at the beginning of this section, the topic of suicidal tendencies is closely intertwined with the usage of alcohol in his embracement, as well as with his rejection of the work sphere. The first example I will provide in this respect encapsulates this:

What were doctors, lawyers, scientists? They were just men who allowed themselves to be deprived of their freedom to think and act as individuals. I went back to my shack and drank...

Sitting there drinking, I considered suicide . . . (*Ham on Rye*, 274)

Here, Chinaski expresses his concern about the alienating force of the work: he reflects upon the loss of those who have entered and complied with the standards of the sphere of work, addressing the mistake that has cost them their “freedom”. As a result from the clash between the necessity to find a job and his resistance to make that same mistake, the character is left in an existential dilemma about the projection of his own aspirations (if any) for which he uses the anesthesia of alcohol, finally leading to the consideration of suicide.

This characterization of the construct of work and the existential implications it has for the character's resistance is also developed in *Post Office*, where the character

abandons his position as a postman once and for all, renouncing to the feature of work and gaining a relative liberty from the Dream as an independent individual: “I didn’t *feel* any different. But I knew that soon, like a man lifted quickly out of the deep sea, I would be afflicted—with a particular type of bends . . . After living in the cage I had taken the opening and flown out—like a shot into the heavens. Heavens?” (156). This short passage actually features one of the major aspects of Bukowskian protest as Chinaski realizes that he has escaped the “cage” that work (and the ideal of the Dream to which is related) symbolizes. That is, the protagonist conceives the sphere of work as a trap for the individual and tries to leave it behind; this rebellion is precisely one of the key points that Harrison underlines in his study of the novel (139). However, no matter his efforts, Chinaski is still conscious that his emancipation from the reality of the construct may have negative consequences, not being sure whether his decision was accurate enough. Precisely, in the next chapter, the Bukowskian antihero does indeed fall into a depressive state, in which he embraces the disillusionment of the outcome of his decision almost committing suicide: “I went into the bends. I got drunker and stayed drunker than a shit skunk in Purgatory. I even had the butcher knife against my throat one night in the kitchen . . .”. (157). Again, alcohol is combined with the decision of suicide so as to deal with the failure of his fight against the ideal and his unresolved existential dilemma.

As a conclusion for this second part of the analysis, Chinaski’s decision to resort to drinking and the idea of suicide exemplify how the Dream, rather than being a source of fortune and happiness, works sometimes in the contrary way, lacking precisely the opportunity for prosperity and easy-living that is promised. Furthermore, through the treatment of the sphere of work the Chinaski/Bukowski tandem brings to light the debate of fighting against the construct while needing to comply with its conventions in order to survive, which results in an existential collapse leading to the previously discussed self-destructive tendencies.

4. Conclusion

Along this essay I have discussed how the American Dream is depicted as a source of isolation, victimization and dehumanization for the individual and the working class in

the writings by Charles Bukowski. As we have observed, through the novels of *Post Office*, *Factotum* and *Ham on Rye*, the Bukowski/Chinaski tandem offers a view of protest of the American mindset, criticizing it as well as bringing to light the reality of the different constructs that conform the ideology. Apart from this, rather than just constituting a work of critique, we have seen how Bukowski elevates Chinaski to the category of a figure of rebellion against the Dream. He is an antihero who actively attacks the classical and modern conventions of the philosophy of which he has been a victim. Indeed, armed with the memories of the author, Chinaski sets on a voyage exploring how conventions of the Dream such as the community-sense, upward mobility, the construct of work, materialism, and consumerism constitute a trap for the individual, arguing how the ideal of the Dream is unachievable, especially for the working classes. Furthermore, in an act of sympathy for the collective, the Bukowskian anti-hero also illustrates how for those not gifted by the ideal, the Dream constitutes a source of suffering, which, almost in a grotesque manner, translates into a dehumanization of the working class. Following this thread, we have also seen how the ideal is depicted as such a negative and oppressive force, that it causes the protagonist to be alienated within his own family, from whom he gets no type of protection or assistance to help him develop his values and identity. Furthermore, the refuge in alcoholism and the consideration of committing suicide that Henry Chinaski displays both the consequences of the failure in achieving the Dream and the outcome of trying to resist it. In the end, Bukowski's novels show how it is impossible for the individual to reconcile the internal conflict between the fight against the construct responsible for his suffering, and his necessity to comply with its conventions.

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