



CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S LITERARY CONSCIOUSNESS ON THE RISE OF WHITE COLLAR JOBS DURING THE 1960S IN AMERICA

*S Habeeb Mohamed Hussain
Assistant Professor
The New College, Chennai.*

Abstract

American literature has always had an equivocal reception in every period in its rich history. Especially after the emergence of the beat generation the American literature redefined its reception, moreover their disdain for the urge to dwell as a fringe in the established society brought a huge impact in both literary and social forums. Their transgressive style of writing brought an absolute disillusionment over the American dream in the visions of the American working class community. The beats became the foremost group to showcase a pragmatic defiance over the conformity of the intellectual system of America during the post world war II era. This paper unearths the consciousness of Charles Bukowski, who served as a prominent figure in the group of beats, and his works on how they recounted the morale of 9 to 5 working class lifestyle.

Charles Bukowski was a German born American poet 1920 – 1994, has also written novels and short stories. Most of his works deal with the themes of American working and underprivileged classes, alcohol and the drudgery of work with a sense of escapism. He also played an indispensable role in the beat movement which acted as a counter culture for the American conformist society of 1960s. Theodore Roszak in his book *The Making of Counter Culture*, discusses the urge and compulsion of having a counter culture, “the rational, science-based society of the twentieth century alienated men and women, especially the young, and propelled them into the search for meaning in drugs, spirituality, and dissent”². In that way the beats were the foremost in bringing the counter culture against the rigidity and regularity of the conformist society during the late 50s. They questioned the privileged class’ accepted codes of behaviors and beliefs in the societal and professional forums. The Beat writers noted the emergence of capitalism as destructive to the human spirit and unethical to social equality. Nevertheless, Bukowski trailed a lot of questions over the distressing and demoralizing inventory of 9 to 5 jobs in the American work culture.

The end of World War II gave drastic changes in the American work culture. Rapid advertisements in the office infrastructure and work plan made employees to seem appealing than their current lifestyle. During 60s offices underwent many experiments to create a human centered approach on believing that transformation would increase the productivity of the employees. Those offices had to advertise them as the providers of health insurance and retirement plans to influence a large population, one of which was the 9 to 5 working style. The term 9 to 5 describes the jobs that start at 9 in the morning and ends at 5 in the evening, particularly these jobs refer to the office settings which have five working days for a week.

Charles Bukowski had never been comfortable with the system of 9 to 5 jobs; he tackled the subjects of social and cultural importance through his works of arts. In 1969, a publisher named John Martin came forward to offer Bukowski an official entry to the profession of writing. He was aged 49 when he got the offer “the black sparrow press” founded by John martin, which also published Bukowski’s small pamphlets. The press also remunerated him with 100 dollars per month and that gave a lead to Bukowski to quit his 15 years old job in the postal service which he absolutely hated. The very first work of Bukowski was *The Post Office*, under the black sparrow press, a semi-autobiographical work of his life of an employee at the United States postal service. The protagonist of the novel Henry Chinaski, the alter ego of Charles Bukowski, endures an extremely tiring and degrading job as a postal worker. Bukowski explicitly criticizes the American dream and the pursuit of chasing a conventional success by portraying chinaski’s disillusioned cyclical life in the post office. Throughout the novel Bukowski highlights chinaski’s strive for exploring only emptiness in 15 years of working as a postal clerk. The novel serves as a provider of rare insights of the working class individuals whom Bukowski thought the unnoticed figures in literature. Bukowski’s portrayal of the post office workers and their struggles objectify the differences of the reality between the blue collar jobs and the society’s romanticized opinion over them.

In 1986, after 15 years of the release of the novel the post office, Bukowski wrote a letter as a thank note addressed to John Martin, in which again he lambasts the 9 to 5 jobs as,
 “They call it “9 to 5.” It’s never 9 to 5, there’s no free lunch break at those places, in fact, at many of them in order to keep your job you don’t take lunch, then there’s overtime and the books never seem to get the overtime right and if you complain about that, there’s another sucker to take your place. “You know my old saying, ‘slavery was never abolished, it was only extended to include all the colors’”³.
 Bukowski’s overstating comparisons of the 9 to 5 jobs sheds lights on the trauma that he had in his workplace and also the necessity of bringing in the subject to the literary forum.

Charles Bukowski has also tainted the same subject in many of his poetic works, arguably the poem *The Great Escape* an exemplary work on portraying a common man’s plight on working in an office spectrum. This particular work expresses the sense and tone of escapism from the eyes of a working class American misbalancing his societal and professional life. In which the narrator, Bukowski himself, meets his life turning point by understanding the office he worked was merely a bucket with a bunch of crabs. The setting of the poem is inside the postal office and the crabs were the coworkers characterizing themselves by pulling down others from the ladder of promotions,
 “you ever seen a bunch of crabs in a bucket?
 no, I told him.

well, what happens is that now and then one crab will climb up on top of the others and begin to climb toward the top of the bucket, then, just as he's about to escape another crab grabs him and pulls him back down”¹.

On the second half of the poem the narrator “climbs right up to the supervisor”, where Bukowski grabs the opportunity to quit his job. Since he climbed up, he transformed as an individual from being a crab of weighing his life under the regime of hierarchy,
 “I got up off my stool and climbed right up the supervisor

and then I reached up and pulled myself right out of there.
 it was so easy it was unbelievable.
 but none of the others followed me”¹.

Bukowski’s brilliance also showcases the indifferent nature in the office atmosphere and its effect on individualism. The above mentioned works of Bukowski exemplify the demeaning and demoralizing social structure recessed under the blue collar jobs. Bukowski was one of the very few writers to play a pivotal role on bringing the hard-working class hands to touch and thematize the American literature.

Work cited

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