20th Century American Literature

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**Lecture Notes: Charles Bukowski**

1. Bio
   1. Charles Bukowski (originally Heinrich Karl Bukowski) was born in Germany in 1920. His father, Heinrich Bukowski, was a US Army Sergeant serving in Germany during WWI. His German girlfriend, Katherina, became pregnant and they were married.
   2. The family moved to America when Charles was three. His family called him Henry so that he would be accepted in America. They first lived in Baltimore before settling in LA when Charles was ten years old.
   3. According to stories that Charles later wrote, his father was very abusive, both to his mother and the children. And because he spoke English very poorly and wore strange clothes, the children at school also treated him cruelly.
   4. Bukowski was very depressed and angry as a teenager. His friend introduced him to alcohol and he quickly became dependent on drinking. He was a chronic alcoholic throughout his entire life.
   5. He graduated from LA High School and spent two years studying journalism at the Los Angeles City College. He was 20 years old when the United States entered WWII but he failed a psychological test and was declared unfit for military service.
   6. He moved to New York to become a writer in the early 1940’s to become a writer and struggled for a long time to get published (two stories over four years), working at menial jobs for support (at a pickle factory and as a mailman for a time).
   7. He gave up on writing for ten years from 1946-1955, drinking heavily. In 1955 he became very ill with a bleeding stomach and almost died. While in the hospital he began writing poetry. A series of heartbreaking relationships further inspired him.
   8. He published several poems in magazines and then in 1965 he published two books of poems. In 1967 he began writing a weekly newspaper column titled “Notes of a Dirty Old Man” and his fame began to grow.
   9. In 1969 Bukowski finally quit his post office job and began to write full-time. He said in a letter at the time: “I have one of two choices – stay in the post office and go crazy … or stay out here and play at writer and starve. I have decided to starve.”
   10. Throughout this time Bukowski began to have sexual relationships with a lot of women. These affairs became the subject of many of his stories. He also continued to drink, often becoming extremely intoxicated and violent in public.
   11. Bukowski eventually wrote thousands of poems, hundreds of stories, one movie, and six novels. He published over 60 books. He was extremely popular with the small group of people who knew about him, mostly on the west coast, but never achieved national fame in his lifetime.
   12. By the end of his life Bukowski was seen as one of the giants of the “outsider” literature movement, a loosely bound group of writers who rejected and were rejected by the “Literary Establishment” of the time. Bukowski died of leukemia in 1994. His gravestone says: “Don’t try.”
2. Themes
   1. Bukowski wrote about life at the bottom level of society. His subjects include sex, violence, alcoholism, and the sad, boring life of people who work at poor paying and humiliating jobs.
   2. His work also explores the unfairness and absurdity of life. Although his view of life is that we are all helpless in the face of a hostile universe, his writing still has a strong sense of humor about it all.
   3. Many writers during this time attempted to depict themselves as “outsiders,” people rejected by either society as a whole or the “club” or professional writers. Bukowski really was. His writing shows a person dealing with rejection and alienation on a daily basis.
   4. When Bukowski became somewhat famous and accepted later in his life he thought that it was very funny. He was prepared however, and maintained his “low-life” perspective, not to mention his self-destructive lifestyle, until the end.
3. Style
   1. Bukowski’s style is extremely, and deceptively, simple. His writing is stark and often disturbing in the frankness of his language. He used words and discussed topics that were considered unspeakable at the time.
   2. His poetry is written in short lines with little punctuation. This tends to give them a sense of movement, as if he has something important to tell the reader. He has been compared, in the content and movement of his poetry, to Walt Whitman.
   3. His stories depict the real life of people in communities struggling with poverty, alcoholism, and sexual dysfunction. He writes incredibly realistic characters who speak from their hearts. Most of his characters and stories are based on people he knew and experiences he had.
   4. He wrote one screenplay for a movie, titled *Barfly*, which was released in 1987 starring Mickey Roarke. The movie was about three days in the life of Bukowski when he was 24. He later wrote a fictional account of the making of that movie in the novel *Hollywood.*
4. Works
   1. Chronology and other Resources:
      1. Main page on the Poetry Foundation website: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charles-bukowski>
      2. Other information: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/search/?q=bukowski>
   2. “a smile to remember”

we had goldfish and they circled around and around  
in the bowl on the table near the heavy drapes  
covering the picture window and  
my mother, always smiling, wanting us all  
to be happy, told me, "be happy Henry!"  
and she was right: it's better to be happy if you  
can  
but my father continued to beat her and me several times a week  
while  
raging inside his 6-foot-two frame because he couldn't  
understand what was attacking him from within.  
  
my mother, poor fish,  
wanting to be happy, beaten two or three times a  
week, telling me to be happy: "Henry, smile!  
why don't you ever smile?"  
  
and then she would smile, to show me how, and it was the  
saddest smile I ever saw  
  
one day the goldfish died, all five of them,  
they floated on the water, on their sides, their  
eyes still open,  
and when my father got home he threw them to the cat  
there on the kitchen floor and we watched as my mother  
smiled