Notes of a Dirty Old Man Study Guide

Notes of a Dirty Old Man by Charles Bukowski

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Notes of a Dirty Old Man, by Charles Bukowski, is a combination of poetry and short stories that not only shocks the senses but enlightens the mind. Bukowski, a self proclaimed alcoholic, womanizer, and rebel, writes his prose in a way that is honest, pure, raw, and sensual, while being crass and heartless at the same time. The works in this book are actually articles Bukowski wrote for his column of the same title in a newspaper in L.A. called Open City. As Bukowski himself explains, many were written while intoxicated, and most contain a blend of true experiences and the darker portion of Bukowski's mind. The stories follow Bukowski around the country as he writes his work, drinks, stays in boarding houses, and experiences the darkest corners of humanity. Along the way, however, readers see a light in Bukowski that is well hidden, but that creates within him a duality of good and evil which appears in many of his stories.

Bukowski's works involve a number of recurrent themes. Sexual deviance, a favor of Bukowski's, is discussed in terms of anal sex, prostitution, threesomes, rape, homosexuality, and frequent casual sex. Politics are discussed not as a party plea, but as a general distaste for all things political. Religion and God are frequent topics as well, and it is clear Bukowski is a fan of neither. Violence in the form of spousal abuse, parental abuse, and overall fighting is present in nearly each story. Other themes presented include the plight of the writer, freedom, justice, and suicide.

In addition to seeing the underbelly of America, Bukowski introduces readers to some of the greatest writers of his time in a personal and up close manner. His stories of drinking with Kerouac and other writers not only provide readers with insight into Bukowski's societal life, but also allow readers to see rare moments in the lives of other famous poets and authors. Further, it is through conversations with such authors that Bukowski really brings light to his true feelings about the world around him, and about his own existence.

While difficult to read for those who are easily offended, Notes of a Dirty Old Man is not only a wonderful novel, but one of honesty and raw talent rarely seen in writing today. Bukowski's crass and brutal look at the world, tempered with his occasional lapse into the poet's care, leaves readers with an overall sense of adventure, and a moment of grateful appreciation for the lives they lead. Brilliant in its simplicity, Notes of a Dirty Old Man is a book for those who want a darker view of the world in which we live.

Forward

Forward Summary and Analysis

Charles Bukowski begins his book of short articles and stories by explaining how such pieces came into existence. His employer at Open City newspaper in L.A. was John Bryan, who had been fired from the Herald-Examiner for objecting to the airbrushing of the private parts of the Christ child in an image. A revolutionary, Bryan clearly earned the respect of Bukowski as he himself was a revolutionary thinker. When Bryan asked Bukowski to write a column for the newspaper, he agreed. One evening, Bukowski sat down with a beer after the horse races, and began drinking while writing, allowing the words to flow freely, without filters. The result, he explains, were the articles he published, and the pieces contained within the book. In the end, he states he hopes the book helps some, and that he does not particularly care if you like or dislike him. Through the short 3 pages of the forward, readers get a very clear image of Charles Bukowski, and of his writing style. He is brilliantly rough, and brutally honest in his work, creating a style that is highly enjoyable for some. His tone is that of someone who knows his flaws, and embraces them, realizing they are what makes him an outstanding writer. He clearly does not care what readers think, and simply writes his style of writing, not what the reader wants to hear. His work is raw, brutal, and brilliant.

Section 1 and Section 2

Section 1 and Section 2 Summary and Analysis

Section 1 begins on page 9, with the heading of the book, "Notes of a Dirty Old Man". Written in the first-person perspective, the author begins by recalling a fight with a friend, Elf, at a drunken card game. Bukowski remembers hitting him, but cannot recall why. However, when he fails to knock Elf out, Elf proceeds to beat him, and Bukowski blacks out. When he comes to, he is under the bed. He looks around to see broken furniture, but is relieved to find his money, stashed during the game, is still well hidden. When he opens the door to go out for beer, he sees a man with a hammer, waiting for him. Bukowski packs a suitcase and grabs his typewriter. He exits the door, and hits the man across the head with the typewriter. Outside, he calls a cab, and asks to be taken to the bus station. He finally makes it to New Orleans. Written in long bursts of run on sentences mixed with short bursts of conversation, this story is a perfect example of Bukowski's style, that of free thought uninterrupted by censors. His words are unrefined, grammatically incorrect, yet flow almost seamlessly throughout the story, even despite the style.

Section 2 begins on page 13 with the words "we were sitting in the office...". The author, Bailey, sits with Henderson, his boss, as the manager of the Blues baseball team during a losing season, drinking. A kid walks in the door with what they believe to be paper wings glued to his back, and offers to play. The kid, named Jimmy Crispin, or J.C. for short, begins to fly around the room. Henderson signs him as a player. After practice, Bailey phones his bookie, and places a thousand dollar bet at 250 to one on the Blues to win the season. The team begins winning, and makes it to the last game. Henderson and Bailey are in the office when J.C. comes in drunk with his wings sawed off. He explains "they" sawed off his wings as he attempted to make love to a woman. He mentions a man smoking a cigar, and Bailey knows it was Bugsy, his bookie. He takes a gun to the VP box and talks with Bugsy, who explains that Man always beats God. Bailey shoots Bugsy in the head. In his cell the next day, he finds out the Blues won the game without J.C. Bailey laments on how "God beats Man always and continually" While clearly a fiction story, told in the first person, Bukowski interjects his own opinions about the play between God and Man. In the story, J.C., a possible metaphor for Jesus Christ, attempts to help men in trouble. However, other greedy men steal his wings. In revenge, Bailey commits a deeper sin, only to find himself losing his freedom as well as his potential winnings. His closing comments symbolize his belief that the world always continues to turn, no matter what losses or gains a single man may experience in his life.

Section 3 and Section 4

Section 3 and Section 4 Summary and Analysis

Section 3 begins on page 20 with the words, "it was hot in there." Bukowski begins this story by noting the heat in the room. He wakes up on a couch, vomits until the cup is full, and continues to vomit in a large pot someone brings. He walks into the bathroom, where he finds two men naked, where one is lathering the other's penis and scrotum with shaving lotion. Bukowski drinks two more beers, and presumes he is in North Hollywood. He speaks with a man named Jack, who informs him he is in Pasadena. He walks behind a curtain to find an orgy of mostly gay men, and pulls away as one grasps his scrotum. He finds a woman in the small room, and begins to make love to her when a man enters him from behind. Bukowski leaves, and drives home to find a letter from his ex-wife, and as he runs a bath, begins to lather with shaving lotion. As with previous stories, the use of Bukowski's own name lets readers know the story is one based on fact, as does his use of first person narrative. Void of deeper meaning, the story allows Bukowski to write of his experiences brutally, without the need for language or context filters. His style, with incorrect grammar, punctuation, and capitalization, just lends to the overall honest feel of the piece.

Section 4 begins on page 23 with the words, "I met Kerouac's boy Neal C. shortly before he went down to lay...." Bukowski mentions meeting Neal C., Jack Kerouac's son, before he killed himself. He watches as Neil, drugged, shoves his head into a speaker to hear the music, and offers him a beer. As the two talk, they compliment one another on their writing, and Bukowski lets the reader know he likes Neil. He feels sorry for the boy, since his father and mother have virtually ruined the boy's life. Bryan, the apparent host of the party, asks Bukowski if he wants to fight Neil, and Bukowski declines. Bryan, Neil, and Bukowski ride to Bryan's for dinner, and Neil drives like a maniac, actually frightening Bukowski. A few weeks later, Bryan calls Bukowski to inform him Neil has passed away. The use of foreshadowing in this piece, by noting Neil is dead from the beginning of the story, is a vital tool that allows readers to feel stronger associations with Neil as the unwilling participant in his fathers writings. Kerouac, a writer much like Bukowski, has clearly made Neil's life difficult, and when he finally ends his life alone, readers are left with a sympathy far greater than they would have, perhaps, for a similar character. Also, the description of the car ride to Bryan's home lets readers know that Neil is clearly not afraid of death, and appears to live at the edge of death consistently. His suicide, then, is not surprising, but saddening.

Section 5 and Section 6

Section 5 and Section 6 Summary and Analysis

Section 5 begins on page 27 with the words, "the summers are longer where the suicides hand and the files eat mud pie." Bukowski finds himself sitting with Jack Kerouac on the bank of the canal in Venice. Kerouac speak out against homosexuality as they talk, and Bukowski explains that too many people are afraid of being homosexual. He also notes, on the other hand, that too many intellectuals are afraid to speak out against homosexuals, and against the left wing. He admires Kerouac for admitting his emotions. The two men go to "Bird's" house, where Bird and his wife, both beautiful, are drinking. Bukowski realizes Kerouac is happy to see him beginning to heal inside, as he is tired of carrying Bukowski's soul. He admits he is the weakest of the four in the room, and sees they are helping him simply by existing. He begins to open up to the three in the room, and realizes they have helped him find his voice. This piece says much about Bukowski's opinion of the poetry market, as well as society, at the time of the writing. By his own admission, he feels the people have become boring, and thus, that poetry and the world of writing has suffered. His soul has been lost, and it is only through the insights of others that he is able to find himself again. He is able to realize that while the world is a dark and lonely place, his existence does not have to be.

Section 6 begins on page 32 with the words, "Jesus, mother, it was terrible —". Bukowski finds himself in the Village. He drinks for a week, and finds a room outside the village, which was inexpensive because the "L" train stops right outside of the room. He attempts to have his clothes cleaned, but the Jewish couple that owns the cleaners gives him a suit instead. When he awakens in his room and puts on the suit, it rips, and he decides to move again. He sleeps on the streets for several nights, finally finding himself outside of Yankee Stadium. The following day, he finds a job replacing advertisements on billboards in the subway, which he quits the same day. Bukowski laments that cities are made to kill people without luck. He finds himself next in Kansas City, listening to a fight next door between a manager and a maid. Bukowski, in this piece, seems to be commenting on the vast differences between the populations of larger cities. In New York, he finds himself homeless and with a crowd of individuals who believe themselves to be higher than they truly are. In Kansas City, he hears the familiar sounds of drunken arguments, and knows he is amongst his own. These individuals are not pretentious, but brutal and honest about who they are and their world, as Bukowski is. It is clear from this piece that Bukowski does not believe himself to be anything other than a humble writer.

Section 7 and Section 8

Section 7 and Section 8 Summary and Analysis

Section 7 begins on page 37 with the words "those were the nights, the old days at the Olympic.." Bukowski describes the nights at the boxing ring, where he and his lady friend would drink along with everyone else, and choose which fighter to bet on. One night, he is watching his favorite, Watson Jones, when he is astonished to see a man named Enrique Balanos win the fight. He later admits to Jane, his friend, that the better fighter won. He and Jane make love, and awaken to find themselves soaking wet, since they fell asleep near an open window. The two laugh, and Bukowski goes to work. In this piece, Bukowski is comparing the existence of a regular working man and those believed to be of a higher order, such as boxers. As he notes toward the ending, there is a very thin line between these two worlds that can easily be crossed by unexpected circumstances. In the end, he finds himself happy with what he has, and knows the boxer is left with nothing. This is a powerful message about accepting what one has, and not looking at exterior appearances to judge the wealth or happiness of another.

Section 8 begins on page 40 with the words, "Santa Anita, March 22, 1968, 3:10 p.m." Bukowski is at the horse track, and is $40.00 down. He notes that while a philosopher once said gambling was a form of masturbation, he himself believes gambling is done by those who are already in agony, and who would rather bet further agony than face their current existence. On this day, Bukowski and others have bet on a horse in the 5th race that was a 5/2 shot. When the horse wins, however, the board changes to an 8/5 shot, which pays far less. The crowd begins to boo as a man enters the field, yelling, and the crowd joins him on the track. The announcer asks them to leave, and they refuse as the track policemen with guns begin to approach. As the protesters lay in front of the horses that are arriving for the next race, the jockey of the lead horse spurs the animal through, possibly hurting many. The crowd attempts to pull him from his saddle, but the police intervene. The crowd leaves the field, and begins to chant "Don't bet!" However, as usual, the crowd bets. Bukowski's commentary on the habitual nature of man in this piece, even in the face of clear betrayal, is subtle but pointed. He believes that the world creates men and women whose lives are so patterned, they follow the same pattern even when it leads them astray. Like the crowd at the track, Bukowski admits that man will fight only for a short time against the world, but will fall back into submission upon any resistance.

Section 9 and Section 10

Section 9 and Section 10 Summary and Analysis

Section 9 begins on page 45 with the words "this guy in the army fatigues..." Kennedy has just been assassinated. Bukowski notes that in the last decade the world has not only lost men of some worth, but also social, political, and spiritual gains. He mentions that assassinations and resulting reactions threaten natural freedom. Bukowski mentions that he himself did not kill Kennedy, or King, or Malcolm X, or any others, but that it is clear that the left wing is being systematically removed as a result of the killings. Bukowski is angry at the idea that all should be punished for the actions of few. He notes that society places blame for the madness on the parents, but that he himself believes assassins exist because society makes them. Bukowski's "rant" in this section is a resounding example of his almost addictive writing style, as well as his passion, which is often well hidden. In this rare political rant, Bukowski makes clear statements against the belief that freedom should suffer because of a few societal mishaps. While he, surprisingly, does regret the death of Kennedy, he also has a strong opinion against the governmental and societal use of such events as a reason for freedom reduction. He sees the world is falling apart as the rich get richer and the rest of society falls to pieces, but believes that the only solution is to face such realities, which he realizes most are unable to do.

Section 10 begins on page 51 with the words, "It's over." Two men are drinking in a room. Anderson admits he is not good with women, and wonders why men make such a big deal out of sex, when in the end, they feel cheated. Moss also points out that the horrible men always get women, but that nice men do not. When Moss asks if this belies the laws of nature, Anderson points out that societal law and natural law are vastly different, which is why modern society is near to blowing up. According to Anderson, women know the fake succeed in modern society. He mentions that he wants to have sex, and Moss calls a woman he knows. He arranges to meet her and a friend at her place in an hour. Bukowski's amusing story shows the irony of the male-female relationships, as well as the comfort of friendship. The men in the story are clearly comfortable friends, and speak easily with one another, showing Bukowski's own love of open, honest friendship. Additionally, however, the men in the story are clearly inadequate at their relations with women, and blame women for the state of society. In the end, however, they still find themselves making dates to satisfy their own needs. On one hand, the men both agree they feel cheated by empty sexual relations, but in the end, set up a situation to have exactly those relations.

Section 11 and Section 12

Section 11 and Section 12 Summary and Analysis

Section 11 begins on page 57, with the phrase "the phone rang." A man answers a phone, listens briefly to his boss, and hangs up on him. He finishes a beer, goes to the bathroom, and sings as he walks to the living room to find his three and a half year old daughter. He sits down with her, and the two laugh together. The father, Freddie, tells her he is in extreme pain, and will not be able to last much longer. She tells him she loves him, and when he returns the hug and the words, she beams happily. The two begin to play when her mother and Marty, her boyfriend, come to pick her up. Freddie gets a knife, and slashes Marty's throat. He closes the door, and begins to play with his daughter as the police sirens come in the background. Bukowski's story is touching through the interplay of father and daughter, but disturbing in the child's behavior. Clearly a child of a disadvantaged family, her language, actions, and statements all show clearly her surroundings throughout her life. Her father, who appears to be dying, obviously loves his daughter very deeply, but appears to also be dying. Before his own demise, however, he kills Marty, sparing his child, and in some way awakening the child's mother from her own daze. However, as Bukowski notes in the end, death is boredom, and it is unlikely the man has done anything truly for his daughter or her mother.

Section 12 begins on page 62 with the words "all the rivers are going to get higher...." Bukowski begins by noting that the world has become a hard place, and some wish for revolution. However, he cautions that revolution usually means the same government with a new face. He scolds the larger presses for covering up the truth in society and government. Bukowski does not believe revolution will change the men who are being ruled, or the rulers themselves. He says he is not telling individuals to give up, but to be aware of anyone trying to sell them a new life or a new world. Bukowski tells of the religious con that occurred in his lifetime, where small churches promised a new world as they sought to support their drinking and drug habits. He warns readers that if they are going to trade their lives, they need to understand what is being traded. However, he also points out he is glad to live in the age he lives in, because the little man is beginning to stand up to government. Throughout the piece, Bukowski keeps up a passionate rage against the revolutionaries of the world who are determined to change the world with bloodshed. Rather than being preachy in tone, however, Bukowski again writes only of his opinion, and asks that people think before they speak, and learn before they dive off the deep end. His experiences in the real world lend an honesty to his opinions that is difficult to overlook, and a reality in his words that is undeniably strong.

Section 13 and Section 14

Section 13 and Section 14 Summary and Analysis

Section 13 begins on page 70 with the words "is this the way it ends?" In the story, a man lies dying from an overdose of alcohol and pills. As he dies, he thinks about his life, and realizes he has never done anything worthwhile. He has a daughter he has not seen for years, and was a poet who some believe to be better than Elliot, but some believe to be useless. A tune begins playing endlessly in his head as he reads a postcard from his students, and realizes he does not feel anything anymore. He thinks of who he can call to say he is dying, but realizes the world has been made to force people into dying alone. As he lies dying in his own blood, he realizes everyone fails, as everyone is nailed to their own cross. He raises the shades to see the sun, lies on the couch again, and dies. While Bukowski's story is one of seeming tragedy, the man in the story does not appear to mind death, but rather the process of dying. Even his own failure, realized more at death than during life, seems to be only a passing thought as the man realizes all people fail to achieve what society expects of them. While the story is not told in the first person, one who has read Bukowski's works can see a strong tie between the man in the story and Bukowski's own beliefs.

Section 14 begins on page 75 with the words, "the little tailor was quite happy." The tailor is happily sewing until a woman outside yells that his home stinks, and he remembers the three dead bodies: one in the kitchen, one in the closet, and another in the bathtub. His friend Henry arrives, finds the bodies, and vomits. He goes to call the police, but instead removes the mouthpiece from the phone, and uses the open hole to ejaculate. When finished, the two talk, and Jack admits his wife, who has left him, believes him to be insane, as does his daughter. Jack states that he killed the men because he disliked them, and Henry promises not to call the police. His daughter calls, and expresses concern for him. Harry leaves, and Jack prepares to make lobster only to find he has to move the body first. He cries hard, and calls the police, reporting himself as a murderer. This story is one of the few that appear to be fully fictitious in nature. While there is certainly an underlying feeling of sadness and anguish within Jack, it is clear he is not sane in the normal sense of the word. Bukowski shows with this piece that while his work can be filled with underlying meaning and honest symbolism, he can also simply write a fantasy tale.

Section 15 and Section 16

Section 15 and Section 16 Summary and Analysis

Section 15 begins on page 79 with the words, "I had gotten a bit drunk...." Bukowski and a friend, Jensen, go to see a famous writer, L., whom Bukowski finds dull. They arrive at his home, and Bukowski remarks that the man is clearly too wealthy to write about the tragedy of poverty. L. rants about the establishment while the Japanese servant is sent for drinks. The men talk briefly, and it is clear they do not like one another. They sit and drink, but when L. discusses translating Marlowe into Japanese, Bukowski mentions he thinks L. is pretentious. The men argue a bit, and L. falls asleep as Jensen and Bukowski leave. On the way out, Bukowski steals L's wallet only to find the Japanese man behind him. He nearly breaks Bukowski's arm before taking back the wallet as well as those of the two men. They leave. Bukowski appears to be noting his dislike of most popular writers of his time. He notes one of the most hypocritical aspects, that of rich men writing of revolution and poverty as they become more wealthy. Such concepts, to an honest, brutal, and raw man like Bukowski, clearly cheapen his profession.

Section 16 begins on page 85 with the words, "Red, I told the Kid...." Bukowski and a man called Red are sitting in a room drinking as Bukowski notes he does not like the bar scene anymore. Red tells of a wino woman he and his friends kidnapped and tied to a bed while charging .50 cents to sleep with her. Nearly 500 men participated in less than three days. Bukowski admits he is nearly ill at that much brutality. Red mentions he carries a razor, change of clothing, and a tie with him on the road so he is able to get a white collar job just off the train. He also carries an ice pick for protection. He tells of witnessing a murder, and of being paid off to keep quiet. Red gets up to leave, and the two men agree it has been a good night. Bukowski lays down to sleep, knowing other men are jumping onto the trains in the yard, hoping for a better life. Bukowski does not believe they will find one. Again touching in its simplicity, this story reveals that even someone as supposedly hard and tough as Bukowski has not only heart, but care, compassion, and a level of sincere joy of companionship. In the story, Red is a younger man whom Bukowski clearly enjoys as a friend, but whom he also regards as beastly due to his lack of care for others. Bukowski, on the other hand, displays his compassionate side as he expresses disgust at the brutality of raping a drunken woman. While short, the story lets readers see Bukowski not as a hard writer, but as a human being.

Section 17 and Section 18

Section 17 and Section 18 Summary and Analysis

Section 17 begins on page 88 with the phrase, "his name was Henry Beckett...." Henry Beckett awakens to find his skin has turned gold colored with green polka-dots. He calls in sick, and then phones a doctor, demanding an appointment. His girlfriend comes and is amazed at his appearance, but also finds him beautiful. He promises to call her after his appointment with the doctor, but the doctor does not know the cause of the coloration. On returning home, Beckett grabs a hunting rifle and plenty of ammunition, drives to a cutoff on the freeway, and begins to shoot drivers. When police arrive, he shoots them as well. They close in on him, and he suddenly realizes the coloration is gone from his hands and body. He raises his hands in surrender, and they shoot him. Bukowski again shows a flare for the fantastic through his story, but also creates a theme that symbolizes the consequences of momentary lapse of reason. In the story, Beckett firmly believes his problem will never go away, and as a result, decides to shoot several individuals. However, only hours later, his skin is normal again. His decision, based on a temporary problem, results in his death. This clearly shows Bukowski's belief that thinking through situations before acting is vital to survival. Whether only in his mind or real, his temporary lack of reasoning ended with his own demise.

Section 18 begins on page 94 with the words, "everywhere we hang onto the walls...." This story finds Bukowski thinking of suicide as he wonders what the world will look like in 2010. In 1954, Bukowski attempted to commit suicide by turning his gas oven on. He remembers seeing a man attempt suicide by drowning, only to be saved, and remarks that even trivial things can become huge when in the right frame of mind. He recalls a friend losing his job and attempting suicide, only to be saved by Bukowski and that when he was a child, they played the song Blue Monday on the radio, and each time, someone committed suicide until the station finally banned the song. This piece, unlike some others, reads as thoughts written as they come. While much of Bukowski's work seems well thought out, if not well planned, this piece is clearly a series of almost lazy thoughts as they enter his head, as is shown by the phrase "since the subject seems to be suicide." This style lends a real sense of honesty to the piece, as well as a feeling that one is looking into Bukowski's head as he thinks. Further, this piece does show the true nature of Bukowski as a troubled, drunken, lonely poet who has, in the past, believed suicide to be a solution. His discussion of the world in 2010 is an added amusement, as his futuristic view of eggs for breakfast, sex problems, poetry, and suicide are proven true in modern society.

Section 19 and Section 20

Section 19 and Section 20 Summary and Analysis

Section 19 begins on page 98 with the words, "it was last Monday a.m...." Bukowski finds himself at a party with an older gentleman who is an editor, and the two talk all night. Bukowski leaves and finds a woman with car troubles, and notices as he glances in that she is not wearing any pants or skirt. He entices her back to his apartment, and the two drink as she talks about her abusive husband, Frank. After conversation, the two make love, fall asleep, and make love again upon waking. Bukowski pretends to fall asleep as he sees the woman get up and dress. He is saddened as she leaves. He realizes he contributes to the horribleness of the world, but still rises to make sure she has not stolen his wallet. Again, Bukowski shows a somewhat sensitive nature in this writing, although still rough and raw. Bukowski forgives the woman her imperfections, and gives in to what both appear to want. Later, however, he expresses a sense of sadness as the woman leaves without dignity. However, he also admits his own self-preservation by checking for his wallet, showing that no man is heartless, but also that it pays to be somewhat suspicious in life.

Section 20 begins on page 104 with the line, "the squirs came to my house." This entire section appears to be snippets of conversations between a man and his young daughter. The first small conversation revolves around squirs coming to the house to ask if the child needed a fix, to which she replies no. Others include tales of her mother's escapades, a question of what fat is on the human body, and a bemusing conversation where the child asks several times in a row what time it is before tiring of the game. In the final conversation, the girl laughs about farting, asks what time it is repeatedly, swears, and gets the man a beer. The narrator notes the young girl stuffs blocks, paper clips, rubber bands, and a small statue of Boris Karloff into her purse. While short, these brief conversations are filled with a clear depiction of a father and his young child. One assumes, when reading, the man in the story is Bukowski while the young girl is his daughter. The care expressed in these simple snippets is blatant, as is the love the man has for the child. The patience he shows with the young girl, as well as the concern shown when he thinks she will fall, is typical of a father and daughter. The beer and statue lend to the idea that the man is Bukowski, as does the closeness felt in the writing.

Section 21 and Section 22

Section 21 and Section 22 Summary and Analysis

Section 21 begins on page 108 with the phrase, "in Philly, I had the end seat...." Bukowski explains that he is a sandwich runner for a run down bar. He asks one evening why no one goes to the bar down the street, and the other patrons tell him the bar is a gang bar. Bukowski heads out, goes to the gang bar, and orders a scotch. When the bartender finally serves him, he asks for another, and orders one for a woman sitting alone. It is clear the woman is part of the establishment, but Bukowski orders her several drinks. When he goes to the bathroom, two men attempt to kill him by hitting him in the head, but he simply walks away, goes back to the bar and buys them drinks. The men leave him alone, and at the end of the night, sit and chat with him outside, inviting him to be part of the gang. He refuses politely, and walks away. Again, Bukowski shows a scene from his own life as he freely admits to drunken escapades, along with casual comments about how others believe his writing to be of high caliber. Bukowski has a way of humbling himself through the praise of others that simply shows his own lack of faith in his work. On the other hand, his style here is consistent with his tone of slight self-pity with self heroism.

Section 22 begins on page 112 with the phrase "when Henry's mother died it wasn't bad." Henry, the main character of the story, finds his mother's funeral calm, but his father's somewhat chaotic. At his father's funeral, his father's girlfriend Shirley begins kissing him and arouses him. While there is no will, Henry inherits the house of his father and his car. He and his girlfriend, Maggy, move into the house. They meet their neighbors, a man named Harry and his wife. Harry loves birds, but the birds hate his wife. The four begin drinking together at night, and Henry finds himself aroused by Harry's wife. Soon after, Shirley begins to come over a lot, and the five drink together. One evening, Harry's wife lets the birds out, and while Harry beats her, Henry takes Shirley inside to make love to her while Maggy tries to catch the birds. When the police arrive, Maggy is watching Henry and Shirley make love, while Harry is still beating his wife. The police rape Maggy, and take the others to jail. In the end, Harry loses his job, Henry sells the house and wastes the month, Maggy makes love to the preacher, and Shirley marries a t.v. repairman. The author of the story states his name is Henry, but his middle name is Charles. Bukowski writes in a drastically different tone in this story, speaking originally in the third person, but hinting at the end of the story that it is a first person account of his own existence. While possibly just fantasy, Bukowski's writing style lends to the feel that the activities in the story are honest and truthful.

Section 23 and Section 24

Section 23 and Section 24 Summary and Analysis

Section 23 begins on page 115 with the phrase, "the best thing about a modern gas dryer...." Bukowski finds himself in cold, rainy Atlanta with no where to go, and very little money. Bukowski realizes he is completely alone, and knows this type of loneliness can kill a man. He finds another room for rent, and is amazed when the woman tells him it is only $1.25 for the week. When he pays the money, however, she takes him outside to a small cardboard shack, with nothing but a cord with no light, a kerosene lamp, newspaper, a bed, and a thin blanket. He lights the lamp, briefly soothing himself, but runs out of fuel. He finds he needs to defecate, but is disgusted by the conditions of the outhouse, and finds he no longer needs the bathroom. He writes to his father, asking for money. A few days later, his father writes back to refuse, and tells him to get a job. Bukowski signs on with a track gang, and leaves town. Bukowski shows again a softer, lonely side of himself in this piece. While others show a hardened drunk, stories such as this reveal Bukowski's occasional loneliness and sadness at his own position. This work finds him not only desolate, but also willing to give up writing for a life of security. This is rare. However, when refused by his father, Bukowski shows the inner spirit his work inspires as he joins a track gang.

Section 24 begins on page 21 with the words, "I don't know if it was those Chinese snails...." Bukowski finds himself married to a woman who is supposed to come into vast amounts of money. They leave for her hometown in Texas, but the woman wants to go to Los Angeles, which they do. They buy a dog, and a car, and both get normal jobs. She begins flirting with a Spaniard at work, and joins an art class, which the two attend together. She becomes violently angry when the art instructor likes Bukowski's work, and comes home the next day to talk endlessly about a Turkish man at work. Bukowski goes to the store and buys a rack of specialty food items, and tells her to eat the snails. She states she can see their sphincters, and throws up. She asks for a divorce. Bukowski states that she still writes him letters at Christmas. Bukowski shows again not only his somewhat sensitive side in this story, but also his uncanny ability to be who he is without fail. Unknowingly, he marries a woman with a million dollars who wants a simple life. Bukowski, on the other hand, has led a normal working life, and would love a country millionaire existence. Bukowski's story shows clearly that sometimes what people seek is what they are least suited for.

Section 25 and Section 26

Section 25 and Section 26 Summary and Analysis

Section 25 begins on page 131 with the words, "I call you funky Bukowski...." The rant begins with a dirty letter from a Bukowski fan. He notes that most people elevate sex to a higher level than reality, and that this is particularly true of the United States. Women with sexy bodies have power, according to Bukowski, and society is raised to know that fact. He points to beauty contestants, and tells readers to notice their faces. They are shaped right, he notes, but are ugly "beyond all essence of brutality" because there is no thought or substance. He reminds readers that these women's looks will fade, and they will be left with nothing. Bukowski himself admits he is confused by sex. He recalls an incident where he is drunk, and picks up a beautiful young prostitute and her lesbian manager. They go back to his room, but when given the choice, Bukowski attempts to have the lesbian, just to prove the point. In this rant about sexual relations, stereotypes, and gender roles, Bukowski again shows a flare for the English language combined with a raw style of writing that makes for an outstanding piece. His belief that females are weapons is apparent, but also that it is society who makes human beings this way. He does not appear to blame or degrade women, but actually holds the strong and the independent up as above the rest. It is clear Bukowski favors intelligence over looks, at least in theory, but also clear that he holds principles far above emotion, as is shown in the story of the prostitute.

Section 26 begins on page 138 with the words, "it all begins and ends with the mailbox...." Bukowski laments that the troubles always begin with the mailbox. He references a letter from a woman named Meggy, and points out he has never met her, but she keeps sending letters about her home life, along with poetry that Bukowski finds dull. Finally, Bukowski tires of the game, and stops writing. She writes again, telling him he has abandoned her, and that she will not write again. Days later, however, he receives yet another letter, and soon after, a phone call. She asks why he has not submitted to small magazines lately, and he notes he has, just to larger magazines. She praises his work, and he gently ends the call. He mentions that there are three horrible things in life, those of the mailbox, the mailman, and letter writers. It is clear from this piece that Meggy is an obsessed fan of Bukowski's. At first, he tries to humor her, showing his somewhat genial nature. However, eventually, he tires of the situation, and, unable to do anything else, simply stops responding. This piece shows clearly part of the down side of being famous, and part of the struggle of famous individuals between kindness and self preservation.

Section 27 and Section 28

Section 27 and Section 28 Summary and Analysis

Section 27 begins on page 145 with the phrase, "in those days there was usually somebody in my room...." The narrator mentions there is always a party in his room. One night, he awakens, drunk, to find a person next to him. He has fantasized for weeks about anal sex but could not find a willing woman. Believing this to be his moment, he takes the person from behind. The sheets fall back, and he realizes the person is a man. The narrator is ill, not wanting to believe the situation. He decides to sleep it off, and the following morning, nothing is mentioned, but the man does not leave. Several days later, he arrives at home to find his food eaten by the partygoers, his dishes used, and vomit in his sink. He orders everyone out, but the man stays. The narrator finds the number of the man's mother, and calls her to come get him. The man is 32, and still lives at home. When he informs the man his mother is coming, he cries, stating that he is a man. His mother arrives, and pulls him from the home by his ear like a small child. "Henry" watches from the window as they drive away. As in previous stories, it is unclear whether the narrator is Bukowski or a fictitious man, but one is led to believe it is Bukowski. Based on previous stories, it would appear that stories about a portion of life Bukowski does not want to discuss are written about "Hank" as opposed to Charles. In previous stories, however, Charles Bukowski reveals his name to be Henry, thereby insinuating the story is true. Regardless, the other man in the story clearly feels his situation in life, that of living with his mother, is degrading his manhood.

Section 28 begins on page 149 with the phrase, "the night the 300 pound whore came in...." Bukowski notes he was the only one ready to take the overweight woman home, and at closing time, the two travel to his rooming house. Bukowski makes love to the woman, and finds himself forced off her several times because of her weight and the movement of the bed. The next morning, he wakes to find the bed is broken. He offers to pay the woman, Ann, but she refuses. He fixes the bed with rope he had planned to hang himself with. He leaves, gets drunk, and returns to find his landlady and the maid assembling a brand new steel bed for him. Bukowski again refers to himself as Henry in the story, and readers can now see Bukowski's naming conventions in his work. When Bukowski writes of his accomplishments, he refers to himself as Charles, or Bukowski, but when the story contains a possibly embarrassing situation, he refers to himself as Hank. It is clear from his descriptions of Ann that he did not find her particularly attractive, but still slept with her. However, he does show a somewhat softer side as Ann leaves, proving himself to be more than a simple crass poet.

Section 29 through Section 31

Section 29 through Section 31 Summary and Analysis

Section 29 begins on page 154 with the phrase, "Dear Mr. Bukowski...." Bukowski tells readers of an ex-girlfriend, Mary. Mary leaves him one evening, and slams the door on the way out. Having warned her not to do so, Bukowski follows her and hits her. She returns a few days later, only to threaten to leave again. Bukowski, drunk, wishes her well. Angry, she beats him over the head with her purse, leaving him bleeding and unconscious. Mary returns with two individuals, Eddie and the Duchess. When Mary and Eddie leave for more wine, Bukowski throws the Duchess on the bed and makes love to her. Upon their return, the Duchess claims Bukowski raped her. Eddie and Bukowski fight, and he asks them to leave, only to grab Mary at the last minute and pull her back inside. They make love without fighting. In this piece, Bukowski shows his true nature. As he drinks, he fights with women, rapes seemingly disabled women, and becomes rather violent. While in previous stories, readers have seen Bukowski's sensitive side, this story shows his violent, angry side, as well.

Section 30 begins on page 159 with the phrase "it was New Orleans...." Bukowski is in the French Quarter, watching a Frenchman and an Italian man argue. Another Italian man sits in a car nearby shaving. The Frenchman reels into the vehicle, making the Italian cut himself with his razor. The Italian in the car gets out and slashes the Frenchman's face. Bukowski goes into the bar, and soon after, a man asks if he needs a job, and offers him eighteen dollars a week. Section 31 is a continuation of section 32, and begins on page 161 with the phrase "it was a place where the cabbies...." Bukowski accepts the job offered in the previous section, and finds it is as an attendant to a station where cabbies come for gas and sundries. One evening, a young black woman appears, and starts conversation. Over time, thirteen or fourteen young girls begin to come. He favors the first girl, Elsie, whom he puts in charge of guarding the register while he pumps gas, and shows her where the gun is hidden. Soon, however, Bukowski is in trouble because of reports about the young girls in the store. After an argument with one cab driver, where Elsie has the gun and nearly shoots him, Bukowski is fired. Two days later, he walks past the store to see police cars. A cabbie he knows tells him the owner has been knifed, and the same cabbie who fought with Elsie was shot with the owner's gun. Bukowski walks away, knowing it was Elsie, and begins to cry. He wakes to wonder what town he will find himself in next. These stories, a rare continuation from one to the next, show again that while Bukowski can be crass and crude, he is a human and does have emotion. He admits to being lonely in this piece, and cries when he hears of Elsie and the owner, knowing he played a part in the owner's death, and in the shooting. While his mourning is short, it does show a sensitive side, displayed further by Bukowski's honest style of writing.

Section 32 and Section 33

Section 32 and Section 33 Summary and Analysis

Section 32 begins on page 165 with the words, "Scribbling on shirt cardboards...." Here Bukowski lists off random thoughts written on shirt cardboards during a two day drunken spell. Most have to do with addiction, relationships between men and women, God, death, and intelligence. While very short, this section does surmise much of Bukowski's writing topics, and shows the thoughts that circle in his head while drinking. Section 33 begins on page 166 with the words, "well, here's your Christmas story, little children." Bukowski and his friend Lou are drinking, and working out a plan to rob someone. Lou believes Bukowski can go to a bar, find a rich man, bullshit with him all night, and at close, lead him to an alley where Lou will be waiting with a baseball bat. That evening, Bukowski finds a man in the bar to rob, and follows the plan. At closing, Bukowski leads him to the alley with the promise of a young prostitute. When they arrive, Lou swings the bat, but misses the rich man and hits Bukowski. As Bukowski slips to unconsciousness, he hears the rich man running away, and feels someone stealing his wallet. Ironic in content, this story shows much about Bukowski's "friends". After being talked into doing something he wishes not to do, Bukowski finds himself being robbed by the "friend" who helped him plan the crime. Bukowski's friends clearly care only about their survival and salvation. After reading of Bukowski's trials through life, this is not a surprising twist, but does show the violent nature of the world in which Bukowski lives.

Section 34 through Section 36

Section 34 through Section 36 Summary and Analysis

Section 34 begins on page 170 with the words, "he was a rich bastard...." Bukowski discusses a wealthy man who has everything, but sits crying in a steam bath because nothing excites him anymore. He asks for Bukowski's help, and Bukowski beats him with a belt, and burns him with a cigar. The man's lawyer pays him $50, and asks him to return in a week. Section 35, beginning on page 172 with the words, "he came down through the laundry shoot..." is a highly unique story, with a less real-world feel. Bukowski envisions himself as a sort of revolutionary. He and his partner Maxfield kill a man, but discover it is the wrong man. While Bukowski calls his boss and speaks in code, Maxfield gives oral sex to the dead man. Upon his return, Bukowski reminds Maxfield that revolution will require clean women and intelligent thinkers. He then burns Maxfield with a cigarette, and shoves it into his anus while asking why someone raided the Hullabaloo. Maxfield does not know. Bukowski proceeds to explain to him how to read Camus. Bukowski returns upstairs to call his boss again, speaking in code, and Maxfield gives oral sex to the dead man again.

Section 36, beginning at the top of page 176, is a conversation between "Stirkoff" and a superior. Stirkoff is being asked about his writings of late regarding justice, equality, and joy. His replies indicate he believes he is insane, as he reports constant masturbation and frequent drunkenness. His superior asks him several questions about his life, as well as about his opinions on love and cowardice. Stirkoff reports that love is the common sense to care for something good, and that cowardice is a man who thinks twice about fighting a lion, whereas a brave man does not know what a lion is. When challenged, Stirkoff reports that he assumes all things are independent of all other things, and that, while his superior believes himself to be a master, he is really only a manipulator. When asked what newspaper he reads, Stirkoff reports Open City, and his superior orders his beheading. These three sections, while independent, all focus on the idea of pain as pleasure and self-searching for answers. In the first section, the man in the story has everything, but wants for more, so pays for abuse to find his happiness. In the second, Maxfield seems to enjoy the abuse by Bukowski, and the concept of revolution appeals to Bukowski. In the third, Stirkoff is forced into self insight at the hands of a superior, only to force that superior into his own form of self-pleasure. Combined, these three stories all read as a single moment for Bukowski, that of the realization that his life is a path of self destruction as a result of the shame and failure he feels as a writer, and a person.

Section 37 through Section 39

Section 37 through Section 39 Summary and Analysis

Section 37 starts on page 180 with "Miriam and I had the little shack in the center...." Bukowski begins by discussing his relationship with Miriam, his girlfriend at the time. The two are living somewhat comfortably, and are happy together, but Bukowski knows it will not last. She is working, while he is doing the housework and betting at the track. However a stripper next door named Renie soon offers to show him her dancing in her bedroom, and he follows. After several drinks, Renie tells him she is an artist in her dancing, and wants him to critique her. Several days later, a heavy woman from next door come to borrow sugar, and the two make love. Miriam finds out, and tells him to leave. He notes that he never made love to Renie, as it would have cheapened her feelings about being an artist. Again in this story, readers see Bukowski's dual personality as a caring lover and a cad. While he clearly cares for Miriam, and respects Renie, he still makes love to another neighbor, ending his relationship with Miriam. A constant theme in the book, the self-demise of Bukowski is clear in this story as his own actions again lead to his downfall.

Beginning on page 187 with "One of my best friends," section 38 lends readers great insight into Bukowski's personality, and imparting knowledge of how such a man becomes someone like Bukowski. He begins by discussing a famous poet who has become what Bukowski called frozen. Bukowski can relate, as he feels he has been frozen since birth. His father, an abusive and violent man, found any reason to beat him as a child. His friends, all older at the time, would fight, but Bukowski would simply go through the motions, not feeling anything. One evening, he recalls going home, drunk, to be told he could not enter. He broke the door in, and immediately threw up on his parent's floor. His father attempted to push his nose into it like a dog, and Bukowski hit him hard enough to send him across the room. In section 39, beginning on page 193, Bukowski continues his discussion of his frozenness. He repeats, as in the last story, that everything he does is mathematical in nature, not emotional. In high school, he notes, he joined the ROTC. He finds himself in an arms competition. He tries to make a mistake but his mathematical mind simply does what it knows to do. He wins, but the General in charge does not congratulate him. Bukowski throws the medal away, not caring about it. He reports now that he is not always frozen, but is simply different than most people. Bukowski describes it as being in a world full of energy, frozen. As mentioned, this very personal story explains much about Charles Bukowski's life and his work. Abused from birth and without many friends, Bukowski never learned such concepts as compassion, loyalty, or love. While he understands companionship and care, he is virtually incapable of feeling deeper forms of emotion, as is shown throughout his entire work. Simple emotional concepts such as passion, lust, and greed are easy for him, but higher emotional capacity escapes him. His writing in this story is as honest as it is brutal, and this helps to demonstrate the coldness of Bukowski, and his lack of attachment.

Section 40

Section 40 Summary and Analysis

The final section begins on page 198. Bukowski opens with the main character "Mr. Radowski" meeting a very attractive woman in a bookstore. He proceeds to ask her out for drinks, and they go home together. Three weeks later, he asks her to marry him. She accepts, but tells him she does not love him. Following their marriage, Yevonna, the wife, begins to wear a long red gown that is rarely washed, and never changed. Radowski hires a maid, Felicia, whom he starts an affair with. The two women soon begin practicing witchcraft and voodooism. Yevonna becomes pregnant and becomes even more odd, telling Radowski she believes a devil is inside of her. The child is later born, and Yevonna becomes even more bipolar and schizophrenic. When Radowski sneaks a psychiatrist to the house, the doctor declares her insane, but when Radowski attempts to have her committed, she fools the court. Soon after, Yevonna breaks all the windows in the neighborhood and the four are forced to move. They attempt to live with Yevonna's mother, but she asks that they move to her acreage. When they arrive after leaving their child with Yevonna's mother, they find a sharecropper, Final Benson, already occupying the house. The foursome rents a house on the edge of the land, and one night, as Radowski is making love to Felicia, Yevonna is found making love to Benson. The following morning, Radowski and Felicia flee, leaving Yevonna with Benson. They find a hotel and celebrate, but Felicia soon believes she sees a devil, and tells Radowski she is Yevonna's sister. Radowski leaves, feigning to go get wine, and drives away, leaving Felicia. He finds a hotel, where a woman offers sex for alcohol. Radowski accepts, and thinks things will now be alright, for a while. As the final story in the book, this section seems a mix of reality and fantasy. The plot of the story is fitting for Bukowski's work, as well as for his life, but the tone in the story suggests a less personal tone that those in previous autobiographical pieces. On the other hand, the name in the story, Radowski, is similar to his own, suggesting a blending of his own experiences with a fantasy storyline. Yevonna, a clearly disturbed woman, is apt as the primary woman in Radowski's life, as Bukowski's own girlfriends and lovers seem to be often equally disturbed. The suggestion of alcoholism also fits well with Bukowski's life experiences, as does the violence around the characters in the story. Overall, the piece sums up not only Bukowski's novel, but also his own existence.

Characters

Charles Bukowski

A self proclaimed alcoholic and deviant, Charles Bukowski is the author of the book, and the main character in many of the stories. Shown through different sections as a lover, companion, rebel, deviant, womanizer, husband, father, and simple transient, Charles Bukowski's character is clearly complex, and varies based on his position in life at the time of the experience. Described as not particularly handsome, about six feet in height and very thin in frame, Bukowski's relations with women are often single night events, or doomed to failure due to his wandering nature. As a companion, Bukowski is clearly caring and compassionate, but because of his lifestyle, he has very few friends outside of the writing industry. He appears often as a philosopher of modern times, as his rants often include foul language and deviant behaviors. However, his style also shows high intellect and a passion for the world that has not faltered, despite his abusive mother and father, and somewhat abnormal life. While brutal at times, and crass consistently, Bukowski's writings show not only what happens in poverty, but the darker side of human nature.

Henry

As the second most common occurring character in the book, Henry is clearly the alter ego of Bukowski throughout the stories. Henry is first seen in Story 16, as the friend of a tailor who has gone insane, and in this story he has sex with a telephone. In section 19, Henry is a man who wakes to find himself gold with polka dots, and in response, goes insane and begins randomly killing people. In section 24, Henry's father dies, and he makes love to his father's widowed girlfriend while his own girlfriend watches. In section 29, Henry is found inadvertently having homosexual relations, while in section 30, he makes love to a 300 pound woman. Throughout the book, Henry seems to appear when the situation and context of the plot line are embarrassing, humiliating, or simply deviant to the point of abnormality. Readers are left with a sense that as often as Bukowski claims not to care about the world, and what it believes him to be, his own guilt, humiliation, and shame about points of his life are hidden in his writings through aliases. The stories, when blended with fiction, appear unrealistic, but their honesty and raw subjects suggest that Henry is Bukowski.

The Women

In almost every story of Bukowski's, there are women who act as playthings for Bukowski or his characters. At times named, but usually anonymous, these women are often beautiful in a fake sort of way. With dyed hair, short skirts, high heels, and vulgar language, these women are the nightly companions of Bukowski, or at least of his fantasies. It is unclear in some stories if the women are real, or simply figments of

Bukowski's deviant imagination, but in all cases, the women are loose, often intoxicated, and always ready to please Bukowski. His treatment of these women, which often borders on abusive, shows his lack of respect for this type of woman, and generally implies a lack of respect for all women.

Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac is another character in several of Bukowski's stories, as either a reference or a main character. In section 5, readers are given a clear understanding of Jack's relationship with Bukowski. Both men are similar, in that each lives on the edge and writes harshly, crudely, and honestly about the world they live in. Kerouac is clearly unafraid of public opinion, as is shown by his lack of politically correct terminology in discussing homosexuality. Kerouac is also shown to be a true friend to Bukowski, as he helps him find his way back to writing after losing his spirit and faith in humanity. Kerouac clearly knows almost all famous writers, as his photo album shows, and yet he, like Bukowski, seems to generally dislike most of the people he knows. In section 4, Kerouac's son, Neil, shows the result of Kerouac's poor fathering, and of his choice to use Neil in his early works. While Kerouac is clearly a brilliant man, it is also clear he is as lost as Bukowski in the world.

J.C.

As a character in section 2, J.C. is important due to Bukowski's use of him to show his own beliefs about religion. J.C. is a young man who appears to a ball club manager with wings attached to his back. He offers to help the losing team, and succeeds in doing so. However, a bookie, close to loosing vast amounts of money because of the kid, has his wings torn off. The manager, angry, kills the bookie, only to learn the team wins without J.C. The manager notes at the end that God always beats man. J.C., clearly a representation of Jesus Christ, simply symbolizes Bukowski's belief that God has abandoned man.

The Little Girl

Appearing in three stories in this book, the little girl is never named, but appears to represent Bukowski's own daughter. Often shown as adoring her father, the little girl is bright and cheerful, but often has not only vulgar language, but an overactive imagination that is extremely dark. Appearing to be five or six years old, the little girl clearly loves her father, and is often seen getting him beer or playing with him. While their relationship is clearly dysfunctional, her father is obviously an adoring man who loves his daughter immensely. While it is never clear the child is Bukowski's, his ease of writing and the style of the child's words suggest a strong link between author and child, and the raw, honest emotion presented in these stories strengthens that idea.

John Bryan

While not a constant character within the book, Bryan is important, since without him, the book would not exist. As his employer at Open City newspaper in L.A., Bryan asked Bukowski to write a column, which led to Notes of a Dirty Old Man. Bryan, a rebel himself, was fired from the Herald-Examiner for objecting to the airbrushing of the private parts of the Christ child in an image. A revolutionary, Bryan clearly earned the respect of Bukowski. Bryan also appears as the man who introduces Bukowski to Neil Kerouac in the fifth story.

Meggy / Letter Writers

Meggy appears in section 28 as an obsessed letter writer. Her letters are dull, and filled with conversations regarding children and her life as a poet and mother. Meggy represents many other fans of Bukowski mentioned throughout the book. While Bukowski clearly appreciates his fans, their adoration makes the humble and shy poet highly uncomfortable. Meggy, like others, keeps writing, regardless of Bukowski's reaction, showing him he is unable to escape this lingering effect of fame.

Lou

Lou appears in section 32, and appears to represent the acquaintances of Bukowski throughout much of his life. In the story, Lou plans to rob a rich man in the parking lot with Bukowski's help, and they are to split the money. When things go awry, however, Bukowski finds himself being beaten and robbed by Lou instead. Throughout many stories, Bukowski tells of unnamed friends such as Lou who take advantage of Buowsiki's abilities or talents, only to turn them against him as needed. While not vital to the storyline, the character does portray the reason behind Bukowski's lack of companionship and trust in others.

Yevonna

As one of the final characters in the book, Yevonna appears to represent Bukowski's luck with women. At first, Yevonna is a dream for Bukowski, but upon their marriage, Yevonna changes drastically. She becomes more interested in mysticism than in being a wife, and often wears the same clothing and does not clean, cook, or work. After the birth of their child, it becomes apparent that Yevonna is mentally ill. Unable to turn his back on her, however, Bukowski deals with the situation as he always does, by finding a mistress. Yevonna eventually leaves Bukowski for another man.

Objects/Places

L.A.

Los Angeles is the home of the Open City newspaper, and thus the home of Bukowski's column, the basis for the book.

Open City

Open City is the newspaper in which Bukowski's column, Notes of a Dirty Old Man, first appeared.

Boarding Room

Generally, a room within someone else's home or a room within a house of boarding rooms that is for rent by the week. Often with a communal bathroom, boarding rooms are generally thought of as the temporary residence of transients, and are the home of Bukowski through much of the book.

Camus

A writer of essays regarding World Events, and one of Bukowski's influences. Throughout the book, he references certain works by Camus that readers should learn from.

Venice Canals

The canals of Venice are where Bukowski meets with Jack Kerouac, a famous writer who helps to lift Bukowski's spirits.

The Transients

This group of individuals are those Bukowski seems to relate most with. Many of these individuals are jobless and homeless, and travel from town to town by rail, looking for work. Many stories within Bukowski's writings are based on his own adventures traveling all over the United States.

Revolution

As a theme in Bukowski's work, revolution is described as the overtaking of one thing that is quickly replaced by another. Bukowski warns that people should beware of any revolution that does not know what the replacement is prior to the overthrow.

The Poets

The poets are the group of individuals seen throughout the novel as parts of a writers circle to which Bukowski himself belongs. These writers include Kerouac, L., Anais Nin, kaja, Hal Norse, and others.

Santa Anna, California

The home of a horse racing track Bukowski visits frequently throughout the book, while freely admitting he has a gambling problem.

The Olympic

A boxing ring Bukowski frequents, and the place of his realization that rich men and poor men are not separated by anything other than a momentary lapse of luck.

Themes

Futility of Life

Perhaps the main theme throughout Bukowski's writings is the futility of life and the irony of existence. In many stories, Bukowski aims to achieve one small goal, only to find the circumstances of his present conditions stop him from achieving such goals. His characters, including himself, are products of their generation as well as of their upbringing, and as such, are revolutionaries who can see that one can have everything without having anything. He mentions several times the urge to commit suicide, the hopelessness of existence, the heartlessness of the world, and the darkness of his own life's loneliness. However, at the same time, Bukowski also admits that he still believes in the human spirit, and that humanity does prevail over adversity.

Both sides of this equation are shown in several places throughout the book. In the story of J.C., the winged baseball player, the baseball team finds a saving grace for their season, only to have that saving grace ripped from them during their peak. However, the team wins without J.C., showing the true nature of the human spirit of determination. At the end of several stories of adversity, Bukowski states he is grateful to be "somewhat alive," showing again his own determination. Although his characters struggle, they are, in the end, alive and continuing in their existences, regardless of their circumstances.

Emotional Distance

Another theme in Bukowski's work is the role of emotion in daily life, and Bukowski's own lack of emotional ability. Bukowski and his characters all seem to believe the primary emotion, that of love, is an emotion designed to trap males and females into submission. Bukowski believes in love as a primal feeling, but does not seem to be able to feel love for anyone. He blames this on his abusive and deviant childhood, as he was forced to detach from his parents at a very early age. Throughout the book, Bukowski and his characters have sexual relations with women, but rarely do those relations lead or stem from any emotional attachment. The characters appear to use sex only as a tool for self-release rather than an expression of emotional bonds. Even Bukowski's accounts of his own marriages are devoid of love, although care and concern are primary factors.

Frequently throughout his stories, Bukowski also mentions his lack of emotional ties to friends. On several accounts, he finds himself in a position of extreme loneliness with no one to turn to for emotional support. His friends are self-preserving, in that they often use Bukowski for their own means, and leave him in his darkest hour. However, Bukowski is not immune from such behavior either, as he often uses others for his own personal gain.

Revolution

Another theme in Bukowski's short stories is that of revolution, and the price paid for freedom. Freedom is highly prized by Bukowski, probably more so than almost any other topic. He is aware that his writing is dependant upon the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech. Without such freedoms, he would be more desolate and destitute than his existence already suggests. However, he also realizes the prices paid often in revolution. While he prizes his freedoms, he often warns that revolution is not the solution. Revolution, to Bukowski, is a romantic idea, but in reality is a violent and useless form of revolt that often leads to no real solution. He warns that revolution often results in worse conditions than originally perceived, since the replacement ruler is often a carbon copy of the original. Bukowski also notes in several stories that those attempting to start a revolution are just as apt to join the other side for their own gain as they are to acheive their original goal. He understands the need for change, but suggests that it is only through proper education of ones self and through a solid plan of action that relies on brain power instead of muscle that true change can occur in the world.

Style

Perspective

Bukowski's perspective throughout the novel changes from first person to third person several times. In his first person stories, Bukowski often tells of his own personal experiences mixed with some level of fantasy. These experiences tend to show the darker side of Bukowski's personality. Bukowski's background as an abused child, and also as a poor transient lend truth to these first person accounts, creating stories that are as believable as they are fantastic. On occasion, however, Bukowski will write in the third person, indicating someone other than himself is the main participant. Even in these stories, however, readers are given a sense that the third person perspective is simply a cover for more humiliating periods of Bukowski's own life.

This change in perspective helps to define Bukowski as a character, in that some stories, while certainly off the wall and deviant, are still told from a first person viewpoint. It is only the truly perverse or highly embarrassing stories that are third person, showing Bukowski's high tolerance for deviance within his society. It is clear through his own admission as well as through these changes that Bukowski is unbiased in terms of his own opinions, but does attempt to fit, at least marginally, into the biases of society. His expressions toward homosexuality, revolution, and assassination show clear opinions on the sacredness of freedom, and the right to choose a life one is comfortable with.

Tone

The tone of the novel changes drastically from one story to the next, and from one theme to the next. When discussing love, women, and male-female relations, Bukowski's tone is one of amused passivity. Bukowski realizes his failure with women in terms of relationships, and realizes that women are held in society above the males as forms of power. While it is clear Bukowski disagrees with this, it is equally clear he has accepted this as reality, and is bemused by the actions of women placed in such positions. However, when discussing topics such as freedom in a world of revolution, Bukowski's tone becomes one of a strong combatant against the revocation of freedom as a response to rising violence. His voice in the novel becomes much stronger and passionate, and while Bukowski still manages to remain calm, his tone suggests such topics are close to his heart, and thus, more strongly felt by him. Bukowski himself notes his lack of emotional capacity, so this tone change shows these topics to be truly important to Bukowski. On other topics, such as loneliness, compassion, and self-preservation, Bukowski's tone becomes objective. These topics do not appear to affect the emotionless Bukowski, although a closer look suggests he is simply covering up his emotions by writing. These changes in tone are vital to a deeper understanding of Bukowski, both as a writer and as a human being.

Structure

The structure of the book is one of an almost continuous stream of thought. The novel is 204 pages in length, and begins with a short introduction by the author, letting readers know where the short stories originated. From there, the text is broken into sections by small lines at the end of each small story. In some cases, the breaks are only inserted to change thought processes within a single storyline, while in others, they are used to break storylines and start a new plot. Grammatically, the writing structure is simple, in that capitalization rules are not adhered to, nor are standard rules of sentence structure or punctuation. This deviance from formal writing style lends to the overall feel of Bukowski's writings as simply thoughts on paper. This structure also helps to tell Bukowski's dark stories without the need for societal filtering.

Quotes

"the Bird. and the ocean down there. and bad battery. a lemon. the cops patrolling their stupid dry streets. what a bad war it is. and what an idiot nightmare, only this momentary cool space between us, we are all going to be smashed, very quickly into broken children's toys, into those highheels that ran so gaily down the stairway to be fucked out of it forever, forever, forever, dunces and fools, dunces and tools, god damn our weak bravery," p. 30.

"I will only say this, out of a background of factories, park benches, two-bit jobs, bad women, bad weather of Life - the reason the average person is at the track is that they are driven screwy by the turn of the bolt, the foreman's insane face, the landlord's hand, the lover's dead sex; taxation, cancer, the blues, clothes that fall apart on a 3rd wearing, water that tastes like piss, doctors that run assembly-line and indecent offices, hospitals without heart, politicians with skulls filled with pus...we can go on and on but would only be accused of being bitter and demented, but the world makes madmen and women of us all, and even the saints are demented, nothing is saved," p. 41.

"I think we've got enough experts on the case now - that's what the decade is: the Decade of the Experts and the Decade of the Assassins. and neither one of them worth crystallized dog turds. the main problem with a thing like the last assassination is that we not only lose a man of some worth but we also lose political, spiritual, and social gains, and there are such things, even if they do seem high-sounding. what I mean is, that in an assassination crisis the anti-human and reactionary forces tend to solidify their prejudices and to use all ruptures as a means of knocking natural Freedom off the goddamned end seat at the bar," p. 46.

"That the assassins are sick, I will admit, and that the Father-Image is also sick, I will also admit. I'm also told by the God-fearing that I have sinned because I was born a human being and once upon a timehuman beings did something to one Jesus Christ. I neither killed Christ or Kennedy and neither did Gov. Reagan. that makes us even, not him one up. I see no reason to lose any judicial or spiritual freedoms, small as these may be now. who is bullshitting who? if a man dies in bed while fucking, must the rest of us stop copulating? if one non-citizen is a madman must all citizens be treated as madmen? if somebody killed God, did I want to kill God? if somebody wanted to kill Kennedy, did I want to kill Kennedy? what makes the governor, himself, so right and the rest of us so wrong?" p. 47.

"revolution sounds very romantic, you know. but it ain't. it's blood and guts and madness; it's little kids killed who get in the way, it's little kids who don't understand what the fuck is going on. it's your whore, your wife ripped in the belly with a bayonet and then raped in the ass while you watch. it's men torturing men who used to laugh at Mickey Mouse cartoons. before you go into the thing, decide where the spirit is and where the spirit will be when it is over," p. 64.

"I found trouble, but the rest of what I was looking for, I haven't found that yet. maybe we find it when we die. maybe we don't. you've got your books of philosophy, your priest, your preacher, your scientist, so don't ask me," p. 112.

"you can never tell what is troubling a man. even trivial things can become terrible when you get into a certain mind-state. and the worst worry/dear/agony tiredness of them all is the one you can't explain or understand or even think out...suicide seems incomprehensible unless you yourself are thinking about it. you don't have to belong to the Poet's Union in order to join the club," p. 97.

"now it was upon me. the wall. this is what men were afraid of. not only being shut out forever, but also not having a friend. so, no wonder, I though, this CAN scare the shit out of you. can KILL you. their cheap trick is to get in and hang in. have all kinds of cards in your wallet. money. insurance. automobile. bed. window. toilet. cat. dog. plant. musical instrument. birth certificate. things to get angry about. enemies. backers. flour sacks. toothpicks. undiseased ass. bathtub. camera. mouthwash," p. 117.

"the public takes from a writer, or writing, what it needs and lets the remainder go. but what they take is usually what they need least and what they let go is what they need most. however, all this allows me to execute my little holy turns unmolested. if they understood these, then there wouldn't be any more creators, we'd all be in the same pot of shit. as it is now, I am in my pot of shit and they are in theirs, and I think mine stinks better," p. 131.

"I had used the last trick of the kind: be cruel to the cruel, be stupid to the stupid. The cruel and the stupid were the same: there was nothing you could do to them; there were only things they could, and would do to you. I had defeated a problem of the centuries; the elimination of the unwanted. it doesn't take a number of men and women to smother and dismember the life of any individual, it only takes one," p. 140.

"One of the finest poets of our Age is afflicted, right now, in London, with it, and the Greeks were aware of it and the Ancients, and it can fall upon a man at any age but the best age for it is the late forties working toward fifty, and I think of it as Immobility - a weakness of movement, an increasing lack of care and wonder; I think of it as the Frozen Man Stance, although it hardly is a stance at all, but it might allow us to view the corpse with some humor, otherwise the blackness would be too much," p. 187.

"and a worldful of energetic hustlers with their minds shaken awry with the pace would only condemn us for sloth or a kind of disgraceful laziness or self-pity. but it isn't any of these things. only the man frozen in the cage can know it," p. 197.

Topics for Discussion

Charles Bukowski's work is written with himself as one of the primary characters, and in a way that suggests autobiographical stories. Do you believe Bukowski has experienced the situations within his stories, or do you think they are fictional? Explain your answer, using examples from the book.

Bukowski writes of a number of different woman throughout his stories. What do you think Bukowski's true opinion of women is? Use examples from the book.

In several stories, Bukowski makes comments about revolution being a romantic idea, but not practical for general use. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Bukowski states in section 9 that he often finds himself being a jumping point for other writers, in that before others write about a topic, he feels he must first guide them with his own work. Do you believe this is the case, or do you feel such a statement suggests Bukowski believed his work to be superior to others?

In section 40, Bukowski describes himself as the Frozen Man. Using examples from other stories, support or refute his claim.

A primary focus of many of Bukowski's stories is the damage man does to himself through his own addictions and life style choices. Do you believe Bukowski's own life choices cause problems in his life? Explain your answer.

Bukowski is, by his own admission, an alcoholic. Do you think Bukowski's drinking problems have helped or harmed his career as a writer? Explain your belief, using examples from the book.