

Post Office Study Guide

Post Office by Charles Bukowski

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Plot Summary

Post Office, by Charles Bukowski, is the self-revelation of Henry ("Hank") Chinaski. Henry is a middle-aged alcoholic willing to buck any system, void of ambition, yet exhibiting superior intellect and reasoning. Having awakened from a terrible drunken spree, Henry looks back at a career that has broken him physically, and at the sexual and gambling adventures that have kept him going.

Henry ("Hank") Chinaski is a middle-aged alcoholic with an attitude. With Betty, his "shackjob," he drinks away their income in an open relationship. Henry joins the U.S. Postal Service accidentally, signing on for an allegedly easy job helping to deliver Christmas cards. He goes on to become a sub, and finally takes the exam to become a regular mail carrier. He works under a sadistic supervisor, The Stone, an archetypal villain who shrewdly maintains buddies in high places, allowing him to work the subs to death. The daily grind of delivering mail in rain, and dealing with dogs and crazy people, is grinding both physically and emotionally. Two old-timers fail, one becoming a thief and the other suffering a breakdown. Betty tires of Henry and kicks him out.

Henry marries a beautiful, oversexed, rich and crazy Texas girl. He enjoys small-town life in Texas with his odd in-laws (except being chased by buffaloes), but follows her back to Los Angeles. On the job, Henry draws another nasty supervisor and a seemingly impossible workload. Henry alludes to the many menial jobs he has had. After a bad fight, Joyce serves divorce papers to Henry, who would have preferred a more direct approach. After making love for old time's sake, he moves out and does not contest the divorce. Henry and Betty get back together briefly and tragically. Ironically, Christmas, which she dearly loves, does Betty in as she drinks herself to death on alcohol the couple receives as a gift. Her funeral is a miserable affair. After, Henry goes to the track, having regularly found luck following funerals in the past. There he meets Vi, a postal colleague, and they have an unsuccessful one-night affair in which he is too drunk to perform.

With Vi behind him, Henry enjoys brief but brilliant success at the track, giving him a taste of the high life. He feels important with Mary Lou, whom he rescues from being evicted for intoxication, and they enjoy themselves until Henry discovers he is being set up for a mugging. He implies that she could have gotten far more out of him by staying with him than by letting her boyfriend roll him. His luck gone, Henry returns to work at the post office during the Los Angeles riots. He lives with a hippie writer, Fay, with whom he has a daughter, Marina. When the baby begins crawling, Henry is abandoned, again without being told directly. With his daughter in New Mexico, Henry finds himself in declining health, and his supervisor is out to get him. He receives a series of four official notifications of the Post Office's intention to discipline and dismiss him for absenteeism. Henry details the physical and emotional burden of clerical work, describes encounters with a stubborn, procedurally minded counselor, a fire he accidentally starts, and his decision to resign without complaining about anyone or anything. He goes on an extended drinking spree after which he wakes up and decides to write this novel.



Chapter 1, Parts 1-11

Chapter 1, Parts 1-11 Summary

A drunk convinces Henry Chinaski that anyone can be hired as a Post Office temp during Christmas, so he finds himself with a leather sack on his back, thinking he has found an easy job. Henry takes the exam and physical to become a substitute mail carrier, is assigned to West Avon Station and is issued a cap but no uniform. His own clothes are shabby because he and his "shackjob" Betty drink up all their money.

Henry then goes to Oakford Station under a bullneck "soup" (superintendent) called Jonstone. Henry alone is drunk as subs sit from 5 until 7 in the morning hoping a regular will call in sick. The Stone starts the subs late but expects them to be back on time. Once or twice a week they are stuck with impossible night pickups. Henry files a 30-page report against him, and an official claims Jonstone is a fine man with 30 years of service. Henry takes the next day off without pay, and for the next week gets no assignments. Bobby Hansen advises he report to Prell Station at night and claim he is not getting work. They will set him up on special deliveries, and one night, Henry delivers to a woman who not only manufactures sexy lingerie, but also wears it. He is unhappy going back to Oakford after a week and a half.

Henry draws Route 539, the station's toughest, full of apartment houses and old ladies asking if they have mail. On a 100-degree day, as he opens a block of boxes, Henry feels a German shepherd between his legs and affects a ginger escape. When on another day a German shepherd leaps at his jugular, Henry screams, defends himself with his mail sack. Henry has no time for lunch and gets written up for getting back 40 minutes late. He throws it in the trash.

Every route has traps that only the regular carriers know about. Out one day with a terrible hangover, Henry believes he will have time for lunch when he hits a handful of mail addressed to a church with no street number. He finds the church but no mailbox and no one around. He finds a side stairway opening and takes a drag of sacramental wine, drops the mail on the priests' robes and uses the toilet. Henry gets written up for being 23 minutes off schedule.

Henry endures the rainy season as regular carriers call in sick all over the city, and subs are shuffled around. Henry is sent to hilly Wently Station. The exhausting first swing takes an hour, and going uphill is worse. Henry skips lunch, and by the fourth swing is ready to tell them where to jam the job. He ducks into a café for coffee and to dry out. Henry takes his time finishing the route and finds the station door locked. Next morning, The Stone acts as though nothing has happened and sends him home to Betty.

When the rain resumes, The Stone sends Henry on Sunday Collection with a clipboard full of cryptic messages guiding him from one pickup box to the next. As it gets dark, he lights matches to memorize directions. Water rises to his ankles, and Henry's mind is on



a hot bath, Betty's legs, a drink, and petting his dog. Finishing, Henry heads toward the West Garage. Meeting Tom Moto, who knows the area, Henry turns down advice to avoid the straight route. With three blocks to go, the truck stalls in two feet of water on someone's lawn. Having no idea about policy, Henry locks the truck and wades to the garage. Henry's 12-year-old car starts, but Moto's new one refuses. Henry takes the highland streets to Betty's ass.

Chapter 1, Parts 1-11 Analysis

The opening sections of Chapter 1 establish that Henry ("Hank") Chinaski is a middle-aged alcoholic with an attitude, willing to buck any system, and void of ambition. At the same time, he exhibits signs of superior intellect and reasoning. He and Betty, yet unseen, drink away their income. The relationship is open. A tongue-in-cheek attitude toward religion is manifest in mindless exclamations of "Jesus Christ," his meandering through a church sacristy, and referring to resuming work under The Stone as being "back on the cross." The Stone is an archetypal villain - down to the blood-red shirt he wears -but shrewdly maintains buddies in high places, allowing him to work the subs to death ostensibly to save money but actually out of sadism.



Chapter 1, Parts 12-17

Chapter 1, Parts 12-17 Summary

The Stone's favorite carrier is 15-year veteran Matthew Battles, who is always perfectly attired and proud. They find The Stone depressed the morning after Battles is arrested for stealing money from mail to the Nekalayla Temple. The Stone assigns all the subs except Henry. Henry wishes The Stone a good day and buys a half pint of Grand Dad for breakfast.

The Stone puts him on Route 511 in an average residential neighborhood with nice weather, no dogs, and no human voices for hours. It changes when he has to deliver a registered letter. When the recipient refuses to open the door, he chases her, jams his foot in the door, and forces his way in. He explains that if she does not sign, she is robbing the U.S. mail. She signs, but then rakes both sides of Henry's face with her nails, so he kisses her on the mouth, sucks her breast, and, hearing her yell rape, proceeds to rape her. He gets written up for being 15 minutes late, and The Stone wonders what has happened to his face.

On another 100-degree day, a woman demands he take back a piece of third-class mail that does not belong in her mailbox. When another woman annoys him by asking where the regular man is, he shocks her, saying Harold is dying of cancer. Henry re-routes letters and magazines for 20 minutes and completes his route, sure the man will phone a complaint to The Stone.

George Greene, known as G.G., has 40-years seniority, which earns him an easy route in the rich district. At the start of the route, G.G. summons children with a whistle to distribute candy. However, when G.G. gives candy to a new girl in the neighborhood and says she is pretty, the mother accuses him of child molestation. Henry is moved as G.G. misses the morning dispatch for the first time. No one else notices. More mail is dumped in front of Henry before he can help G.G., but it looks like both will make the deadline when The Stone dumps a bundle of circulars in front of them, knowing the addition is impossible. Henry sets to work, but G.G. begins crying. When Henry offers to drive G.G. home, The Stone orders him to man his case. Getting a late start, Henry gets written up in the afternoon. No one knows what happens to G.G., and the "good guy" is never mentioned again - done in for coupons.

After three years as a sub, Henry becomes a "regular," and The Stone assigns him as a relief man to five different routes. He wonders why some regulars congratulate him. When a bulletin orders that no caps or equipment are to be placed atop the carrier's case, The Stone writes him up but warns Marty, the only other violator. He puts more write-ups in his pocket and continues working. The third day, The Stone hands him another write-up. Henry throws it away and works while the typewriter prepares another. Henry warns he can throw them out faster than he can write them, and The Stone will



look foolish. Next day, Henry sleeps until noon, and then goes to the Federal Building to resign.

Chapter 1, Parts 12-17 Analysis

Chapter 1 concludes the first phase of Henry's postal career, as a mail carrier, describing some of the daily grind that they endure, but focusing on the failure of two veterans. Battle's theft is primarily a cut at The Stone, while also dealing tongue-in-cheek with a charismatic but businesslike religionist. The second is a "good old guy" whose mental breakdown only Henry notices. Henry resents that a coupon for detergent ends a useless but human life. He resigns after the macho tug-of-war that is inevitable from the time of his assignment to Oakford Station.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Henry enjoys a run of good luck at the racetrack, making \$15-40 a day. Betty gets a job as a typist. He rises at 10:30, eats, flirts with the mechanic's young wife and gets friendly with the stripper in front. He is at the track by 1 p.m. and picks Betty up at the bus stop. One night, Betty announces she cannot stand having friends think she is supporting him and telling him about his goings on. He reminds her about women's liberation and that his track winnings are paying the rent and buying food. Betty asks whether he wants the house or prefers to move out. Henry rents the first place he sees, having lost three women and a dog

Suddenly, at 36, he finds a beautiful, solid, blond, rich 26-year-old Texan on his lap. Pros go to the track alone to concentrate, but having to fight off the wolves that move in on Joyce makes Henry lose money. When Joyce demands they marry, he agrees to a cheap wedding in Vegas, after they take a bus to Texas. Joyce's hometown is picked by experts as the U.S. town least likely to be hit by an atomic bomb. They lie around, screw, and eat in Joyce's little house. The townspeople both pity and hate Henry.

A midget collects him to drive him around, showing off the holdings and scaring him. He clearly believes that Henry is an operator rather than an ex-mail carrier with 75 cents in his pocket. He has a nervous disease that causes him to lose control of the car at high speeds. He is married to a beautiful girl who as a teenager gets a Coke bottle trapped in her vagina, which precludes her attracting anyone but a midget as a husband. Scared they are trying to knock him off, Henry lights a cigar and plays the role, ordering "Buster" to take him back. Joyce peels off Henry's clothes and pushes him, protesting, to the bed.

Joyce's father hates Henry, wrongly assuming he is after his money. Henry sees him only once and gets angry when Henry winks. Gramps Wally is cooler. They visit his house, drink his whiskey, and listen to his cowboy records. Gramp's wife is indifferent towards Henry. Once after eating in a café, Wally suggests showing the city slicker a buffalo. They climb the fence into a sloped field and encourage Henry to walk in. Suspecting the "damned farmers" will drive away laughing, Henry goes along with the joke. Henry hears their thundering hooves, and leaps over and lands in a ditch. Joyce laughs louder than anyone at him. When the story gets around town, Henry's swagger is lost.

Well-fed Henry does not want to return to the city when Joyce, aggravated by Granny, says it is time. Henry prides himself in standing up to the town bully, Joyce's cousin, on "blue jean day." He agrees with the town doctor, always high on drugs, who argues the advantages of country living. Gramps writes a big check, they rent a little house, and Joyce insists they both get jobs to prove their self-sufficiency. Henry prefers to hustle and argues one cannot job hunt without a car. Gramps sends money, and Henry sits in



a new Plymouth in his new suit and shoes. He takes the job that does not smell like work. The art store takes 1-2 hours of his time. When he gets bored, Henry goes down the alley for coffee and to flirt with waitresses.

Henry knows something has died in their place on the hill, because any time he walks outside, 10,000 flies rise straight up. He buys the biggest fly sprayer he can find and fights for hours, but only sickens himself. The bed is encircled by a wobbly room-break topped by pots of geraniums. When one falls on him the first time they have sex, Joyce tells him not to stop. They are all down before he finishes. Later, Joyce claims the falling plants add to it.

Henry's manager, Freddy, whistles *Around the World in Eighty Days* non-stop, driving him crazy and forcing him to drink every night. Joyce tells him to find another job, but keep the art store one until he does. Henry meets an old drunk he knows from his days with Betty, who is now a postal clerk and recommends the job. Henry takes the civil service exam again and asks Freddy for extra time at lunch for the swearing in ceremony.

Some 150-200 new clerks fill out paperwork, take the oath, and get a pep talk about having security for life. Twelve years later, only two remain with the Post Office. They tour the building as Henry worries about his lunch hour running out, and then punch in for 12.5 hours of sticking zoned mail. People get sleepy after 9-10 hours. The supervisor, another Stone, has the practiced look of all supervisors, proclaiming workers "hunks of human shit." Henry hopes that he will get used to it, though he never does. After ten hours, the supervisor takes them to a new aisle, explains the "production schedule" requires them to stick two-foot trays in 23 minutes, no matter what size letters are involved. The 12 hours are up at 3:30 a.m. - paid at straight time as a "temporary indefinite substitute clerk" - and Joyce thinks he has had an accident.

Working the 12-hour night shift, Henry cannot perform when Joyce paws him during the day. She buys a puppy named Picasso that Henry sees is an idiot - and not housebroken. When Henry next awakens to Joyce's strumming, he learns that she has forgotten to bring him in. Henry rushes out naked to find him smiling and overrun by 500 flies. Henry tells Joyce that Picasso lacks the sense to come in by himself. When Henry falls asleep, Joyce resumes stroking. Later, walking into the kitchen for water and seeing Joyce kick Picasso with a pointed shoe, Henry is furious, shatters his glass against the cupboard and rescues the puppy. Henry returns to pick Joyce up off the floor, where she is convulsing. Henry carries her to bed, and gives her the best geranium-tossing ride in months. When they finish and she goes into the kitchen and sings over dishes, Henry realizes that he has two Picassos on his hands.

Henry wants to quit, but Joyce insists they must show her family. She lays out expensive clothing for Henry to wear to work. For 30 minutes each night, the recruits are freed from sticking mail to attend Training Class with a big Italiano. Henry is amazed to hear a degrading lecture on daily bathing, and an effort to whip up anti-Russian feelings. The Italiano points out Alaska on a map, where they could jump across, and draws his conclusion: every letter they stick beyond duty helps defeat the Russians and



keeps them within budget. During "scheme assignments," Henry gets Zone 9, the city's biggest. Guys with tiny zones have the same 23 minutes per tray.

The next night, Henry gets in trouble with the Italiano for being late after having a chat and a nip with Gus the newsboy, a former welterweight contender. The new clerks receive "scheme training." Each gets a deck of cards to learn and stick into the case; they must throw 100 in eight minutes with 95% accuracy. Fail three times and they are fired. There is so much mail that new clerks are scheduled two weeks straight and promised four days off afterward. On the last night, Group 409 is told they must report again.

Joyce gets a daytime clerical job with the police department, giving Henry relief from the fondling, but buys two parakeets that "molest" his sleep with constant chatter. Henry tosses and turns, silencing them a moment by throwing water at them. When Picasso bites Henry on the ankle, he snaps, carries the cage outdoors, sending 10,000 flies into the air, and opens the cage door. The birds weigh food and water against open space and eventually fly off. Henry sleeps well for the first time in weeks, and is dreaming about being Mayor of New York, when Joyce shakes him and asks about the birds. He sleeps until a mad woman fondles him; he flips her over and sticks it in.

On the job, Joyce meets a "real gentleman," a widower, who always wears a purple stickpin, has a Turkish accent, and kisses her forehead lightly. Henry says that Purple Stickpin must own a theater and watches too many movies. While Joyce is small-town, Henry has had 50-100 jobs and seen this type everywhere, playing the "office-romance game" to pass time. He wants Joyce not to get hurt. Mr. Partisian is not a phony, Joyce assures. When Henry gets a day off, Henry shops in the Oriental section to prepare a meal in dedication to his and Joyce's love. She calls it shit, while Henry snaps up snails and seaweed. Swallowing one, she declares they have tiny assholes, and vomits.

A week later, on another day off, Henry snuggles against Joyce when the doorbell rings. Handed a summons for divorce, Henry sees his millions evaporate, and wakes Joyce to ask why she could not have been more civil. She files during an argument and confirms it is Purple Stickpin. Henry predicts trouble, but wishes her luck. Joyce shakes, crying, faking nothing, while Henry strokes her back to calm her. Joyce claims to love him and is sorry. They knock off a good one, for old time's sake, and he agrees to give her everything. He rents the first place he finds.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2 Henry describes his brief marriage to a beautiful, oversexed, rich, and crazy Texas girl, from meeting to separation. He enjoys small-town life in Texas with his odd in-laws, but follows her back to Los Angeles. He is surprised when he makes love as well as legendary movie star Steve McQueen, but she seems unimpressed. On the job, Henry draws another nasty supervisor and a seemingly impossible workload. His difficulty in meeting the standards sets up the next part of the novel. Henry alludes to the many menial jobs he has had in warning Joyce that office romances are common

and ill fated. Later in the novel, he more directly refers to some of the experiences he has in other Bukowski novels.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Joyce gives him the car and keeps \$3-4 million. When he meets Betty on the street, she sadly has gotten old, fat, has lost her job and dog, and drinks heavily. She changes sheets and cleans bathrooms in a loser's hotel in exchange for a room. She wants to get back together, but Henry needs to wait. He calls in sick, and as they relax with a fifth of whiskey, it is almost like old times. The post office sends a nurse to check that Henry is actually sick. The nurse knows him and only wants him to sign a form saying she has called on him. Betty tells Henry about that happening to her when she is drinking with another Harry. He jumps into bed fully clothed, and she hides. When Henry and Betty go to bed, it is not the same.

Henry calls Joyce to see how things are going and learns he is shocked when she tells Purple Stickpin about the divorce. He turns cold and no longer sits with her in the cafeteria. Henry suggests she let Purple Stickpin know about her fortune, but she does not want him that way. Soon afterwards, Joyce writes from Texas, where Grandma is not expected to live.

Henry is called to personnel in the Federal Building and walked back to the desk of a 38-39-year-old, slightly sexy woman. She asks about the arrest record portion of his application. He has listed 8-10 "drunk raps," estimating the dates. He feigns surprise to have forgotten another incident years ago. The woman needs an explanation of his terrible record within ten days. He phones in sick that night and, on a fifth of whiskey and six-pack of beer, types his response in 42 pages. The woman reads it at her desk, and gradually nine colleagues come to share it. One proclaims, "all geniuses are drunkards." The woman allows him to continue working.

One night, Henry is assigned to sit beside Butchner, who sticks no mail but yells threats and obscenities. Henry can stand no more and challenges him to fight. He goes for a drink of water. The supervisor, a black man in his early 50s, screams that he has left his seat twice in 30 minutes. Henry accepts an illegible, furiously written write-up. Butchner declares he is going to kill that son of a bitch. Twelve hours a night packed into an airless building with supervisors and smelling stale baked food from the "non-profit" cafeteria is bad enough, but then comes CP1 - City Primary 1. This scheme takes in about a third of the city streets, breaking them into zone numbers. After that comes CP2 and CP3, and after each one must pass the same test. Out of the original 150-200, only 17-18 remain. Henry can study only before bed, a tall six-pack beside him. One morning, he is so tired that he climbs the stairs, unlocks the door, and discovers a pretty, young blonde on the sofa. As they drink and kiss, she mentions her husband. Henry panics, learning he is in 309, not 409. She settles him, they finish the beer, and he flees in fear.



Henry recalls old timers saying how Big Daddy Greystone (whose penis earns his nickname by hospitalizing three women and a fag named Carter) recording scheme sheet breaks and listening to the playback. When his own voice puts him to sleep, Henry gives up and pictures seeing a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist declares crazy anyone who wants to study this and asks for \$25. Henry analyzes himself and saves the money. Needing to do something, Henry calls Personnel in the Federal Building, fondling himself as he talks with Miss Graves, asking if his case has been decided, since he does not want to invest time in studying CP1 if he is to be terminated. Graves agrees to get his test postponed.

Betty comes over for Christmas. She loves huge Christmas trees covered with various ornaments. They drink whiskey, make love, and eat turkey Betty bakes. He dozes off when it suddenly falls on top of him, burning him with its hot light bulbs. Several days later, Henry visits a drunken Betty at 8:45 a.m. Almost all the roomers have given her a cheap bottle. He says it will kill her and recognizes the look in her eyes. She has two children who never visit or write. She promises to go easy as he leaves with a kiss.

A week and a half later, Henry returns to find Betty gone. The door is unlocked, there is a large spot of blood on her mattress, and the middle-aged French owner informs him that Betty was taken by ambulance to Country General Hospital. He races there and finds her in a tiny room. Her eyes are calm, and a bright, beautiful blue. He cleans her face with a cloth and wets her parched lips. She will drink no water. The desk nurse claims they are doing their best, but Henry angrily charges they would not let someone important die like that. He gives his name and address as Betty's former common-law husband and hurries out.

The funeral is at 10:30 on a blazing morning. Henry wears a cheap new black suit. Betty dies while he is making long-distance phone calls to locate her son, Larry. In his youth, Larry gets off on car theft charges, gets training in the army, and lands a good-paying job. He cannot locate his sister. He picks Henry up in his new Mercedes-Benz, and the landlady's subnormal daughter, Marcia, rides silently with them, smiling inanely. Larry has fought with a priest about rites for Betty, but the cleric agrees to do half a service. Henry's order for a wreath of roses runs into delivery problems. Henry pays no attention to the half-funeral, contemplating what used to be Betty lying in a coffin. Halfway through, the wilted wreath arrives and promptly falls flat. No one picks it up. At the end, the priest and Marcia smile. Larry promises to write about a headstone but never does.

Henry drives to the racetrack and heads for the bar. Henry tells Vi - a "high yellow" postal worker about his woes: three funerals in two years - mother, father, and old girl friend. After each funeral he wins big. They catch the second race together. As always, Henry looks for the unpopular horse capable of beating the favorite. He knows that trainers enter their horses under seemingly unfavorable conditions to get the public money off their horse, and is certain that despite disadvantages in weight, record, and jockey, the 6 horse is best. He puts \$10 on it to win. Vi disagrees. The jockey opens up at the top of the curve, surprising the other jockeys. Henry studies the Racing Form and picks the 8 horse, despite its recent loss. Vi again disagrees. Henry puts down a modest \$10 to win. The favorite looks good but 8 blows by, winning easily, and paying 9/1. At



the bar, Vi leans on Henry hard. He wins three of five races and drives Vi to his place. She is not impressed by the "rat hole" and suggests her place. En route, they pick up steaks and other dinner fixings.

Vi has a nice apartment. Vi insists on eating first and heads to the kitchen, while Henry settles in the front room, contemplating staying with her, being cared for and loved by her and making money at the track. He can put up with the arguments, screaming, and drama that women enjoy, but he has trouble with the exchange of vows. Vi sits on Henry's lap, slips her tongue in his mouth, but before he can react, shows him a photograph of her six-year-old daughter, who is living in Detroit with her grandmother, but is due out in the fall for school. Vi's ex-husband, Ray, is a no-good, horse-playing drunk. Henry observes that the girl's black genes dominate. While Vi returns to the kitchen, Henry muses on women and their eternal photos. Vi warns against him drinking too much, because she wants him to perform in bed.

Vi watches patiently as Henry admits defeat and falls drunkenly asleep. She climbs atop him and begins stroking him. He enjoys being raped by a greedy-eyed enchantress a while, but then says it has been too long a day. In the morning, Henry hears Vi walking around and does not want to face her. She shakes him and tells him to get out before her girlfriend arrives. Coughing and gagging, he dresses and pleads that there must be something good in him. He has failed before because of booze. Vi advises that women "do not like coming in second to a bottle." She accepts a \$20 bill and tells him to drive carefully. Henry heads to the track.

Summoned to a counselor's office and told he looks bad, Henry informs them about the funeral and admits he has failed to phone in. Henry tells Mr. Feathers to go to hell and demands respect, because the blacks love him. Knowing about various assaults on supervisors by blacks, Feathers backs down and later transfers elsewhere. One morning later, Miss Graves phones to tell Henry he has "made clearance," and must throw his CP1 in two weeks. Henry relates the data on the scheme sheet to sex and age, assigning street names to various women and fags on whom some guy performs diverse sexual acts. The cards become his friends, but the orgies get crossed and he throws a 94 the first time. Ten days later, he scores 100% in five minutes and gets a form letter of congratulations.

Soon, Henry becomes a regular, one of two survivors from his group. Sitting beside young David Janko, he talks about classical music, which he has read a little about. Janko takes him for scholar and spends every night, ranting about his sexual exploits. Janko asks Henry to critique a novel he is writing. Finding it starts honestly, Henry considers he may have misjudged Janko, but then the novel falls apart as the hero at the opera crashes into a cultured, beautiful woman during intermission and they talk for a terrible page and a half. Married to an uncultured doctor, she runs into the hero for concerts and implied quickies. Conflicted, she commits suicide. Janko rejects Henry's suggestion to drop the dialog around the pillar and that he resign to devote himself to writing. When Henry cites Van Gogh's taking chances, Janko insists Van Gogh's brother gives him free paints.



Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 finds Henry and Betty back together briefly and tragically. Ironically, Christmas, which she dearly loves, does her in as she drinks herself to death on gifted alcohol. Her death is depicted with rare sensitivity before Bukowski resumes his dry humor, describing her miserable funeral. At work, Miss Graves in Personnel comes into focus several times, with Henry finding her sexually attractive and annoying. Sex plays a major role in this section, as Henry meets Vi outside of work and they have an unsuccessful one-night stand. Note that "high yellow," Henry's description of Vi, refers to a 1965 film about a light-skinned black teenager who pretends to be white.

At work, mastering CP1 - City Primary 1 - puts Henry into hopeless agony. The instructor's useless advice is not to sleep. Henry tries subconscious learning but gives up. After the Vi fiasco, Henry relates the data on the scheme sheet to sex and age, assigning street names to various women and fags on whom some guy performs diverse sexual acts. He gets his orgies get crossed the first time, figures out who does what to whom on the second test and scores 100%. Henry's relations with Janko shows Henry's love of classical music, which plays a more prominent role in other Bukowski novels. Henry is disgusted that the characters in Janko's novel are so prim.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Henry develops a new system at the track that has him winning \$3,000 in six weeks. Henry tells Mr. Winters that he needs a leave of absence or must resign. Henry fills out papers and gets 90 working days off. The track has moved 100 miles south, but Henry keeps his apartment and checks the mail once or twice a week. He is \$380 ahead one night before risking \$50 on Blue Stocking at 9/2, which adds \$250.

Every night, Henry drives along the coast looking for an expensive but uncrowded place to eat. He has a nose for them and does not need a window table to enjoy the ocean and moon. Waitresses smile and stand close. After dinner, he stocks up on whiskey and beer, and finds a motel with no TV.

One day, while in the bar between races, Henry sees a sex creature bursting from her dress. The bartender has cut her off and calls a track cop to haul her out when Henry follows them and pretends to be her husband. She brings Henry luck, and he wins two of the last three. In his car, Mary Lou flicks her tongue in and out of Henry's mouth, and they head up the coast. Henry carries her to bed, and it is one of the best. Next day, they pick up her stuff at her motel, where Henry meets Hector, who invites him in for a beer. When Hector challenges Henry to take Mary Lou away from him, Henry is content to let her decide between them. He sees in a mirror Hector advancing to attack in time to smash his teeth out with the bottle. He kicks him flat, and removes his switchblade. He slaps Mary Lou and calls her a cunt for helping kill him for \$400-\$500. She cries that she loves Henry as he leaves. He never sees either of them again.

Henry's luck ends. Soon after returning to work, he meets gray-haired Fay, who always wears black to protest the war. She writes, seeks to save the world, lives with three children off alimony checks and help from her mother, and has barely worked in her life. One night he gets home, beat, and finds Fay in bed reading *The New Yorker* and eating chocolates. Finding the kitchen a mess, Henry is angry but cannot hit a gray-haired woman, so he runs a hot bath. He is so stiff he feels he will drown and prepares for bed. Finally, Henry asks about Fay's writers' workshop and hears the woes of Robby, who at 40 lives with his mother and writes funny stories about the Catholic Church for which the magazines are not ready.

Regular clerks do all the work while the miscellaneous crew, blacks built like professional wrestlers, stand around arguing expertly about sports. They work five minutes per hour moving mail via the freight elevator and sometimes pretend to count the mail.

Henry can feel his dizzy spells coming on and is sure the job is killing him. A doctor tells him his blood pressure and weight are both fine. He takes a special blood test. The



tests show there is nothing wrong with Henry, but the spells get worse, and he often leaves work early. Those days he walks in around 11 p.m. to deal with pregnant Fay.

They do not know about Henry's problem at Dorsey Station. There, he plays the black-and-white game, including hearing repeatedly the story of a cook who masturbates into tapioca pudding. They call him "poor white trash" and "boy," and brag they are catching up after centuries of white men sleeping with black women. Henry says it is OK with him, and admits to stealing the Indians' lands.

Fay does well with her pregnancy, "for an old gal." He forgives her everything when the pains begin and urges her to head to the hospital. Grimacing, she asks Henry to hold her hand as he looks out the window. Later, the German doctor that gives him the blood tests congratulates Henry on the birth of a girl. Through glass, Henry looks at his bright red screaming child and evaluates her legs, hips and breasts. When he sees Fay, he considers that it is no wonder that women, being meant to suffer, crave hearing constant declarations of love. Kissing her, he believes she has made a major improvement in the world. Fay names the baby Marina Louise Chinaski.

The city is in a riot and burning. Guys are walking the streets holding whiskey, TVs, and vacuum cleaners, and the cops do not get out of their cars. Businesses are putting up "BLOOD BROTHER" signs to keep from being burnt out. The postmaster announces over the intercom that the southeast area is barricaded and there is a 7 p.m. curfew. Employees living in the area are excused from work. Henry punches out. The riots end, Marina calms down, and Henry finds ways to avoid Janko, but his dizzy spells continue. The doctor prescribes Librium, which helps. One night, Henry gets a drink of water, works 30 minutes, and takes his ten-minute break. Chambers, a high yellow, announces that Henry has finally hung himself, being gone 40 minutes. Two days later, Henry sees Chambers at the racetrack and is never bothered again.

Marina learns to crawl, discovering her world. She sleeps with her parents in bed along with the cat. Henry finds it odd to have three mouths depending on him. Finding Fay looking at the classified sections, Henry asks if she is moving out. He helps her find a place, agrees to pay her monthly, and gets the cat. He sees Marina two to four times a week. Fay continues her social actions, taking Marina with her, often when Henry wants to visit. She has moved in with Andy, a truck driver who paints and has a big cock. Later, he receives a letter from a hippie commune in New Mexico, where Marina can breathe. Fay includes a drawing Marina makes for him.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This short chapter examines Henry's brief but brilliant success at the track, allowing Bukowski through Henry to discuss the art and science of handicapping. Henry enjoys the high life the second time around, and feels important with Mary Lou until he discovers he is being set up for a robbery. He implies that she could have gotten far more out of him by staying with him than by letting her boyfriend roll him. His luck gone, Henry returns to work during the Los Angeles riots, which allow Bukowski to comment



obliquely on race relations. Fay's giving birth allows another tender moment, but by the time the baby is crawling, Henry is again abandoned without being told directly. With his daughter in New Mexico, Henry finds his health declining and his supervisor out to get him. Note that Librium is used to treat alcoholism.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

Henry receives a Letter of Warning from the Post Office Department informing him that his 12 March 1969 arrest for drunk driving, while a relatively minor charge, fits into Section 744.12 of the Postal Manual, allowing the disciplining of personnel who fail to reflect favorably on the service. Henry's next memo gives advanced notice of a proposed three-day suspension for being absent without leave 13-15 May 1969. Henry learns his fate in a Notice of Decision, declaring that he is suspended 17-19 Nov. 1969.

Henry sits beside a plump young girl who does not know her scheme well and makes suggestions about throwing envelopes. A supervisor is making time with her. When Henry finishes his tray, the supervisor tells him he has taken 28 minutes. Henry enters Counselor Eddie Beaver's office and takes a seat. When "Skinny Beaver" notes it has taken him 28 minutes to throw a 23-minute tray, Henry tells him to knock off the bullshit, that he is tired. Henry explains that men should be judged on ten trays or a night's worth. Henry cannot believe he has been here this long and has nothing to show for it. Henry has gone from 185 to 223 pounds, because all he moves is his right arm. He sleeps all day to be able to work at night and suffers pains everywhere.

There remain bits of action. Another guy gets caught in the stairwell with his head under a girl's skirt. A cafeteria girl and three mail handlers that she provides "oral copulation" are fired, while the general foreman she services is demoted. Then, Henry sets fire to the post office when the ash from his cigar lands on a stack of third-class mail. He resumes work for a while but then asks for a travel slip to the nurse's office. As Helen dabs his hands, her breast brushes him. He explains the accident and asks her to marry him. She dismisses him. A week later, "no smoking" signs are posted and official embossed ashtrays appear.

One day men rip out every other water fountain, and Henry alone protests the injustice to the union representative, Parker Anderson, a failed hustler who sleeps in his used car and freshens up at gas stations. Anderson informs Henry that the building is built in 1912 with double the allotted fountains; they are being removed to reach the legal number.

One night, Henry runs into Tom Moto, who invites him to The Stone's retirement party, maybe throw him overboard in a deep lake. Henry does not want even to see him. Henry parks across the street from the Federal Building and takes papers to resign. The man doing the exit interview wonders why he wants to "pursue a career" just shy of his 50th birthday. Henry wants to be a trapper in Bayou La Fourche, LA, making \$10,000-\$20,000 in three months.

Henry gets drunker and stays drunk longer than ever and at one point has to remind himself about his daughter to keep from slitting his throat. He faces a preserved human



heart in a fat jar on the coffee table labeled "Francis." Scattered around are empty bottles, ashtrays and garbage. Henry has not eaten in two weeks, but recalls 7-8 wild parties. A pre-med student called Wilbert promised to come back for the heart. His doorbell rings, and a long haired white guy and black woman from the party have brought him an orange flower. They have come so Henry can have sex with her as he wanted. He asks them to take the heart away but not destroy it in case Wilbert has to return it. They go to a nude floor show where Henry enjoys squeezing and kissing the girls until his money runs out. They drive Henry back and leave him. He finds a half-pint of scotch, turns on the radio, burns his fingers on short cigar butts and sleeps. When he wakes up, still alive, he writes a novel.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Post Office concludes with Henry receiving a series of four official notifications of the services intention to discipline and dismiss him for absenteeism. Henry details the physical and emotion burden of clerical work, describes encounters with a stubborn, procedurally minded counselor, a fire he accidentally starts, and decision to resign without complaining about anyone or anything. He goes on an extended drinking spree after which he wakes up and decides to write this novel.



Characters

Henry Chinaski

The novel's narrator is Henry ("Hank") Chinaski, a middle-aged alcoholic, willing to buck any system, void of ambition, yet exhibiting superior intellect and reasoning. In his youth, Henry works in slaughterhouses, crosses the country on a railroad track gang, works in a dog biscuit factory, sleeps on park benches, and works nickel-and-dime jobs in a dozen cities. He tells his story after waking up from a terrible drinking spree.

A fellow drunk convinces Henry that anyone can be hired as a Post Office temp during the Christmas season. He takes the exam and physical to become a substitute mail carrier, and is assigned to West Avon Station under a sadistic supervisor, A. E. Jonstone ("The Stone"). Henry finds the daily grind of delivering mail in rain, dealing with dogs and crazy people, grinding physically and emotionally. After being thrown out by his common-law wife, Betty Williams, Henry marries a beautiful, oversexed, rich and crazy Texas girl. He enjoys small-town life in Texas with his odd in-laws, but eventually follows her back to Los Angeles. On the job, Henry draws another nasty supervisor and a seemingly impossible workload. After a bad fight, Joyce serves papers on Henry, who moves out peacefully and does not contest the divorce.

Henry and Betty get back together briefly and tragically. Her funeral is a miserable affair, after which Henry goes to the track, always having been lucky better after funerals. There he meets Vi, a postal colleague, and they have an unsuccessful one-night affair in which he is too drunk to perform. With Vi behind him, Henry enjoys brief but brilliant success at the track, giving him a taste of the high life. He feels important with Mary Lou, whom he rescues from being evicted for intoxication, and they enjoy themselves until Henry discovers he is being set up for a mugging. His luck gone, Henry returns to work at the post office, lives with a hippie writer, Fay, with whom he has a daughter, Marina. When the baby begins crawling, Henry is abandoned and finds his health declining badly. He receives a series of four official notifications of the Post Office's intention first to discipline and to dismiss him for absenteeism. He sleeps all day to be able to work at night and suffers pains everywhere. Henry details the physical and emotion burden of clerical work, describes encounters with a stubborn, procedurally minded counselor, a fire he accidentally starts, and decision to resign without complaining about anyone or anything. Henry goes on an extended drinking spree after which he wakes up and decides to write this novel.

Betty Williams

Henry Chinaski's common law wife, whom he refers to as a "shackjob," Betty is a well-to-do widow, well-dressed, shapely, almost beautiful, vivacious, and fun. Her grown children have had nothing to do with her for years. Together, Betty and Henry drink away most of their income. When Betty gets tired of gossip about Henry's flirting with



slutty neighbors by day while she is at work, she throws him out. Betty has another alcoholic boyfriend named Henry while Chinaski is briefly married to Joyce. After their amicable divorce, Betty meets Henry on the street. Betty has gotten old, fast, is heavier and lined, has lost her job and their dog, and is on wine. She seems terribly sad. She changes sheets and cleans bathrooms in a loser's hotel, in exchange for a room. Betty wants to get back together, but Henry needs to wait. Nevertheless, they go to Henry's place, he calls in sick, and as they relax with a fifth of whiskey. It is almost like old times.

They celebrate Christmas together, drinking whiskey, making love, and eating the turkey she has baked. When Henry screams as the tree falls on top of him, burning him with hot bulbs, Betty is mostly concerned about her poor tree. Days later, Henry visits Betty and finds her drunk in the morning, working her way through the cheap liquor that roomers have given her. Henry warns it will kill her and recognizes the look in her eyes. She will not allow him to confiscate the bottles and dole them out to her, but promises to go easy. A week and a half later, Betty is rushed by ambulance to Country General Hospital, bleeding massively. Henry finds her in a tiny room, her eyes a bright, beautiful blue and calm. She knows he would come. He cleans her face with a cloth and wets her parched lips. She will drink no water. The desk nurse claims they are doing their best, but Henry angrily charges they would not let someone important die like that. Henry is making long-distance phone calls to locate her son, Larry, when Betty dies. The priest who buries Betty performs half a service, having questions about her being a Catholic in good standing. Henry cannot believe that what used to be Betty is in the coffin. He goes after the funeral to the racetrack and enjoys great success, as he had after burying in parents.

Parker Anderson

A failed hustler who sleeps in his used car and freshens up at gas stations, Anderson rises quickly through the union ranks to become vice president, and serves as Henry Chinaski's union representative. Henry alone protests the injustice of removing half of the drinking fountains, and says that after paying dues for 12 years, he wants an explanation. Anderson learns that it is a legal liability issue. Henry believes the story is worth \$312. He has seen worse printed in Playboy.

Matthew Battles

Supervisor A. E. Jonstone's favorite carrier, Matthew is a 15-year veteran, always perfectly attired, scrubbed, and proud, until he is arrested for stealing money from mail to the Nekalayla Temple. Old ladies sending checks but not getting receipts bring on an investigation.

Eddie Beaver

The postal counselor to whose office Henry Chinaski is summoned after taking 28 minutes to throw a 23-minute tray, "Skinny Beaver" explains the production schedule



and how his failure to meet the standard means someone else must stick the leftovers at overtime rates. Henry explains "fat" trays that some clerks grab and says he just takes what comes along. They are sticking letters, not trays. Beaver is angry by the time Henry signs to acknowledge he has been counseled and leaves.

Fay

Henry Chinaski's common-law wife, Fay is a gray-haired antiwar demonstrator and aspiring writer when he meets her after his luck at the track runs out and he goes back to the post office. Fay is out to save the world, lives with three children off alimony checks and help from her mother, and has barely worked in her life. She annoys Henry by her unwillingness to do any household chores. Fay does well with her pregnancy, "for an old gal." After the deliver, Fay is anxious to hold her baby, whom she names Marina Louise Chinaski. By the time Marina can crawl, Fay moves out, continues her social action, and moves in with Andy, a well-endowed truck driver-painted. They move to a hippie commune in New Mexico.

Miss Graves

A 39-year-old, slightly sexy employee in Post Office Personnel, Graves summons Henry Chinaski to explain the arrest record portion of his application and requires a written explanation within ten days if he hopes to remain employed. Irritated with her, Henry produces a 42 page report, which Graves shares with colleagues. She continues Henry's case and allows him to continue working. When Henry cannot learn the content of CP1 for crucial tests, he phones Graves to ask about the status of his case; he does not want to invest time studying if he is to be terminated. Graves arranges for the test to be postponed. He fondles himself while talking with the "bitch."

George Greene

A croaky-voiced, dull-eyed, wrinkled bachelor carrier in his late 60s, whose seniority earns him an easy route in the rich district, G.G. regularly blows a whistle to summon children to gather for candy. One day, when the mother of a new girl in the neighborhood accuses him of child molestation. The Stone explains G.G's honorable nature, but insists "the public's dynamite." When The Stone dumps additional circulars in front of him, G.G. begins crying softly breaks down and the "good guy" is never seen or mentioned again.

The Italiano

A postal instructor who begins his orientation session with talk about personal hygiene, the Italiano also emphasizes that the Russians pose sufficient threat that the new clerks must always exceed quotas. The first time that Henry crosses him, he smells body odor.



Believing himself humorous, the Italiano says those who fail their scheme test may end up as president of General Motors.

David Janko

One of Henry Chinaski's fellow postal clerks, with whom he makes the mistake of talking about classical music, Janko makes Henry dizzy and sick with loud talk about music and his delusional sexual exploits. Janko asks Henry to critique his novel but rejects his advice.

A. E. Jonstone

The "soup" (superintendent) at the Oakford Postal Station, "The Stone," as Henry Chinaski alone dares call him to his face, always wears blood-red shirts and swivels importantly in his desk chair. He so obviously a man of cruelty that Henry submits a 30-page report about him, but the civil servant who hears the case insists The Stone, with a 30-year service record, is a fine man. The Stone retaliates by assigning Henry no work, but orders him back when Henry finds easy night work at Prell Station. The Stone kowtows to the public and cares nothing about 40-year veteran G.G. suffering a mental breakdown over the workload. At the end of the novel, Henry learns that The Stone is retiring and refuses an invitation to his going-away party.

Joyce

Henry Chinaski's beautiful, rich, 26-year old wife, Joyce, insists they marry in Las Vegas and then takes him to her tiny, unnamed home town in Texas, where everyone knows about her sex drive and vast family fortune. Joyce is an excellent cook, but highly emotional. In a temper, she kicks their dog, Picasso, occasioning a fight. Joyce takes a clerical job with the police department, working days, while Henry works nights. They rarely see one another. She falls in love with Mr. Partisian ("Purple Stickpin"), whom she says is a perfect gentleman. Henry cooks her a bizarre meal of seaweed and snails, which make her vomit. A week later, divorce papers arrive. She retains the house as Henry moves out and figures he loses \$3-4 million in the uncontested divorce. Later, Henry learns that Purple Stickpin cools swiftly, learning she is free.

Mary Lou and Hector

A true sex creature whom Henry Chinaski rescues from being ejected from the racetrack for intoxication, Mary Lou accompanies him to dinner and makes love with him in a motel. In the morning, they go to her motel to pick up her stuff, where Henry meets dangerous-looking Hector, who invites him in for a beer before challenging him to take Mary Lou away. Henry is watching in a mirror when Hector attacks from the rear with a switchblade. Henry smashes his teeth with a beer bottle, kicks him flat, and



disarms him. He then slaps Mary Lou for collaborating and rips her dress. For weeks Henry is nervous they will retaliate, but he never sees either again.

The Midget

An employee of Henry Chinaski's rich Texas in-laws, the unnamed Midget is tasked with driving Henry around the family's vast lands to intimidate him. The Midget is married to the most desirable woman in town, who must accept him because no other man will have her after an accident she had as a young teen in which she got a coke bottle stuck in her vagina. The Midget suffers a nervous disorder that makes him an erratic driver. Henry plays the Big Shot to justify the Midget's view of him as a gold digger.

Tom Moto

Henry Chinaski's fellow sub at the Oakford Postal Station, Tom is the only one who remains with the Post Office as long as Henry, rising to the rank of supervisor, sheepishly saying he must feed his wife and four children. Early on they share an adventure getting back to the truck station during a torrential downpour that floods the low-lying streets. At the end of Henry's postal career, Tom invites him to The Stone's retirement party, joking that Henry might enjoy throwing him off a rowboat into a deep lake.

Mr. Partisian

A perfect Turkish gentleman (the surname appears to be Armenian) whom Henry Chinaski's wife Joyce meets on the job at the police department, Partisian is nicknamed by Henry "Purple Stickpin" for the ornament he invariably wears. Based on experience in office romances, Henry warns Joyce that he is a phony, but she goes ahead with the divorce. Henry wishes Joyce well, peacefully moves out, and does not contest the divorce. Joyce is shocked when Purple Stickpin cools as soon as he hears Joyce is free.

Vi

A friendly "high yellow" woman (a black person pretending to be white) whom Henry knows from the post office (different station), Vi is in the racetrack bar, dressed-down in a raincoat, when Henry Chinaski arrives after Betty William's funeral. They have a one-night affair at her apartment during which he is too drunk to perform. Vi despises her drunken ex-husband who plays the horses, and is expecting her dark-skinned daughter to come to Los Angeles from Detroit to begin school. She advises Henry that no woman wants to come in second to a bottle.



Grandpa Wally

Joyce's land- and money-rich Texan grandfather, Wally, more than any of Henry Chinaski's in-laws, accepts him. Grandma, his wife, is indifferent towards Henry while his unnamed son actively hates him. Joyce and Henry visit Wally to drink whisky and listen to country music. Grandpa laughs too heartily to drive after they set Henry up to be chased by buffalo on their extensive lands. He sends Joyce money for a house and to buy a car and clothing to help Henry find a job.



Objects/Places

Bayou La Fourche

Henry Chinaski's intended destination after resigning from the U.S. Post Office after eleven frustrating and wearing years, Bayou La Fourche in Louisiana offers him the opportunity to make \$10,000-\$20,000 in three months trapping animals to sell their furs and carcasses, raise farm animals, and fish. The nearby Fair Grounds offer premier horse racing to keep him amused.

Dorsey Station

Henry Chinaski's last assignment as a postal clerk, Dorsey Station is primarily black, and he plays the black-and-white game, including hearing repeatedly the story of a cook who masturbates into tapioca pudding. Henry gets locked in a stairwell with doors that carry a warning not to use the door. A cafeteria girl, three mail handlers, and a general foreman also are locked in, so the girl provides "oral copulation" to the other men and they are disciplined for their actions afterward. Henry accidentally sets a fire when ash from his cigar sets fire falls into to a stack of third-class mail. Henry fights the blaze and gets burned, "no smoking" signs go up everywhere, and government-issue ashtrays are put out (and promptly stolen).

Oakford Station

Henry Chinaski's second assignment as a substitute mail carrier, Oakford Station is run by a sadistic, bullneck "soup" named A. E. Jonstone ("The Stone"). Oakford has 40-50 different routes, each with a case that must be memorized. The toughest route in Oakford is 539, filled with apartment houses. Henry is confronted by two German shepherds and learns a good place to "shit and shower" if he ever needs to. Henry later passes the examination and physical to become a regular carrier, still in Oakford Station. The Stone persecutes Henry into resigning from the Postal Service.

Nekalayla Temple

A disgustingly green painted religious institution on carrier Matthew Battles' route, Nekalayla temple is founded by a mystical entrepreneur who claims to have spoken with Jesus Christ in the desert. Nekalayla maintains a staff of 30-40 people processing donations, so when old ladies complain about not having their donations receipted, an investigation is launched, and Battles is caught red-handed.



Prell Station

The postal station to which Henry Chinaski turns for night special delivery work after The Stone at Oakford Station refuses to assign him to routes, Prell Station is an easy-going assignment, but after enjoying it a week and a half, Henry is ordered back to Oakford.

U.S. Civil Service Commission

With its regional headquarters in San Francisco, CA, the Commission is one of two possible routes for appeal in Henry Chinaski's dismissal from the U.S. Postal Service for absenteeism. A memo from the Post Office Department informs Henry that if he appeals to the Commission, he gives up the right to appeal in the Department. If he appeals to the Department and loses, he may then appeal to the Commission. He has 15 days to appeal in writing, offering proof that he has been wrongly terminated.

U.S. Postal Department

Henry Chinaski's employer on two occasions, the Postal Department requires that all new employees review Part 742 of the Postal Manual regarding "Basic Standards of Ethical Conduct, Personal Behavior of Employees, Restrictions on Political Activity, etc." (quoted before Chapter 1). They must be devoted to the public interest, highly moral, and law-abiding. Supervisors are to be alert to actions contrary to policy. Working for the Postal Department is a "unique privilege." Henry's record of drunk driving violations brings his first warning of pending disciplinary action, and his frequent absenteeism, caused by declining health, but not properly documented, gets him suspended and then dismissed.

Wently Station

Henry Chinaski's temporary assignment during a five-day rainstorm, Wently Station serves very hilly terrain and the soup burdens him down with 12 tie-outs on his pack. Whoever conceives this route, Henry believes, is a madman.

West Avon Station

Henry Chinaski's first assignment as a substitute mail carrier, West Avon Station has an easygoing "soup" (superintendent), which helps lull Henry into believing it is an easy job..

West Garage

Located on flat land without drainage in Los Angeles, the West Garage houses the trucks used for making Sunday Collection along a route of pickup boxes. Henry Chinaski is sent out into a sheet of rain that leaves West Garage in two feet of water. Henry's truck stalls on a nearby lawn and he abandons it to be towed in.



Themes

Sex

Sex thrums throughout *Post Office*. During his second day as a substitute mail carrier, narrator Henry ("Hank") Chinaski has sex with a lonely woman along his route, and goes back a few more times before getting bored. He is shackled up with Betty at the time, but this does not slow him. He flirts with loose female neighbors until Betty throws him out. Henry bounces back, marrying a rich, sex-crazed Texas nymph who nearly eats him alive and gets turned on when potted geraniums fall on him from as the bed shakes. After knocking off a good one for old time's sake, Joyce moves on to a "real gentleman" at work and Henry hooks up again with Betty. When they go to bed, it is not the same. Betty drinks herself to death, and after her funeral, Henry meets and beds Vi, but is too drunk to perform and is told that women "do not like coming in second to a bottle." Back at the track, he picks up a flirtatious drunk, Mary Lou, and is nearly mugged by her lover. Henry's last fling in the novel is Fay, an older hippie with whom he conceives a baby, but who leaves him for a well-endowed trucker/painter. Henry passes on a black woman he has flirted with at a party, but asks if he can watch her and her white lover. They go to a nude floorshow where Henry enjoys squeezing and kissing the girl until money runs out.

As a mail carrier, women regularly titillate Henry along his routes, and when a crazy one accuses him of rape, he obliges her. Needing to pass an impossible CP1 test to keep his job, Henry relates the data to sex, age, and assorted sexual acts and learns so well who does what to whom that he scores 100%. Henry evaluates her legs, hips, and breasts everywhere he goes: lusting for the florist while he buys flowers for Betty's funeral, and admiring the nurse who holds his newborn daughter. Henry passes comments on other characters' sexual attributes: an elderly carrier cannot be guilty of child abuse because he cannot get an erection; a midget chauffeur is married to the most beautiful girl in town because in her teens she gets a coke bottle trapped in her vagina, so no other male will have her. Big Daddy Greystone has a penis so enormous that it not only earns his nickname, but hospitalizes three women and a gay man named Carter. Henry regularly identifies gays as "roundeyes." Another guy gets caught in the stairwell, with his head under a girl's skirt, and a cafeteria girl and three mail handlers are fired for "oral copulation," while the general foreman she services is demoted. Sex is always hazardous in *Post Office*.

Employment

Having worked in a slaughterhouse in the days of his youth, ridden the rails, and taken dozens of menial jobs across the continent, Henry Chinaski lets a fellow drunk convince him to hire on as a postal temp during the Christmas rush. After getting laid on his second day, Henry takes the exam to become a substitute carrier and is assigned to a sadistic supervisor who starts subs later than regular carriers but expects them to finish



on time, and once or twice a week sticks them with impossible night pickups. Taking an immediate dislike to Henry, "The Stone" denies him work, hoping he will quit, and assigns him the most difficult routes when forced to give him work. Regular carriers call in sick around holidays and in bad weather, leaving subs to struggle with unfamiliar routes and the worst assignments, without knowing the secrets that regular carriers guard closely for job protection. Henry learns the hard way that The Stone has friends in high places and a wide network among fellow supervisors. After three years as a sub, Henry becomes a "regular," and looks forward to learning the cases, shortcuts, and traps, and having easier days, but gets into a face-off with The Stone over a picayune regulation and resigns from the service.

Unemployed and newly-married, Henry prefers to hustle, but does as his wife asks and answers ads for shipping clerk, receiving clerk, and stock boy, taking the job that smells least like work in an art store. He has plenty of time for diversions and opportunities to join in the petty thievery, but he wants the whole world or nothing. Going crazy, Henry lets another drunken acquaintance talk him into becoming a postal clerk. Squad after squad of recruits passes through, with two or four from each surviving, just enough to match retirements. During "scheme assignments," Henry again draws the hardest assignment on which recruits must score 95% accuracy within three tries or be fired. The instructor's advice is not to sleep. Henry relates the data on the scheme sheet to sex, age, and assorted sexual acts to make the content memorable and he scores 100%. Regular clerks do all the work while the "miscellaneous crew, blacks built like professional wrestlers, stand around arguing expertly about sports. No one complains because the parking lot is dark.

Eleven years later and 38 pounds heavier, aching all over, and suffering dizzy spells that the doctor cannot explain, Henry, now nearing the age of 50, resigns to "pursue a career" as a fur trapper in Bayou La Fourche, LA, making \$10,000-\$20,000 in three months. He believes a combination of night work, repetition, and absence of surprise makes the job hard. He has seen many men eaten up, melted, or bloated from sitting on a stool all day, moving only their right arms. The final straw comes when a counselor refuses to acknowledge that clerks are sticking letters, not trays, and the measuring standard is patently unfair. Henry leaves quietly, without complaining about anyone or anything.

Alcohol

Alcohol flows through Post Office. Narrator Henry ("Hank") Chinaski has scarcely a sober day from start to finish. He and his common-law wife Betty drink away their income, leaving them in worn-out clothes. A fellow drunk convinces Henry to sign on as a postal temp during the Christmas rush, assuring him it is easy work. Henry soon finds that walking in 100° weather, hungover, makes him stagger under his load, and sweat whiskey and beer from his armpits. He suffers even more miserably during the rainy season, having shoes full of holes and a torn raincoat. All of his money goes into liquor. Working nights, Henry can drink at the racetrack all afternoon. He buys a tall six-pack on his way into work in order to have it at hand at bedtime. Once he falls a floor short of



his apartment and is disoriented in another apartment not strewn with bottles and cans but actually furnished. The beautiful blonde occupant is amused and invites him back, but Henry is afraid of her husband.

After breaking up with Betty, Henry marries a teetotaler, but drinks with her grandfather and on his own. Divorced and back with Betty, who is now drinking more than ever, Henry calls in sick and knows the visiting nurse smells whiskey on his breath. Betty laughs about the same thing happening to her most recent boyfriend. By Christmas, Betty is suffering blackouts and within weeks drinks herself to death on the holiday gifts she receives. Henry tries to warn her of the danger, but sees the futility in her face. Seeing the danger, Henry nevertheless attends the funeral drunk and heads to the racetrack bar, where he picks up an eager woman who takes him home, warning him not to overindulge because she has expectations. Henry cannot control himself and has to admit defeat in bed. Vi advises him that women "do not like coming in second to a bottle." Henry next picks up May Lou at the track. She is so intoxicated that the guards are escorting her off the property. Henry pretends to be her husband, promises not to let her drink any more, and promptly leads her to a different bar. The brief fling nearly gets Henry mugged. On the job, Henry experiences dizzy spells that he believes come from perching on a stool all night. A doctor can find no physical explanation, but prescribes Librium, which helps. Librium is used to treat alcoholism. Henry's absenteeism grows chronic and he resigns ahead of being terminated. He gets drunker and stays drunk longer than ever before and has to remind himself about his daughter to keep from slitting his throat. He finds a half-pint of scotch, turns on the radio, burns his fingers on cigar butts left over from crazy parties, and sleeps. When he wakes up, still alive, Henry writes the present novel.

Style

Point of View

Post Office by Charles Bukowski is a fictionalized first-person account, as recorded by Bukowski's favorite alter ego, Henry ("Hank") Chinaski. On the last page, Henry wakes up from a terrible drinking binge and decides to write a novel. This novel is the result of that effort, covering Henry's adult life. Although a chronic alcoholic, both author and narrator are astute and tongue-in-cheek observers of the human condition. Late in the novel, Henry briefly recalls the days when he works in a slaughterhouse, rides the rails, and takes dozens of menial jobs across the continent, all of which are detailed in Bukowski's second autobiographical novel, *Factotum*. In *Post Office*, Henry looks back to first signing on with the post office as a Christmas temporary, which begins easy and fun, before swiftly degenerating into real work, particularly when the supervisor is out to get him. He lasts three and a half years as a mail carrier, but later returns to the Postal Service as a clerk for eleven miserable years during which he feels himself age and physically broken. Chapter 5 consists of the official reprimands he receives for absenteeism that correlates with his decline in health.

Henry is brutally honest and frank about the ups and downs of his life. He never misses an opportunity to comment on a woman's physical attributes and only rarely exercises self-control about having sex with them. Twice he experiences the high life: first when he marries Joyce, heir to a Texas fortune, who prefers they be self-sufficient financially; and next when his handicapping system at the racetrack rakes in money. He is pleased with the luxurious lifestyle, describes the pleasures, shows his luck turn, and returns to the narrative of life at the post office. Most of the time, Henry's emotions seem either flat or closed-off. He takes life's events as they come. Twice, however, he turns authentically and unapologetically tenderhearted: first witnessing Betty's physical decline, death, and funeral; and second watching the birth and early infancy of his daughter Marina, whom he loses when Marina's hippie mother removes her to commune to enjoy fresh air. By contrast, Henry accepts his first separation from Betty and divorce from Joyce in a matter-of-fact manner.

Setting

Post Office by Charles Bukowski is set in a very large city that suffers flooding from extended seasonal storms. Most of Bukowski's fiction is set in Los Angeles, where he spends most of his life, so this is the probable site for most of the novel's action. Why Bukowski would be reticent about naming the city is a mystery. As a postal carrier (temporary and permanent), Henry is generally assigned to the worst territories, where there are steep hills and apartment buildings. He briefly substitutes in a rich neighborhood, which he describes lyrically. He gives great emphasis to the misery of delivering mail during the non-stop curtains of water that fall in the wet season, winning the battle against the sewer system and turning the streets into lakes.



The novel takes little notice of contemporary events, but does mention that the Vietnam War is a "little firecracker party" during Henry's first three-and-a-half-year employment by the post office. Resigning, he finds himself married in Las Vegas to a rich Texas woman, and the novel shifts briefly to an unnamed small town, where Henry enjoys the laid back life, despite his in-laws' attitudes. Joyce wants them to be financially independent, however, and moves them back to Los Angeles, where Henry takes a nickel-and-dime job, which he leaves to become a postal clerk. Eleven years later, broken physically and emotionally, Henry is about to be terminated for absenteeism in November 1969 (gleaned from official documents quoted in Chapter 4). His common-law wife, Fay, is busy protesting the full-blown Vietnam War by then. Their daughter is born during race riots that appear to be a fictional addition to the chronology.

Language and Meaning

Post Office is Charles Bukowski's take on a life of mind-numbing and body-draining banality. The narrator, Henry ("Hand") Chinaski, is Bukowski's alter ego, waking up from days of drunkenness and deciding to write an autobiographical novel. Although he is an inveterate alcoholic, Henry is an astute observer of the human condition and candid about his own foibles. He describes the generally depressing places he lives and works in gratuitous detail and reproduces long conversations verbatim. Interestingly, when a colleague writes a novel, Henry urges him to drop the inane dialog. Henry's dialog is brisk and sharp. In the brief periods of Henry's prosperity, he writes enthusiastically and optimistically about the condition, but shows no depression when slumping back into working-class poverty. He waxes most eloquent over his strategies for handicapping horse races, using the appropriate specialized vocabulary. When discussing his jobs, he also uses technical lingo, assuming its meaning is self-evident to readers, and often failing to explain himself for pages. The reader must discern from the context what Henry's "soup" is, and what postal employees mean by, e.g., bid, case, circular, dispatch, pouch, registered, throw, and zone. By the end of the novel, what Henry does for a living is clarified.

Henry is generally dismissive of his fellow human beings and says so, to their faces and/or to his readers. Many pages are devoted to the foibles of folks along his routes, some of whom bring him close to contemplating murder. He prefers to mentally torment his rigid and sadistic supervisors. Women are sexual objects, as one would expect in the 1960s; even clear signs of insanity cannot prevent his having intercourse with a large breasted woman on his route. Initially, he considers sex a job perk, but this slackens off. Throughout the novel, Henry relishes telling of tantalizing moments - but is put off when a coworker does the same. Betty is introduced dismissively as Henry's "shackjob." When she throws him out, he marries a beautiful, rich Texan who somehow falls into his lap, and describes with amusement trying to keep up with her sexual appetite. He confesses with chagrin but no embarrassment falling for a coworker but getting too drunk to perform, and for a gorgeous drunk who sets him up for a mugging. Little seems to faze Henry until he describes getting back together with a sagging Betty and losing her to her alcoholic habit, and the birth and infancy of his daughter. These stand out by showing true pathos and feeling.



Structure

Post Office by Charles Bukowski consists of six numbered but untitled chapters, which differ greatly in length. Each chapter consists of numbered sections of varying lengths. The rationale for the numbered breaks as distinct from extra leading to break scenes within sections is unclear. The mood of resignation, sarcasm, and opportunism is rarely broken.

Chapter 1, consisting of 17 sections, is the longest. It examines narrator Henry ("Hank") Chinaski's first period of employment with the U.S. Postal Service, beginning with his "mistake" of signing on as a temporary for the heavy Christmas season. It establishes Henry's jaded attitude toward life, work, and women and seeming magnetic power to attract hostile supervisors. He takes being thrown out by Betty in stride.

Chapter 2, consisting of 24 sections, shows Henry between postal employments, in the company of rich, beautiful Joyce. The action moves briefly to the idyll of Joyce's tiny Texas hometown, and then back to a mundane job in Los Angeles. Henry rejoins the Post Office just before Joyce announces she wants a divorce. Henry again takes it in stride.

Chapter 3, consisting of 20 sections and Chapter 4, consisting of 17 sections, takes up Henry's second postal employment, as a clerk, which stretches to eleven years. It details the physical and emotional rigors of sticking letters that omit zip codes into the proper zone for delivery. Henry also describes a series of sexual encounters and his brief financial success handicapping horses at the racecourse. Henry and his second common law wife, Fay, have a daughter at the emotional climax of the novel, but mother and daughter leave him.

Chapter 5 consists of 4 official documents from the U.S. Postal Service to Henry detailing procedures for first reprimanding him and then removing him from his post. Chapter 6, consisting of nine sections, shows Henry after he resigns before being fired. He becomes even more alcoholic than in the earlier chapters and, when he wakes up, decides to write the present novel.



Quotes

"It began as a mistake.

"It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought. Soft! They only gave you a block or two and if you managed to finish, the regular carrier would give you another block to carry, or maybe you'd go back and the soup would give you another, but you just took your time and shoved those Xmas cards in the slots." Chapter 1, pg. 13.

"When The Stone was finished and had hung up, I told him:

" 'You shouldn't suck up to that woman. She's got a dirty mind. Half the mothers in America, with their precious big pussies and their precious little daughters, half the mothers in America have dirty minds. Tell her to shove it. G.G. can't get his pecker hard, you know that.'

"The Stone shook his head. 'No, the public's dynamite! They're dynamite!'

"That's all he could say. I had seen The Stone before - posturing and begging and explaining to every nut who phoned in about anything..." Chapter 1, pg. 44.

" 'It's over,' she said, 'I'm not sleeping with you another night.'

" 'All right. Keep your pussy. It's not that great.'

" 'Do you want to keep the house or do you want to move out?' she asked.

" 'You keep the house.'

" 'How about the dog?'

" 'You keep the dog,' I said.

" 'He's going to miss you.'

" 'I'm glad somebody is going to miss me.'

"I got up, walked to the car and I rented the first place I saw with a sign. I moved in that night.

"I had just lost three women and a dog." Chapter 2, pg. 55.

"I walked very quickly into the field, waiting for them to drive off. I didn't hear them leaving. I walked further in, then turned, cupped my hands and yelled back at them: 'WELL, WHERE'S THE BUFFALO?'

"My answer came from behind me. I could hear their feet on the ground. There were three of them, big ones, just like in the movies, and they were running, they were coming FAST! One had a bit of a lead on the others. There was little doubt who they were headed for.

" 'Oh shit!' I said.

"I turned and began running. That fence looked a long way away. It looked impossible." Chapter 2, pgs. 59-60.



"Then it was the red one with the green breast's turn.

"The red one was much more hesitant. He walked around in the bottom of the cage, nervously. It was a hell of a decision. Humans, birds, everything has to make these decisions. It was a hard game.

"So old red walked around thinking it over. Yellow sunlight. Buzzing flies. Man and dog looking on. All that sky, all that sky.

"It was too much. Old red leaped to the wire. Three seconds.

"ZOOP!

"The bird was gone.

"Picasso and I picked up the empty cage and walked back into the house." Chapter 2, pg. 82.

"We drank a little longer and then we went to bed, but it wasn't the same, it never is - there was a space between us, things had happened. I watched her walk to the bathroom, saw the wrinkles and folds under the cheeks of her ass. Poor thing. Poor poor thing. Joyce had been firm and hard - you grabbed a handful and it felt good. Betty didn't feel so good. It was sad, it was sad, it was sad. When Betty came back we didn't sing or laugh, or even argue. We sat drinking in the dark, smoking cigarettes, and when we went to sleep, I didn't put my feet on her body or she on mine like we used to. We slept without touching.

"We had both been robbed." Chapter 3, pg. 96.

"I read the scheme sheet onto the tape, got into bed with my beer and listened:

" 'NOW, HIGGINGS BREAKS 42 HUNTER, 67 MARKLEY, 71 HUDSON, 84 EVERGLADES! AND NOW, LISTEN, LISTEN, CHINASKI, PITTSFIELD BREAKS 21 ASHGROVE, 33 SIMMONS, 46 NEEDLES! LISTEN, CHINASKI, LISTEN, WESTHAVEN BREAKS 11 EVERGREEN, 24 MARKHAM, 55 WOODTREE! CHINASKI, ATTENTION, CHINASKI! PARCHBLEAK BREAKS...'

"It didn't work. My voice put me to sleep. I couldn't get past the third beer." Chapter 3, pgs. 104-105.

" 'Cunt! You set this up, didn't you? You'd let this monkey kill me for the lousy four or five hundred bucks in my wallet!'

" 'No, no!' she said. She was crying. They both were crying.

"I slapped her again.

" 'Is that how you make it, cunt? Killing men for a couple hundred?'

" 'No, no, I LOVE you, Hank, I LOVE you!'

"I grabbed that blue dress by the neck and ripped one side of it down to her waist. She didn't wear a brassiere. The bitch didn't need one.

"I walked out of there, got outside and drove toward the track. For two or three weeks I was looking over my shoulder. I was jumpy. Nothing happened. I never saw Mary Lou at the racetrack again. Or Hector." Chapter 4, pgs. 142-143.



"A couple of days later, the tests said there was nothing wrong with me. I didn't know if it was the five minutes difference or what. But the dizzy spells got worse. I began to clock out after four hours work without filling out the proper forms.

"I'd walk in around 11 p.m. and there would be Fay. Poor pregnant Fay.

" 'What happened?'

" 'I couldn't take any more,' I'd say, 'too sensitive...'" Chapter 4, pg. 150.

"This is advance notice that it is proposed to remove you from the Postal Service or to take such other disciplinary action as may be determined to be appropriate. The proposed action is considered to be for such cause as will promote the efficiency of the service and will be effective no sooner than 35 calendar days from the receipt of this letter." Chapter 5, pg. 171.

" 'Look, you took 28 minutes on a 23-minute tray. That's all there is to it.'

" 'You know better. Each tray is two feet long. Some trays have three, even four times as many letters than others. The clerks grab what they call the "fat" trays. I don't bother. Somebody has to stick with the tough mail. Yet all you guys know is that each tray is two feet long and that it must be stuck in 23 minutes. But we're not sticking trays in those cases, we're sticking letters.'

" 'No, no, this thing has been time-tested!'

" 'Maybe it has. I doubt it. But if you're going to time a man, don't judge him on one tray. Even Babe Ruth struck out now and then. Judge a man on 10 trays, or a night's work. You guys just use this thing to hang anybody who gets in your craw.'

" 'All right, you've had your say, Chinaski. Now, I'm telling YOU: you stuck a 28-minute tray. We go by that. NOW, if you are caught on another slow tray you will be due for ADVANCED COUNSELING!'" Chapter 6, pg. 180.

" 'What do you do?'

" 'Trap! Muskrats, nutria, mink, otter ... coon. All I need is a pirogue. I give 20 percent of my take for use of the land. I get paid a buck and a quarter for muskrat skins, three bucks for mink, four bucks for "bo mink," a buck and a half for nutria and twenty-five bucks for otter. I sell the muskrat carcass, which is about a foot long, for five cents to a cat food factory. I get twenty-five cents for the skinned body of the nutria. I raise pigs, chickens and ducks. I catch catfish. There's nothing to it. I—'

" 'Never mind, Mr. Chinaski, that will be sufficient.'

"He put some papers in his typewriter and typed away." Chapter 6, pg. 191.

Topics for Discussion

What role do Joyce's parakeets play in the novel?

Does Henry's violent treatment of Mary Lou and Hector fit his general demeanor, or reveal something he normally hides?

Had Betty lived, could she and Henry have found happiness the second time around? What factors are in their favor and what are against them?

Knowing the rules, why would Henry fail to receive permission to miss work when he is suffering dizzy spells? Why does he not defend himself against dismissal?

What role does "Francis," the embalmed heart play in the novel?

How do The Stone and Tom Moto unify the novel?

Are any of Henry's lovers good for him? Is he good to anyone?