

# **Tales of Ordinary Madness Study Guide**

**Tales of Ordinary Madness by Charles Bukowski**

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# A .45 to Pay the Rent

## A .45 to Pay the Rent Summary

Duke and his four-year-old daughter Lala shop for groceries. Lala is an outgoing child and asks her father many questions about the products in the store. Duke tries to answer as best he can, likening the sun to an avocado. Lala fills the cart and the two of them go home. On the way, they pretend that Lala is the mother and Duke is the baby, and Duke explains to her that he must work at nights so that nobody can see him.

At home, Duke's wife Mag scolds him for allowing Lala to pick the groceries, then asks him not to go out tonight. She begs him to get a normal, legal job, and Duke loses his temper. He yells that every job is like a crime and he is a prisoner to his own criminal record. He goes out to rob a liquor store but loses his nerve because the moon is full, and he fears that someone might be able to see him. At the same time, Mag reads Lala to sleep.

## A .45 to Pay the Rent Analysis

This story features three main characters that comprise a working-class family. Duke is a convicted criminal who resents how limited his options are. He adores his precocious daughter, Lala, who similarly worships him. Mag, Duke's wife, hates the fact that they must live on the money that Duke steals. Duke is a slave to his daughter's whims, and he loves to coddle and spoil her. In fact, he confides in her that he has spent his entire life terrified. As much as he caters to his daughter, however, he refuses to be dominated by his wife. When Mag challenges him to find a respectable job, he firmly establishes his dominance over her by first arguing her into the ground, then asking her to make him dinner before he leaves for the night's work.

This story evaluates the plight of the working man and the well-intentioned criminal. Duke is a loving father who also robs liquor stores in order to support his family. Because of his jail record, he cannot demand fair treatment from an employer. He has been pushed into a corner by his own decisions and now he has no alternative but to continue the work that could get him arrested again. However, Duke believes that a prison sentence does not make a criminal. Many of the respectable, socially elite men for whom Duke has worked are the most criminally-minded people he has ever known. They take advantage of men like Duke who have responsibilities to fulfill and force them to work long hours for small wages. The esteem with which society holds a man does not determine his moral fortitude.

Bukowski also introduces one of the major themes of this collection in this first story: the idea that man is just another animal. He may have delusions of superiority because he can read, write, and drive a car, but ultimately man is nothing more than a beast. Duke protects his young and guards his home, much as a wild animal would.



# Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1

## Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1 Summary

Charles Bukowski is sitting at home when the FBI knocks on his door and drags him away to prison. First, they question him about the whereabouts of his uncle, who is deceased. Then, the police incarcerate Bukowski for dodging the draft. In Moyamensing prison, he shares a cell with Courtney Taylor, another draft dodger and slippery con artist. Bukowski settles into a routine in prison, until he is reassigned to share a cell with an old man who steals his sheets and speaks no English. Finally, Bukowski can leave the prison and go to an induction center, where he passes the physical examination for combat. Then, he visits a psychiatrist who asks him if he believes in war. Bukowski says no, and the psychiatrist deems him unfit for combat for excessive sensitivity, and the poet is free to go home.

## Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1 Analysis

This is the first story in the collection that stars a main character with the same name as the author. Charles Bukowski seems to be oblivious to consequences and largely apathetic and aimless. While he is in jail he does not fret over commitments in the outside world, but instead simply shrugs and accepts the fact that he will be sleeping here instead of there for a few weeks. The other inmates seem similarly undisturbed by their sentences. The men start up bets and games, and begin to adapt to the social boundaries that exist only within a prison.

For example, in the outside world a convicted man lies near the bottom of the social ladder. However, within a prison all men are criminals, and therefore they must create a new moral code for establishing who must take the least powerful position. The indecent exposure offenders appear to bear the brunt of that stigma. Bukowski and the other inmates disdain these sexual offenders, judging them harshly but nevertheless offering a handout when they have one to give. Even though in their social system the men who expose themselves to children are the outcasts, the more elevated criminals still have compassion for them.

While he seems to allow most of the unpleasantness of prison to roll off of his back, Bukowski does admit to having extremely sensitive skin. When bed bugs bite him, and later when his new cellmate steals his sheets and he must sleep wrapped in a wool blanket, Bukowski complains of the physical discomfort. This sensitivity, ironically, becomes the psychiatrist's reason for excusing him from military duty. When Bukowski reads the psychiatrist's diagnosis, he finds it absurd. However, Bukowski is a man who gives a bit of money to even the lowest of the low within the prison walls. He is also a man who cannot bear the sensation of wool on his skin. His sensitivity, compassion, and tenderness do dictate his behavior, although he does not acknowledge them as ruling forces in his life.



# Scenes from the Big Time

## Scenes from the Big Time Summary

The narrator cleans pigeon droppings all day until his co-worker decides to scare the pigeons away by cutting off the legs of a lame bird. The other prisoners cannot bear to watch the man cut the legs from a bird who cannot fly, but the narrator is tired of cleaning the droppings and helps the man with his operation.

Blaine is the narrator's cellmate, until one of the cruel guards transfers Blaine into an all-black cell. The black prisoners plan to rape Blaine until they see him naked. His physical unattractiveness saves his life.

Another prisoner, Sears, is fearless and belligerent. He attacks the biggest black prisoner he can find on his first day in prison. He also challenges white prisoners, like Ned Lincoln, a simple-minded young man whom Sears threatens when Lincoln is still new to the prison. Lincoln buys a shiv to protect himself, but he refuses to leave his cell, afraid. Sears stabs him the next day in the shower.

Joe Statz is another inmate who serves his time in the hole, an isolated cell totally immersed in darkness. Even under that stress, he never crumbles. The warden antagonizes him, and Statz responds by throwing his excrement on the warden. His courage heartens the rest of the inmates.

The narrator plans to return to the prison as a free man once he has been released, so that he can relish his liberty. Once he leaves, however, he never returns.

## Scenes from the Big Time Analysis

This episodic short story presents six short brief vignettes describing life inside a prison, and, more specifically, the men who must live inside that prison. The narrator, who remains anonymous, observes five of his peers and the fates that they meet. These men share the same environment, both physically and spiritually. The moral code within a prison is mutated, so that right and wrong take on a much less civilized meaning. Strength trumps goodness. Ugliness and brutality are superior to beauty. This moral code more resembles the world of beasts than of men.

The first man, who cuts the legs from the pigeon, shocks and horrifies even hardened criminals with his blatant cruelty to the bird. The narrator, however, agrees with the man that the birds need to be frightened away so that they do not have to continue cleaning up the droppings. This episode shows how men still cling to innate values of right and wrong even when living in an alternate world in which such values change meaning. Men who would kill another man find the bird's plight deeply disturbing, and a man who only steals radios enjoys torturing the animal.



Blaine never inflicts such pain on another living creature, but he does manipulate other inmates in order to survive. By revealing his unattractiveness, he protects himself. He feels no shame at his nakedness, or at the other prisoners' disgust. Instead, he is grateful that he can live to see another day.

Sears, on the other hand, is as primitive a beast as can be. He fights to stay dominant over the rest of the men, which is why he targets the biggest man he can find on his first day inside. By establishing himself as fearless and unpredictable, he survives. However, he also maintains the ferocity of the rest of his peers by eliminating the weak specimens, like Ned Lincoln. Lincoln feels fear and tries to avoid the fight, and that fear ultimately leads to his death.

Statz's response to such brutality is far more human. He knows that he cannot physically fight his way out of the hole, and so he fights back in the only way he can: by maintaining his sanity and acting as a beacon of strength and unwavering inspiration to the rest of the inmates.



# Nut Ward East of Hollywood

## Nut Ward East of Hollywood Summary

The narrator wakes up in the middle of the afternoon and greets his friend Mad Jimmy, a junk peddler proudly sporting a brand-new Panama hat. The narrator and Mad Jimmy discuss sex, painting, and literature, and throughout their conversation the narrator makes many medical observations about Mad Jimmy's physical health. Meanwhile, the two men drink heavily and the narrator must smash the bottles so that they fit in his garbage can. Later, he steps on the glass and recalls how brave he feels when he picks glass out of his feet and sees the blood.

Mad Jimmy calls his woman, Mary, and discovers that she is taking him to court on charges of assault and battery. He does not remember breaking her rib. The two men discuss the importance of bowel movements and Mad Jimmy continues to try to call Mary until the narrator becomes annoyed with Mad Jimmy and calls his friend Izzy Steiner to pick him up. Steiner is a glutton who, upon arriving at the narrator's house, tears Mad Jimmy's new hat and steals his bottle of wine. Once Mad Jimmy leaves, the narrator tells Steiner about how he attempts to perform oral sex on himself, but always falls about an eighth of an inch short. They go to a bar together and enjoy their evening, but once the narrator returns home he tries once again to pleasure himself, then falls asleep reading "War and Peace".

## Nut Ward East of Hollywood Analysis

The tone of this story is conversational and natural. The subject changes often and with no transitions. The unnamed narrator lives in a beaten-up apartment in Los Angeles and spends his days drinking and sleeping. This character remains consistent with the vast majority of the Bukowski and Chinasky characters in the collection, with one notable exception: this narrator has a significant store of medical knowledge. When Mad Jimmy arrives at his home, instead of describing the man based on physical appearance, the narrator interprets his appearance so that he concludes that Mad Jimmy suffers from various physical ailments. This habit reinforces the prevailing idea of madness as an illness, both physical and psychological. The two men move from discussing intellectual concepts to chatting about basic, instinctive activities like sex and bowel movements. Bukowski illuminates yet another facet of man's similarity to beast, while at the same time maintaining a laughably well-informed narrative voice that seems to have memorized a medical dictionary.

Pain and violence both play a major role in this story. The narrator feels pride when he sees his own wounds, and in fact the idea of watching blood leak from his foot is the only thing that seems to please him. Mad Jimmy, on the other hand, seems not to be aware of the violence in the world around him, even when that violence has been perpetrated by himself. He claims that he cannot remember the fight with Mary in which





he breaks her rib. However, once he gets Mary on the phone he makes violent threats. These men understand the language of violence and pain as animals do, without feeling anxiety, fear, or guilt. The narrator, however, also understands the language of "War and Peace", although the novel cannot make him any less of a beast or any more of what society defines as civilized.



# Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?

## Would You Suggest Writing as a Career? Summary

Acclaimed poet Henry Chinasky waits in an airport bar for his flight to Seattle, where he will give a reading at a college. He notes the physical attributes of all the women he sees and continues to drink as he fantasizes about having sex with one of the flight attendants while the airplane crashes.

Once he arrives in Seattle, a student named Belford greets him and drives him through the countryside to a bar where Chinasky drinks until he must go to the college for his reading. At the college, he takes a pint of scotch from his bag and reads his poems with no preamble or fanfare. The students applaud enthusiastically, to his surprise. After the reading, Chinasky and Belford attend a party at the home of a literature professor whom Chinasky dubs Hemingway. Chinasky avoids Hemingway because he does not want to discuss literature, and instead comes on to a beautiful woman. The next morning Belford wakes him up to rush him to his next reading, and Chinasky learns that the woman from the previous night is Hemingway's wife.

At the next reading, Chinasky continues to drink scotch, then departs for the airport where he misses his flight because he is in the bar. Henry Chinasky imagines his legacy as the man who dies in an airport bar while attempting to return to Los Angeles.

## Would You Suggest Writing as a Career? Analysis

This story introduces the pseudonym of Henry Chinasky, a thinly-veiled version of Bukowski himself. Chinasky is a heavy drinker and a poet who fantasizes about raping a woman right before he dies in a massive airplane crash. This breed of madness is an unspoken one, the madness that possesses a man's deepest, most uncontrollable desires. He never touches the woman that he dreams of raping, and in that control lies his sanity. In truth, Chinasky's only priorities seem to be sex and death. He wants physical pleasure and then another dose of poison. He does not care if his reading goes over well, although it pleases him to hear excited applause for his writing. He does not want to be happy on the grand scale.

A major theme of this story is the reality of life in comparison to the fantasy of life. Chinasky, while observing the beautiful natural environment of Washington, yearns for his dirty apartment in Los Angeles. The idyll of nature is a fantasy for many, but Chinasky prefers the reality of his routine at home, as poor, dirty, and liquor-sodden as it is. Similarly, Chinasky abhors discussions about literature. Literature, to him, is nothing but another fantasy about the way life should be, and the reality of life, no matter how far from ideal it may be, is always superior to the imagined life. Ironically, Chinasky is a well-read man. Bukowski himself cites Hemingway as a major influence, and the character appears multiple times after this first allusion.



# The Great Zen Wedding

## The Great Zen Wedding Summary

Bukowski arrives at the wedding of his friends Hollis and Roy, wearing a necktie and bearing a wrapped wedding present. As the other guests arrive, Bukowski sees that he is the only man in a tie, and that nobody else has brought a gift for the couple. He begins to drink heavily with his friend Harvey, who tries to discuss writing with Bukowski. The other guests are mostly hippies, intellectuals, and vagrants.

The Zen Master arrives and performs the ceremony. Bukowski is amazed by how thin the Zen Master's ears are, and decides that he must have them. After the service, Bukowski is the only guest to congratulate the couple, and the only guest to thank the Zen Master. He follows the holy man outside and demands his ears or his outfit. The Zen Master defends himself against Bukowski and leaves.

Belligerent and drunk, the poet returns to the house and comes on to the bride's mother by pulling up her skirt. He then watches the couple open his gift: a miniature carved coffin made by a Spanish artisan. The gift is not a success, and Bukowski stumbles home, shouting threats at passing women until the police arrest him and take him to jail.

## The Great Zen Wedding Analysis

Social conventions dictate that a man wear a necktie to a special occasion, and that a guest bring a gift to a couple celebrating their wedding. Bukowski's obedience to these very customs makes him an outcast at the wedding of Roy and Hollis. He is the only guest in attendance to make an effort towards honoring the traditions of a marriage ceremony, although he continues to do so in his own unorthodox way. For example, his wedding gift is a carved coffin. Bukowski means it to be a genuine gesture, a precious and beautiful object d'art. The couple interprets it as some kind of cruel joke about marriage as death, and Bukowski wonders if he should have just bought them a pressure cooker. That gift, however, would have exiled him even more from the collection of fringe individuals at the wedding.

The distinction between life and literature, as well as Bukowski's violent and passionate opinion about women, both appear in the Zen Wedding story. Bukowski refuses to talk about literature with his friend Harvey because he would rather experience the wedding than discuss books. In refusing to voice an opinion on literature, Bukowski unintentionally disappoints and alienates his fans. Also, when Bukowski makes his way home at the end of the night, he screams sexual threats at two women who make fun of his slovenly appearance. Bukowski wields his sexuality like a leash to women. He can own them with physical intercourse.



# Reunion

## Reunion Summary

Harry returns to his home after a term in rehabilitation. His girlfriend Madge greets him exuberantly and he asks about how things are at home. They have fifteen dollars between them, and the car has been crashed while Harry was gone. Harry asks Madge for the money so that he can go get the car from the corner garage, and when she tries to hide some money from him he slaps her.

Harry strikes a deal with the mechanic to owe him seventy dollars for the repairs to the car. He drives to the liquor store where he learns that Madge has charged up his tab while he has been gone. He talks the store owner into giving him some beer and cigars. When he returns home, Madge reminds him that he could die if he drinks beer, but then opens a can for him. He insinuates that Madge slept with the mechanic, and she gets angry. In the middle of their fight, Harry admires her figure and takes her into the bedroom. As they make love, he continues to speculate about her fidelity, and calculates how much money he owes to the hospital, the mechanic, and the liquor store.

## Reunion Analysis

Harry and Madge have a dysfunctional relationship. He physically and verbally abuses her, and she enables his alcoholism. His abuse, however, is not born out of rage but rather out of the desire to remind Madge that he is the dominant party in the relationship. Harry operates on a largely animalistic basis. He is driven by anger, sex, fear, and jealousy. These instinctive, basic motivators dictate his behavior, as when he throws Madge down onto the bed when she fights back against his accusations of infidelity. He dominates her physically in order to suffocate her rebellion.

Surprisingly and conversely, however, Harry also incorporates two very human habits into his behavior. He worries about money, which is something that no animal has ever had to do. Debts follow him, and while he does not seem to care about accumulating them, they do distract him even when he makes love. Secondly, he is actively destroying himself. In the animal world, survival is the ultimate goal, and Harry returns from rehabilitation and immediately begins poisoning himself yet again.

# Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home

## Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home Summary

Jack Hendley arrives at the horse track, irritated that a house guest has prevented him from preparing the day's bets in advance. He watches the other gamblers mill around, and as he hastily prepares his card, he notices that one old man keeps following him. Hendley manages to shake him off, but loses every bet of the day. At the end of the night, he returns home to prepare the next day's card.

## Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home Analysis

Jack Hendley repeatedly experiences the roller-coaster ride of gambling addiction on this night at the track. Every race begins with the elation of hope when his horse looks good and the others look tired, yet every race ends with the crushing low of defeat when, in the last length, his horse gives up, or another finds his spirit. Hendley possesses the specific madness that requires a man to return, over and over again, to a place that does nothing but empty his wallet. In this world, there is no attraction to women, nor is there power in philosophy, nor is there contentment of any kind.



# Goodbye Watson

## Goodbye Watson Summary

The narrator describes what happens when a day of gambling goes poorly, and he concludes that he must be mad to return to the horse track and make bad bets every day. Nevertheless, the track teaches him about himself in the same way the bullfights teach Ernest Hemingway: they reveal his weaknesses and the constant rate at which he changes.

Before he began attending horse races, the narrator frequents a boxing club, where he always picks the quietest fighter to win. The scene inside is always rowdy, with the gamblers standing ringside screaming for their fighters to win. The narrator has some success with a boxer named Watson Jones, until one night when Enrique Balanos knocks Jones out. That night, heartbroken, the narrator goes home with a beautiful woman. They sleep under an open window and wake up soaking wet and blue from the cold rain. The narrator laughs at how ridiculous he looks, and then must go to work.

## Goodbye Watson Analysis

"Goodbye, Watson" explores further a major theme of this collection, the idea that life must feed literature, not the other way around. The narrator says that if he becomes a teacher of creative writing he will require his students to go to the track and bet every week. The richness of the experience will improve their writing much more than reading other people's works will. Hemingway is an example of this, as in the fact that Hemingway attended bullfights in the same way that he goes to the track. These vital, intense experiences remind writers of their own strengths and weaknesses, and how deeply changing human beings are.

Overall, the story establishes the vices of a character similar to Bukowski and shows how those vices both nourish and poison the man. He gambles, drinks, and sleeps in the cold rain with a stranger; none of these activities will extend his life, but they will inject uniqueness and vigor into the years that remain. The "normal" duties that he must perform, like going to work, in fact drain that vigor from him. Even though working is a healthy activity, productive and financially positive, it counteracts the positive effects of his seedy behavior.



# Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit

## Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit Summary

Bukowski goes to the grocery store with an intense hangover to buy something to eat before he must go to work at the post office. A man at the store recognizes him and praises his poetry. He especially admires a poem that he interprets to be about loneliness, which Bukowski wrote to describe how difficult it is to ever get away from people. The man cannot understand why such a great poet would have to go to work at a post office, and he demands that the checkout clerk not charge Bukowski for his groceries. Bukowski finally brushes him off after promising that he will come and visit the man again. He imagines the man returning home and telling his wife about poor lonely Bukowski.

## Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit Analysis

This story further establishes how Bukowski the poet alienates his fans because he hates to discuss poetry. Bukowski does not write in order to be praised by his fans, in fact, he rather detests his fans. This man in particular approaches a slovenly, hungover Bukowski and shouts at him (signified by his dialogue typed in all capital letters) about how wonderful he is. He misinterprets a poem of Bukowski's and is baffled that the poet, a man who inspires him, must work at a dead-end job at the post office. Bukowski knows that inspiration does not put money in a pocket, but this man is so idealistic and obsessed with the power of literature that he fails to register reality, which is that the rent, grocery bills, and doctor bills take money, not talent.

For Bukowski, the work of art is the woman outside of the grocery store who climbs out of a car. Her skirt pulls up, revealing a stocking-clad thigh, and as she rises it swings back into place. She is real, vital, sexy, and has never heard of Bukowski.

# **My Stay in the Poet's Cottage**

## **My Stay in the Poet's Cottage Summary**

Bukowski stays at the Poet's Cottage one summer at the University of Arizona. It is unbearably hot and Bukowski does not welcome conversation about poetry or writing, so he spends most of his time drinking beer and talking to local waitresses about going back to Los Angeles. On the day that he is due to depart Tucson, the editor at the school meets him at the train station and is shocked that Bukowski walked all the way there from the cottage in the stifling heat. Bukowski replies that he would rather walk than have waited for the bus in a drug store that makes him feel depressed. He boards the train and considers hitting on an insane woman, but does not. He is happy to return home to Los Angeles.

## **My Stay in the Poet's Cottage Analysis**

Bukowski explores the pointlessness of his time in the Poet's Cottage in this story. He spends a full summer there on a college campus doing nothing more than he would have at home in Los Angeles. He fantasizes about raping a woman, but never gets the opportunity; he drinks beer in massive volume and avoids discussing literature at all costs. He forms superficial and temporary relationships with the people around him, and ultimately returns home feeling only fatalistic resignation.





# The Stupid Christs

## The Stupid Christs Summary

Dan Skorski quits his job at a rubber processing plant and returns home. Waiting for him there is a letter from D.R. Signo, the editor-in-chief of WorldWay books. Signo praises Skorski's writing and offers him a job in New York. Skorski calls to make sure that Signo's offer is genuine, and though Signo's voice sounds metallic, Skorski boards a flight to New York. On the flight he gets drunk, vomits on himself, loses his socks and shoes, and tells the entire cabin that he is a retired boxer. The co-pilot restrains him for the rest of the flight. When he lands in New York he meets Mr. Signo at Griffio's for lunch. Signo shows Skorski his new desk in the office, but Skorski does not know what to do there so he spends the day going back and forth from the bar at Griffio's. At the end of the day, Mr. Signo tells him that they will not require his services, writes him a check to cover expenses, and leaves.

Skorski decides not to return to Los Angeles right away. Instead, he goes to Tijuana and spends the day in a bar, enjoying Mexico. The next day, however, he has nothing to do, and returns to the same bar where he gets drunk, dances, and wakes up the next morning in a park with his glasses shattered and his wallet emptied. The night before, he had tried to pull down a statue of Jesus in the park. He walks south, deeper into Mexico.

## The Stupid Christs Analysis

"The Stupid Christs" is very nearly a myth or allegory in the way that it follows a character through a bizarre alternate reality. Although no element of this story is totally otherworldly, the way that Skorski notices certain elements of the environments around him makes the scene appear unfamiliar. For example, his perception of Signo's voice as metallic makes the character of Signo into a robot. Similarly, his foreignness in the crisp office of WorldWay New York makes the office itself alien and bizarre.

This story differs from the casual, autobiographical style of Bukowski's other stories in this collection in its tone and structure. This story contains a beginning, middle, and the beginning of the end, whereas few other stories up to this point have dealt in plot beyond one minor event. The beginning, in which Skorski works in a rubber plant, showcases the brutality of the laborer's life, the inhumanity of mankind's industry. When Skorski goes to New York, he discovers both the futility and the distinct poison of the humanities. He has nothing to do precisely because there is nothing for him to do at WorldWay, but Signo fires him anyway. Continuing on in his search of a home that will not kill some part of him, he goes to Mexico. For the first day there he finds peace. He enjoys the novelty of being outside the United States, free from the places that he knows to be deleterious. Mexico, however, turns out to poison him physically, as opposed to ideologically.



# Too Sensitive

## Too Sensitive Summary

According to the narrator, a man whose kitchen is clean is dull and conditioned, but a woman whose kitchen is clean loves her man enough to clean for him. The narrator recalls returning home one night from a brutal day of work. His entire body is stiff and weary. At home, his girlfriend sits in bed eating chocolates and reading about literature, while he goes to the kitchen for a glass of water and discovers trash piled up in the room, and the sink full of dirty gray water.

He goes upstairs to bed and his girlfriend tells him about a man named Benny Adimson from her poetry workshop. Adimson has been laid off, and he cannot write when he is not working. The narrator offers to help him get a job at the post office, but the girlfriend scoffs and says that Adimson is too sensitive to work there.

## Too Sensitive Analysis

This story is a snapshot of one moment in a relationship between two people from the man's point of view. He is hardworking and exhausted, she is too engaged in the intellectual world to fully comprehend reality's demands, like a clean kitchen or the necessity of a pay check. She insults him when she says that her friend is too sensitive to work with him, but the narrator prefers to interpret her comment as an insult to Adimson. Adimson does not submit his writing for publication, and cannot write unless the rest of his life is just so. A man that sensitive cannot be a writer, and the narrator takes pride in his own lack of sensitivity.

Ironically, the narrator suffers from some sensitivity of his own. His body aches and stiffens after a day of work, and it takes him a long time to relax his body, even with a hot bath and a comfortable bed. He is also deeply sensitive to the cleanliness of the kitchen and gags when he sees he filthy water in the sink. His girlfriend does not see this sensitivity, however.



# Rape! Rape!

## Rape! Rape! Summary

Bukowski sees a woman on the street and follows her. She is beautiful, curvaceous and well-dressed, and he is intensely attracted to her. He follows her to her apartment building, the Hudson Arms, and begins to knock on doors, trying to find her. He first walks into the apartment of a wrinkled, fat woman who kisses him when he gives her son a dollar. He escapes and continues to knock on doors until the woman answers.

Bukowski pushes the door open and grabs the woman, slapping her repeatedly, then raping her standing in the middle of her living room floor.

Vera, the woman, introduces herself and confesses that she enjoys being raped. She asks him to beat her more next time, and to use his belt. She performs oral sex on him, then he takes a bath and asks her to make him some dinner. But when he emerges from the bathroom, two cops are waiting for him. Vera accuses him of rape and the police officers drag Bukowski to jail. He is confused and does not know if he has actually raped her or not. Vera drops the charges, and as soon as Bukowski gets out of jail he returns to her apartment building and knocks on the door of the fat woman with a son. He kisses her, and they begin to make love while her son watches.

## Rape! Rape! Analysis

This story is a rape fantasy told from the point of view of a man. Bukowski rolls over and reveals the extent of his beastliness, his id, his underbelly. This primal desire is what Bukowski calls madness, the total disregard for morality in favor of satisfying an instinctive urge to take what he wants. In this situation, he takes what he wants only to discover that it had been given willingly. Vera's desire excites him further. She reciprocates his primal urge. However, she then steps out of the world of beast and back into the world of man when she deceives Bukowski, contradicts herself, and lies. These are distinctly human traits, and they baffle Bukowski. His confusion spreads to cover all the events of the afternoon. The reality of his afternoon, at first a bout with madness, becomes a real fantasy come true, then descends back into madness with his arrest.

His second visit to the Hudson Arms proves far more rooted in reality. A fat, ugly woman gives herself to him willingly. He is still a beast who takes what he wants, but this time he has taken something that he can recognize and understand.

# An Evil Town

## An Evil Town Summary

Frank Evans leaves his hotel room and stops at the clerk's desk on his way out. The desk clerk says that Mr. Evans is losing his mind, and that he has found a piece of it. He hands Evans a piece of cheese wrapped in cellophane, which Evans puts in his pocket, then goes to the movies. At the movie theater the rest of the audience members perform sex acts on each other or themselves. Evans goes to the filthy bathroom to urinate, and a man watches him through a hole in the door until Evans pees in his eye.

He decides to return to his hotel, and the desk clerk asks him not to mention their earlier conversation because he could lose his job. Evans goes to his room, checks his switchblade, and begins to write a letter to his mother. He describes how the devil owns this town, the way that the people are evil sinners. The desk clerk knocks on Evans' door and confesses that he is in love with him. When he kisses him, Evans stabs him and cuts off his penis. He then finishes his letter to his mother and begins to pack.

## An Evil Town Analysis

This story is another near-myth, or allegory. The evil town in which Frank Evans lives is not totally alien, but the way that Evans perceives it transforms it into an alternate reality that resembles the familiar but is slightly askew. For example, the movie that Evans goes to see is a silent black and white film, yet the entire theater is in various states of sexual arousal through the showing. This dichotomy of stimuli makes for an otherworldly environment.

Evans' faith in God turns out to create one half of another dichotomy in this story. He is a righteous man who is disgusted by the sex and filth of the town, yet without blinking an eye he pees on a man and stabs and mutilates another. This alternate morality that Bukowski ascribes to Christians further enhances the foreignness of the story. Similarly, Bukowski argues, through Frank Evans, that Christianity does not necessarily equate goodness or morality. In fact, Evans is a hypocrite and sociopath.



# Love it or Leave it

## Love it or Leave it Summary

Bukowski signs up to join a railroad crew in Sacramento. The recruiter gives him a train ticket and the next day Bukowski arrives along with about thirty other men for the train to California. The other men are ragged and boisterous, and Bukowski sits apart from them. They grow suspicious of him and resent the fact that he does not join them. They play pranks on him and threaten him.

Midway through Texas, the foreman distributes cans of food for which the men will have to work later, but no can openers. The cans remain unopened, and the foreman picks them up for the next crew. Throughout the rest of the journey to California, a few men jump from the train every time it stops. In Los Angeles, Bukowski uses his food coupons to buy beer, then finds a Cadillac to sleep in. The next morning, the owner of the car and his young son discover a man sleeping in their car, and the boy beats Bukowski with a bat. Bukowski finally escapes, then walks out into Los Angeles.

## Love it or Leave it Analysis

The world of man is the most inhumane, and the sphere of industry is the most brutal therein. Bukowski signs on for hard manual labor, and in order to do so he must also take responsibility for the cost of his travel, food, and lodging to the site of the labor. That alone is not unheard of, but the fact that the foreman ensures that no man will be able to eat the food that he has bought is cruel. Bukowski is in the thick of the common man's struggle, and a young boy turns out to be the one who punishes him for that effort. Even a boy of fifteen has already been inducted into the ranks of brutal civilization. Los Angeles, a powerful and affluent city, contains only people who beat an old man and charge him for food he cannot eat.

# A Dollar and 20 Cents

## A Dollar and 20 Cents Summary

Mr. Sneed sits on a bench by the ocean enjoying the weather when four young friends come up behind him and start to tease the old man. Mr. Sneed cannot understand why the kids would be cruel, and he tries to explain to them that there is no shame in aging, but Rod, one of the boys, dismisses him. He returns home, where his landlady, Mrs. Conners, insists on bringing him some homemade soup. The soup is unappetizing, and he throws it out the window. He lies down on his bed, listens to the ocean, and dies.

## A Dollar and 20 Cents Analysis

Bukowski tends to focus on the strength and brutality of society, but Mr. Sneed is the personification of the other side of humanity. He is old, weary, and resigned. In fact, he is too old and weak to exist in this world. He takes no shame in his state, even when he faces the diametric opposite of himself in the form of four young lovers. They are strong, lithe, and fertile, while he is old, dirty, and useless. Their youth reminds him of his age, and when he returns home he is resigned to his fate. Death, for him, is a friend rather than an enemy. It will free him from having to live in a world that does not want him.



# No Stockings

## No Stockings Summary

Barney and Bukowski both have sex with a woman and then Bukowski falls asleep. A few hours later, Dan visits Bukowski and asks him for a few poems for a reading, but ends up criticizing all of Bukowski's writing. Together, the two men visit Vera, a friend of Dan's. They drink, and Bukowski begins to come on to Vera. He kisses her and pulls up her skirt, but then stops to drink more scotch. She asks him if she is too fat, and he says that she is so beautiful that he could rape her for hours. She asks him to leave, and even gets a friend to ask him again, but he grows more and more agitated. Two police officers arrive and make Bukowski put his pants and shoes on. They lock him up in a cell where, he realizes, he is the only man who is not wearing socks. Even in jail he is the least civilized man in the room. Finally, a fan named Ann bails him out of prison, and he immediately returns to Vera's apartment. He still desires her, but she refuses to speak with him. He calls her fat, then collects his wallet and socks and drives home.

## No Stockings Analysis

Bukowski further develops the motif of man as animal in this story. Bukowski engages in three-person intercourse and then drinks himself to sleep as would an animal who had sated itself. Then, when faced again with a woman who ignites his passion, he attempts to take her physically. However, he will only do it on his own terms, when he has drunk to his satisfaction. This self-destructive urge is distinctly human, but in combination with his animal obedience to sexual urges, he strikes Vera as a sexual predator.

Interestingly, for all his insistence that he is nothing more than an animal, Bukowski still feels shame when he realizes that he is not appropriate in some specific way. Here, although his crime—drinking heavily and being rude to a woman—is certainly not the most heinous, he feels like the lowest man in the room because he is the only one who is not wearing stockings. These social conventions do not play a large role in Bukowski's life; in fact, he seems to spend much of his time attempting to avoid following such rules. However, he is still a member of society, albeit an unwilling one.

# A Quiet Conversation Piece

## A Quiet Conversation Piece Summary

Bukowski sits at home with a friend named Maxie and the two drink, smoke, and discuss world politics and the state of society. Maxie, who is studying to be a rabbi, believes that the United States can gain focus and purity from a revolution, but Bukowski believes that a revolution will only serve to purge society of both good and bad elements. Maxie believes that revolutions at least make progress even if they do not fully solve the problems that they are intended to solve, but Bukowski argues that the human cost is too great for such little progress. Maxie leaves, and Bukowski reflects on how much he has enjoyed the evening of conversation with a smart man.

## A Quiet Conversation Piece Analysis

This story is full of contradictions. Words are powerful tools to enact change, yet words are also powerless in making the changes that are necessary to improve society. Human beings are animals who would follow any strong leader, but human beings are also intellectuals who can decide for themselves whether or not to believe in an ideological system. Ultimately, nothing changes by this conversation. No revolution begins and no man dies, nor does any man grow any measurable amount by it. However, both Bukowski and Maxie leave this encounter with a richer perspective on the state of the union, and for now that is enough for both.





# Beer and Poets and Talk

## Beer and Poets and Talk Summary

Bukowski and many of his literary friends are discussing the nature of literature today and how their other literary friends are doing. Bukowski believes that many of the greatest poets of the time have died recently, and that no one so far has stepped forward to replace them. Bukowski goes to the bathroom and hears a couple fighting through the wall, climaxing in the sound of the man slapping the woman. Bukowski returns to his friends.

## Beer and Poets and Talk Analysis

This story marks a rare occasion in which Bukowski discusses literature voluntarily and without a paycheck. He enjoys gossiping about literary figures, forecasting trends in the coming years, and criticizing some well-regarded poets that he believes are hacks. He nearly forgets the reason that he usually refuses to talk about literature, because life is much more interesting than books, until he goes to the bathroom. Just on the other side of the wall is life, vital, brutal, and ugly. In his apartment is nothing more than conversation on an alternate reality, that which is made up solely of ideas and words. Next door, life is feelings, physical contact, and domination. Ultimately, Bukowski resigns himself to the present state of affairs and returns to his friends, contemplating the nature of bad writing.



# I Shot a Man in Reno

## I Shot a Man in Reno Summary

Bukowski is staying with a friend, listening to some music. When Johnny Cash's recording of "Folsom Prison" comes on, Bukowski thinks that Cash has no business singing about prison to men who are in prison, and he decides to leave. He visits his friend Jim, who has been very professionally successful. Jim hires Bukowski for a three-month job, and then Bukowski goes to a bar where he runs into Luke, another man that he has not seen in years. Luke describes some of the horrible jobs that he has worked since he quit working at the post office. Bukowski approaches a woman who has been smiling at him, and she pulls out a knife. He takes the knife away and he and Luke leave the bar. She follows and has sex with Luke in the back of Bukowski's car. Bukowski has sex with her next, and drops her and Luke off at home. He drives home and thinks about his life.

## I Shot a Man in Reno Analysis

Bukowski measures himself against both Jim and Luke and comes up with very different results. Next to Jim, Bukowski feels shamefully old, ugly, and sloppy. Jim knows that Bukowski is brilliant and does not care about how old or messy the man is, but Bukowski knows how sorely he sticks out in Jim's slick office. When Bukowski next visits his friend Luke, he concludes that not only is he old and unkempt, but also unmotivated. Luke has left many intolerable jobs, but Bukowski still works at a job that he despises. Worst of all, he takes second place in having sex with the woman at the bar. Ultimately, Bukowski concludes that the world is merciless, that he is not strong enough to exist inside it, and that the only thing he can do is drink and remain.

# A Rain of Women

## A Rain of Women Summary

Bukowski drives his car to the mechanic to get his tires rotated, but the mechanic is uncooperative and lazy. Just then, a beautiful, scantily-clad woman drives in with a big, expensive car, and is immediately served. Bukowski is attracted to her and also hates her for her stupidity. He must wait longer for his car to be maintained, so he runs some errands, and at one point is almost hit by a car driven by another scantily-clad woman. Then another woman, this one less attractive than the other two, runs by complaining that someone has blocked her car in. A fourth woman, beautiful and wearing a very short mini-skirt, flirts with Bukowski, but he is afraid of talking to her and she passes him by. He feels shame, frustration, and anger with himself. Instead of going to the horse track as he had planned, he goes to a bar.

## A Rain of Women Analysis

Bukowski's relationships with women in this story are all negative and malevolent. The first woman reminds him of how he is regarded by men, and how much less he matters to others than a beautiful woman does, even a stupid one. The second woman nearly hits him with her car. The third woman needs help, but Bukowski scoffs at her troubles and brushes her off. The fourth woman likes Bukowski, watches him, flirts with him, and clearly desires him. Bukowski, however, cannot reciprocate her positive attention. The problem with this woman is not the helplessness or stupidity of a woman but of himself. Suddenly he is certain of his own worthlessness, and loses the desire to go to the horse track.



# Night Streets of Madness

## Night Streets of Madness Summary

Bukowski and a young poet sit on his porch after a party has ended. Bukowski likes the boy, but does not like the other guests at his party who talk about nothing but literature. Someone starts to blow a car horn down the street and the boy runs off to tell him or her to stop. Bukowski does not want to be put in jail again for being drunk in public, so he stays on his porch and thinks about having a conversation with Ernest Hemingway about why he killed himself. Finally, Bukowski goes to see what is going on with the boy and the car horn.

A woman is blowing the horn outside her own house because someone has blocked her driveway. The boy offers to push the car out of the way, but then another boy in a white t-shirt comes out and starts pushing the young poet around. The poet retaliates, and then a beautiful young woman runs out to move the car. Finally, the older woman stops blowing her car horn, and Bukowski and the young poet start to go home when an old man comes out to talk to the boy in the white t-shirt. The boy responds by beating the old man in the middle of the street. The young poet wants to stop it, but Bukowski explains that it is just for a young man to beat an old man. They go home and fall asleep. The next morning, Bukowski sits at home in the rain and thinks about the night before.

## Night Streets of Madness Analysis

This story deals largely with the everyday insanity of mankind, as expressed through violence, temper tantrums, and sexual desires. When Bukowski discovers the scene down the street from his house he first sees a woman simply leaning on her car horn, instead of parking her car on the street. She has the right to park in her own driveway, but she does not calmly assert that right. No, she disturbs the entire neighborhood with her minor inconvenience. Next, a boy in a white t-shirt with no particular business on the street starts a fight with the young poet. He is angry and wants a fight, but for no given reason. He finally gets his fight, but not with a boy his own age. He beats an old man cruelly and publicly.

Bukowski sees that act as a signifier of the state of society. It is just in his society for the strong to punish the weak for their very weakness, and for the young and powerful to abuse those who are not. So it is in the animal world, and so it is in this story.

# Purple as an Iris

## Purple as an Iris Summary

Inside an insane asylum Bukowski describes how, when the men's and women's wards mix together, the patients immediately pair off and have sex. They get away with this breach in protocol because the staff is also busy having sex with each other. Once, Bukowski has sex with a girl named Mary in the ladies' room. He also collects drugs prescribed to him from the doctor and sells them to other patients. In general, he is a troublemaker.

One day, he and Mary go up into a barn to have sex. In the middle of intercourse, Bukowski and Mary are discovered by a team of orderlies. They gawk at his purple penis and are tempted to take advantage of him until the doctor arrives. The doctor punishes him but Bukowski knows that the sex with Mary is worth the suspension of his privileges.

## Purple as an Iris Analysis

The idea that sex can cure insanity drives Bukowski in this story. Everyone in the asylum is desperate for sexual contact: the patients, the orderlies, even the doctors and nurses are always in the middle of some form of intercourse. Bukowski argues that sex is necessary to a man's sanity, that human contact, coupled with the basic satisfaction of mating, is a primal need that a man cannot suffocate forever. It is unnatural and contrary to the nature of both man and beast.



# Eyes Like the Sky

## Eyes Like the Sky Summary

Bukowski muses on the nature of comic strips. The comics have recently turned from human towards heightened social commentary. Unfortunately, they are so heavy-handed with their messages that Bukowski only finds them funnier than ever. Another such distortion of truth occurs in the world of poetry, in which Bukowski notices that every year someone comes up with a new movement or theme, but every poem is still the same. Bukowski knows that there are no innovative poets writing today, that few poets alive can still make people feel fear and awe. The situation is dire but Bukowski believes that if we can all hang on, our luck may change.

## Eyes Like the Sky Analysis

Bukowski discusses the current state of poetry in comparison to comic strips. Both current poets and current comic strips fail to accurately depict reality. Instead, they dramatize reality to resemble a soap opera or caricature, and distract their readers from the real truth of life. Though he rarely discusses literature, in this story, which is more of a manifesto or rant than a story with a plot line, Bukowski sends up these poets for their lack of courage and their failure to admit that they are only producing more of the same old poems.



# One for Walter Lowenfels

## One for Walter Lowenfels Summary

A man wakes up with a hangover and his girlfriend tells him that their daughter, Tina, needs to go to the doctor. She is a hysterical woman who believes in communism, free love, and other ideas. The man goes to work and she takes Tina to a bookstore where she can read her poems to an audience of like-minded people. That night, her poem is warmly received, and she glows as she tells her boyfriend about how Walter Lowenfels likes her poems. He goes in to check on Tina and is amazed that the little girl is still pure and full of hope, even after living with two such hopeless parents.

A few weeks later, on Tina's birthday, the man drives Tina around to pick up her birthday cake and some groceries. When he returns home, his girlfriend is furious. She has gone to another poetry reading and not been as warmly complimented, and is now in a terrible mood. He puts the candles in Tina's cake, and then realizes that Tina's mother is in the bathroom taking a bath instead of celebrating her daughter's fourth birthday. She comes out to sing to Tina, and during the song the man is moved nearly to tears by his daughter's happiness.

As soon as the song is over the woman takes a long shower. When she comes out he offers to drive her to a bookstore so that she can have fun and he can play with Tina. As soon as she leaves, Tina climbs into the front seat and holds her father's hand.

## One for Walter Lowenfels Analysis

This story is the only one that centers around family. The man is, like Bukowski himself, a drinker who works hard at a difficult job and lives in Los Angeles. The woman he lives with is, interestingly, the exact opposite of all that the man is. She is an idealist. She lives in a world of concepts, like love, communism, equality, peace, and fairness. These concepts, however, cannot live her life for her, nor can they deal with raising a child or having a relationship. Tina, her daughter, remains unscarred by her mother's changing moods and furies, even as the man grows more and more impatient with the woman's total lack of respect for the people around her. For her, it is more important to save the world than to be kind to her family.

The child is a symbol of absolute and genuine purity. The man is amazed and impressed by her, as well as deeply moved by how easily and openly she expresses her happiness. When he drags his girlfriend out of the bathroom to unwillingly sing to Tina for her birthday, Tina still treasures the experience of being the center of attention, of being the recipient of effort, love, and song.



# Notes of a Potential Suicide

## Notes of a Potential Suicide Summary

Bukowski goes out with a German and a Jew to try to pick up girls, but they all fail. He thinks about classical music and about how many people do not have any taste in music. They simply applaud at pieces that sound familiar to them. Such performances of overplayed music only serve to make the unintelligent feel educated.

Then, Bukowski remembers attending an Air Show as a boy. At the Air Show, he sees stunt pilots, parachute jumpers, and races. One of his friends pulls him underneath the bleachers and shows him how they can see up the girls' skirts from down there. They stare at a woman's vagina for a long time, and then come out to see a parachute jumper's parachute fail to open. He hits the ground and the Air Show ends. Young Bukowski and his friend Frank bicycle home and talk about the exciting events of the day.

## Notes of a Potential Suicide Analysis

The connection between sex, death, and society is Bukowski's main focus in this story. First, Bukowski goes out with two men and spends the entire time thinking about musicians that he likes and does not like, along with the kinds of patrons of music that annoy him most effectively. Socially speaking, the men who know nothing of good music are upstanding and good, but because they do not care to explore anything beyond the familiar, Bukowski thinks of them as sheep.

Suddenly, the story makes a major scene shift to a scene of sex and death from Bukowski's youth. After seeing a woman's genitals for the very first time, Bukowski witnesses a man plummet to his death. The major connecting factor between these two scenes is the idea of a spectacle being put on for a group of people. At a symphony, a group of musicians performs well-known music for well-dressed ticketholders, and at the Air Show, stunt men take risks with their lives for a small community of working-class people. Both performances result in discovery and death. At the Air Show, Bukowski discovers womanhood and witnesses a death. At a symphony of overplayed classics, the audience discovers perhaps the joy of live music, but in that discovery, they also encourage the death of their curiosity to learn more of good music.





# Notes on the Pest

## Notes on the Pest Summary

Bukowski describes a pest as a person who seeks him out, no matter where he is, and wastes his time postulating useless theories. A pest knows when he is on the toilet, when he is sleeping, when he is having sex, and those are the times that he inevitably arrives. For example, Bukowski finds an empty diner to eat in and he sits at the bar and enjoys his solitude. Soon after a pest arrives and sits right next to him, babbling about his doughnut and killing Bukowski's good mood. Bukowski realizes that every man has a little bit of a pest inside of him and recalls a time that he goes to visit a friend and discovers a sign on his door that says that he will not answer the door because he will not allow anyone to murder his work.

One particular pest calls Bukowski every morning when he has just arrived home from a long night shift. Bukowski always chastises him for calling so early when he has only just gotten home and to sleep. Finally, he stuffs his telephone in a box full of rags so that he cannot hear it ring. Bukowski wonders if he too is a pest.

## Notes on the Pest Analysis

Once again, the poet reminds his reader that he does not want to talk to his fans about poems, literature, or their own boring lives. In fact, the pest does more than simply irritate a man. It can kill his creativity, his vitality, and his good day. Bukowski's relationship with his fans is a sadistic and symbiotic one. Without them, he is not a published writer, but when they come into his everyday life he despises them.

Bukowski's treatment of pests is almost scientific in its objectivity. He does not insult the pests on a personal level, but rather their traits that, according to his hypothesis, they have no idea that they even have. This idea leads to his next, scarier thought, that every man can be a pest. From there, Bukowski concludes that he himself could be a pest to someone. Therefore, the very man that he has spent his day condemning is himself in another man's eyes.



# A Bad Trip

## A Bad Trip Summary

Bukowski begins the story by explaining how acid and color television grow in popularity simultaneously. He describes how both color television and LSD alter the user's reality. Acid's virtue is its ability to show the user truths that are not evident to others, and not governable by political bodies. On a particular acid trip, Bukowski discovers the charade of the world, of society, and of the people who both conform to it and uphold it.

## A Bad Trip Analysis

This piece reads more as a cry for help than as a story. Bukowski writes a diagnosis for all that is wrong in American society. Bukowski feels that citizens today are anesthetized, dulled, and conditioned. He knows that industry is the tool that dulls men's minds. Ironically, he can only express these observations on reality when he is in an altered state of mind. This story is another of the few in this collection that deal more with philosophy than with real events.



# Animal Crackers in My Soup

## Animal Crackers in My Soup Summary

Gordon wakes up in an alley after a long drinking binge and walks out to the edge of town, where he approaches a large, friendly-looking house to ask for a glass of water. A woman answers the door, unafraid of the man's slovenly appearance, and invites him into her home. As Carol fetches Gordon a glass of water, an orangutan named Bilbo takes the man's coat and runs away with it. Carol tells Gordon that she had to spend some time in a madhouse because the rest of her neighbors think she is crazy for living all alone in a big house with zoo animals roaming free.

Gordon and Carol get along very well and he stays in her home for a few nights. The animals in her house are kind and passive, and he enjoys their presence. One night he comes downstairs and sees Carol making love to a snake. The scene arouses Gordon and he struggles to fall back asleep. The next day, Gordon offers to leave, but Carol insists that he stay on as a member of her zoo. That night, Gordon goes downstairs again and sees Carol making love to a tiger. The next morning, Carol and Gordon kiss for the first time. That night, they make love.

They continue to connect even as Carol continues to have sex with the various animals at the same time. One day, Carol discovers that she is pregnant. Together, Carol and Gordon go into town so that she can buy some maternity dresses and some groceries. On their way home, Carol gets violently ill, sensing that something horrible has happened. When they arrive at home, Carol and Gordon see that all of Carol's animals have been shot. Carol is paralyzed by her shock and grief. Gordon buries the animals.

They get married so that if Carol dies in childbirth Gordon will inherit her estate. When the time comes for Carol to give birth, Gordon waits at the hospital with her. The baby is part human, part animal—every animal that Carol has loved is in the baby. Gordon looks at the child in awe, and just then, a hydrogen bomb lands on the city.

## Animal Crackers in My Soup Analysis

This story is the only one of two in the collection that has a definitive beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning of the story, Gordon is lost, drunk and homeless, but Carol saves him and shows him how pure he still is, better than all the men who have stepped on him and fired him and hated him. Gordon and Carol live an unsustainably happy life together; both of them are outcasts in their own ways from the society that refuses to have them as they are. Their uniqueness satisfies them tremendously, but it is this uniqueness that also precipitates their total heartbreak. The murder of the liberated zoo is also the murder of the purity and unity of living things. By killing the animals, people have essentially extinguished their own brotherhood with all other beings. Carol's child

is the final gasp of that identity, as being one among many creatures. That child cannot survive long in this world, and dies in the ultimate act of man's destruction of itself.



# A Popular Man

## A Popular Man Summary

Bukowski has a terrible flu and wants nothing more than to simply go to bed, but his friends and fans will not leave him alone. The first man arrives and tells him a story about how he discovered that his wife was having an affair with both his best friend and the mayor. He leaves, and the next visitor is a young Jewish man studying to be a rabbi. When he leaves Bukowski gets some sleep. His final visitor is an English teacher who gives him a six-pack and a book of his own poetry. Bukowski returns to bed, ignoring the telephone and the door, and watches cracks spread along his ceiling until it caves in and he chokes to death on the plaster.

## A Popular Man Analysis

Each of the visitors robs Bukowski of both his strength and desire to continue living. The first man tells a funny story about infidelity, but his health and professional success make Bukowski feel as though he has wasted his life. The second visitor frets about a poor poet, and Bukowski recalls that nearly all poets lack talent, which depresses him further. Finally, a talentless English teacher brings him a book of poems that mentions all of the awards, fellowships, and support he has won with his bad poems, and Bukowski cannot hear any more. The world is too full of hacks for him to want to live in it any more. When death comes, he smiles.



# Flower Horse

## Flower Horse Summary

Bukowski is at the horse track betting on horses that keep coming up just short of the win. He cannot help but observe the extremes at the race track, the despair slammed up against joy, and the frivolity coupled with utmost importance. He hates himself, his weakness and stupidity for betting on all the wrong horses. Finally, he wins almost \$250 on a big race. As he is on his way to claim his tickets, he realizes that he has lost one of the four, which means that he will have much less money waiting for him. He panics, but finds the ticket stuffed in his wallet. Suddenly, he feels optimistic, and leaves the race track knowing that he will always come out on top.

## Flower Horse Analysis

Bukowski's trademark pessimism meets its match in the form of a well-deserved payday at the track. More importantly, however, is humanity's ability to change so totally based on the outcome of one moment of time.

The track itself is a prime example of how man destroys himself. Gambling is inherently self-destructive; every win pushes the gambler to lose more and more. Bukowski is a victim of this very system, as throughout this day at the track he continues to bet higher and higher amounts of money, losing more and more on every horse that does not cross the finish line first. Luck redeems him. He plays one more race and wins back all of the money that he has lost. At this point he quits and emerges feeling not lucky but gifted, not as though a whim of fate had determined his victory but as if he has planned the entire evening to end that way it had.



# The Big Pot Game

## The Big Pot Game Summary

At a party, Bukowski asks two younger men if they have a cigarette for him to smoke. They reply that they are going to Malibu, and that they are high on marijuana. Bukowski looks down on the boys because they act in such an exclusive way, that since the old man does not smoke marijuana, he is not in their crowd. Bukowski thinks of such exclusion as being part of a cult or religion, and he approves of neither. Similarly, the boys have copied the language of the hepcats of the 1920s and 30s, men who did much harder drugs than marijuana. Yet these boys disrespect their memories by taking their words and cheapening them to apply to a gentler, toothless drug.

Bukowski thinks of the older social commentators who despise the younger generation for their sloth and drug use, but he wonders who will win the final match between the two. The older men have a little comfort around them but are used up; they have spent their lives working, toiling for another man. The younger men have nothing but their freedom from an institution, from a boss or pension.

## The Big Pot Game Analysis

Bukowski presents an enormous question to his readers with this story: should we play by the rules and end up the swindled majority, or refuse to go along with a social con and end our lives the infringed bums of society? Bukowski himself does not easily fit into either of those categories. On one hand, he has worked in hard jobs for his entire life, but conversely, he despises the entire system of industry that has robbed him of his youth. Overall, Bukowski sides with the older men. He believes that the youths lack perspective on their own behavior and on where they exist in the history of drug users.



# The Blanket

## The Blanket Summary

Bukowski mentions that he has not been sleeping comfortably recently. Not only has he been dreaming about his own life in disturbingly accurate detail, but he is also troubled by mysterious events that occur in his room while he lies in bed. A door opens, or his blanket begins to wrap itself around his neck. Years earlier, Bukowski suffers from a similar delusion, when he dreams that a team of tiny men is wiring his bed to electrocute him in his sleep. Now, these visions return in the form of his blanket. It slithers towards him and tries to strangle him. He runs from his apartment, but the blanket follows him. He walks into his neighbor's apartment, and the blanket has found a home on his arm. He offers it to Mick, who has not been well lately, and then goes back upstairs to get a beer. By the time he comes back, Mick has shot the blanket. Bukowski takes it back upstairs, pours a tall glass of vodka, and shreds the blanket, then burns the shreds of fabric in a pot. He notices a smear of blood on his hands, but he has not cut himself. He cries.

## The Blanket Analysis

Bukowski's madness reaches its climax in this story. He begins to hallucinate that his blanket is trying to kill him. He associates the blanket's murderousness with his drinking. In fact, Mick, who is also an alcoholic, is the only other person who can see the blanket move of its own accord. He drinks more hard alcohol, even though his doctor has told him that he can die from drinking it, and kills the blanket before it has a chance to kill him. This act, for him, is heartbreaking. When the blanket begins to move, it gains not only motion but also emotion in Bukowski's eyes. He is not merely shredding fabric. He is killing a companion, an entity that has protected and comforted him for years. That companion would now kill him, and although Bukowski is alive and the blanket is not, Bukowski has to wonder if life is worth living anymore.





# Characters

## **Charles Bukowski appears in Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1, The Great Zen Wedding, G**

Although this collection of short stories contains many fictional characters, all of the main protagonists resemble Charles Bukowski. Bukowski himself is a self-loathing alcoholic who hates poetry and pretension. Otherwise, he seems to be a relatively easygoing though often cranky companion, a man who only changes out of his bathrobe on an occasion. In "Doing Time" Bukowski goes to jail for dodging the draft, only to be released from military service because of his sensitivity. The foul-mouthed drinker laughs at the idea, but this is a man who gives money to men who are more down than he is, and a man who, in "Zen Wedding", spends hours looking for the perfect wedding gift for his friends. Bukowski has a tender heart, although he would sooner rape a stranger on the street than admit to it.

Bukowski is an animalistic man with basic needs. He needs liquor as sustenance and sex when he can get it. Other companionship seems to irk him, especially since his visitors all seem to want to discuss literature with him, and thinks that literature is boring.

## **Henry Chinasky appears in Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?**

Henry Chinasky is a common pseudonym used by Bukowski not only in short stories but in novels as well. He is a thinly veiled version of Bukowski himself. A heavy drinker who loves women's bodies but not their personalities, Chinasky is a writer who works by day in a dead-end job. In "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?" Chinasky flies to Seattle and reads at two universities in between drinking binges.

## **Duke appears in A .45 to Pay the Rent**

Duke is a convicted criminal, thief, husband, and father. His daughter, Lala, is the love of his life, and he is honest with her about his profession. He does not want to be a thief anymore, but cannot gain more respectable employment because of his criminal past. He thinks of industry as the greatest crime in society, because a few powerful men can manipulate the masses, for their own benefit.

## **Lala appears in A .45 to Pay the Rent**

Lala is the young daughter of Duke and Mag. She is inquisitive, bright, and devoted to her father. At the grocery store, she asks why a coconut has milk inside of it, what the



inside of the sun looks like, and why the other people driving their cars are trying to kill her and Duke.

## **Nameless Women appears in Goodbye Watson, Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit, Ra**

Bukowski portrays many nameless women throughout the collection who play a variety of roles, usually one of two archetypes: beautiful and untouchable or accessible but fatally flawed.

The beautiful, untouchable women both inspire and shame Bukowski. In "Goodbye Watson", a beautiful woman takes Bukowski home and they sleep together under an open window in the rain. When they wake up in the morning they are both blue, shivering, and thrilled with the sensation. They have no future together. Similarly, in "Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit", Bukowski cites a gorgeous woman climbing out of a car as the greatest work of art in the world. He never speaks to her, simply admires her legs from afar. In "My Stay in the Poet's Cottage", Bukowski fantasizes about a sensual maid who will not clean his house. These women fuel his desires and fantasies. However, in "A Rain of Women", Bukowski experiences shame when a beautiful woman who actually flirts with him intimidates him into inaction.

Conversely, most of the women that Bukowski considers to be accessible are also unattractive or irritating. In "Rape! Rape!", Bukowski returns to have sex with Vera's overweight, ugly neighbor. She does not refuse him, but she does not excite him either. In "Too Sensitive", and "One for Walter Lowenfels", Bukowski lives with a woman who cares more for literature than she does for the the man in her home or, indeed, reality in general. Another strange woman that Bukowski picks up at a bar has sex with Bukowski's friend Luke before she will have Bukowski.

## **Sears, Blaine, Ned, Joe appears in Scenes from the Big time**

Sears, Blaine, Ned, and Joe are all inmates who serve time with the narrator. Each of them demonstrates a unique quality that supports the narrator's view that men are largely animals. Sears attacks other strong men in order to establish his dominance and he preys on weak men, like Ned Lincoln, to keep the men around him afraid. Blaine protects himself with his ugliness, as would a skunk or blowfish. Joe is the only man who demonstrates a human trait: he perseveres even in a hopeless situation and inspires his prisonmates to do the same. That sense of community service is more human than animal.



## **Mad Jimmy appears in Nut Ward East of Hollywood**

Mad Jimmy is a trinket-peddler who often visits Bukowski's home. He has various psychological and physical ailments, but he still drinks and smokes often. He owns a new Panama hat which he thinks makes him look very handsome. His girlfriend, Mary, is taking him to court for breaking her rib during a recent argument.

## **Belford appears in Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?**

Belford is the young student who guides Henry Chinasky through his brief reading tour in Seattle. Belford is dedicated to his task, and takes Chinasky wherever he wants or needs to go, whether it be to an appointed reading or a liquor store.

## **Roy and Hollis appears in The Great Zen Wedding**

Roy and Hollis are friends of Bukowski's who get married in a new-age Zen ceremony. They are friends with the fringe elements of society, liberal intellectuals, hippies, and artists like Bukowski himself. Though they love their friend, they do not like his wedding gift, a small carved coffin.

## **The Zen Master appears in The Great Zen Wedding**

The Zen Master is an older Asian man who performs Roy and Hollis' wedding ceremony. He is most notable for his patience, spirituality, and very thin, translucent ears. After the ceremony, he spends some time socializing with the guests but leaves quickly once Bukowski demands that the Zen Master hand over his ears. The Zen Master subdues Bukowski as gently as possible, but ends up throwing him into a cactus plant.

## **Harry appears in Reunion**

Harry has just gotten out of an alcohol rehabilitation program and returns home to his girlfriend, Madge. He has no intention of sticking to an alcohol-free lifestyle, and immediately buys more beer. He is verbally and physically abusive to his girlfriend, but nevertheless values the sense of sanctuary that she brings to him when they are under the same roof.

## **Madge appears in Reunion**

Madge is Harry's girlfriend, a heavy drinker and smoker whom Harry suspects of infidelity. She hates it when he calls her names or hits her, but she remains with him



because she truly loves him. She does not help enforce an alcohol-free lifestyle for Harry, and immediately offers him a drink when he returns home from rehab.

## **Jack Hendley appears in Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home**

Jack Hendley is a writer and gambler who loses money at the race track. He resents the other gamblers who he feels are losers and vagrants.

## **Dan Skorski appears in The Stupid Christs**

Dan Skorski, former rubber plant worker, is also a writer whose work is noticed by Mr. Signo at WorldWay books. Unfortunately, Skorski does not stay with WorldWay because his drinking consumes his life. He continues to drink in Tijuana, where, while intoxicated, he tries to pull down a statue of Jesus in a public park.

## **Mr. Signo appears in The Stupid Christs**

Mr. Signo is the robotic editor in chief of WorldWay books. His voice sounds tinny and metallic and he talks over people's heads when he speaks. He admires Skorski's writing but does not believe that Skorski's personal habits fit with WorldWay.

## **Benny Adimson appears in Too Sensitive**

Benny Adimson, colleague of the narrator's girlfriend, is a sensitive poet who loses his job on a delivery truck and therefore cannot write. He does not submit his poems for publication. The narrator's girlfriend knows that Adimson is too sensitive to work alongside her boyfriend at the post office.

## **Vera appears in Rape! Rape!, No Stockings**

Vera is a sensual, beautiful woman. She is curvy, alluring, and appears twice, both times as the elusive sexual partner of Bukowski. In "Rape! Rape!" Bukowski sees her wearing a tight yellow dress, and follows her home to rape her. Vera confesses that she loves to be raped, and actually asks him to be more physically brutal with her next time. She is the object of a male sex fantasy, until she diametrically changes and has Bukowski arrested for sexual assault.

In "No Stockings", Vera is a less willing participant in Bukowski's sexual script. He comes on to her, complimenting her curves and her sensual presence, but when he says that he could rape her for hours, she asks him to leave. Again, she calls the police and has him arrested. Her character is a mysterious one, at once hot then cold, largely due to the fact that the stories are told from a man's perspective.



## **Frank Evans appears in An Evil Town**

Frank Evans, pious Christian man, lives in a hotel in a morally bankrupt town. Homosexual sex rages at the movie theater, and even his own hotel desk clerk attempts to seduce him. Evans stabs the clerk and cuts off his penis, in order to protect his own moral purity. Evans is a figurehead intended to personify the hypocrisy of violently dogmatic religion.

## **Desk Clerk appears in An Evil Town**

The desk clerk, an innocent man who falls in love with Frank Evans, meets his end when he confesses his love to the homophobic and righteous man.

## **Mr. Sneed appears in A Dollar and 20 Cents**

Mr. Sneed is a sixty-year-old man who lives in a rented apartment by the ocean. He feels that he has wasted his life, a feeling that is compounded by a run-in with several young and disrespectful lovers. Uncomforted by his landlady or her thin chicken soup, Mr. Sneed dies in peace.

## **Mrs. Conners appears in A Dollar and 20 Cents**

Mr. Sneed's landlady who brings him a bowl of unappetizing soup in an attempt to comfort the lonely old man.

## **Maxie appears in A Quiet Conversation Piece**

Maxie is a large Jewish man currently studying to become a rabbi. He believes that a revolution can help wipe clean the problems of the United States in the same way that revolutions have helped other countries rid themselves of tyrants or social limitations.

## **Tina appears in One for Walter Lowenfels**

Tina is the narrator's four-year-old daughter. She lives with a moody, unpredictable, liberal mother, but she remains pure and kind, untouched by the unorthodox lifestyle she has had to live.

## **Gordon appears in Animal Crackers in My Soup**

Gordon is a Bukowski proxy, a lost man with a drinking problem who stumbles into Carol's house, penniless, to ask for a glass of water. He falls in love with Carol and becomes one of the animals in her zoo.



## **Carol appears in Animal Crackers in My Soup**

Carol is the owner and operator of the liberated zoo, a free spirit and loving member of the race of beings. She has sexual relationships with all of her animals, and her love keeps the animals peaceful and passive. She gives birth to a baby that is a combination of all of her animals.



## Objects/Places

### **An Apartment in Los Angeles appears in collection**

The vast majority of the stories take place in Los Angeles, and most of them take place within a working-class home or apartment owned by a struggling artist and frequented by various other infringed artists and vagrants. A classic example of such a story is "Nut Ward East of Hollywood", in which the narrator is awoken by a trinket-peddler named Mad Jimmy who uses his phone, preens in his new Panama Hat, and finally leaves once his gluttonous roommate finds him there. The apartment's toilet constantly backs up, and its major decoration is a large wooden box in the middle of the room in which the narrator throws his bottles in order to make them all fit into two garbage cans. Similarly, "Too Sensitive" takes place inside an apartment that the narrator shares with a woman who does not care at all about cleaning it. "A Quiet Conversation Piece", "Beer and Poets and Talk", and "Night Streets of Madness" all feature a run-down Los Angeles apartment as a kind of ragged salon, a place where artists can gather and have intellectual discussions.

Sometimes this apartment is not the main setting of the story, but rather a bittersweet sanctuary to which the characters return at the end of a long day. In "Reunion" and "Goodbye Watson", the main characters return to such dwellings after a stint in rehab and a crushing gambling loss, respectively. In "A Dollar and 20 Cents", Mr. Sneed goes home to his apartment by the sea to die. "A Popular Man" has an apartment that serves the same purpose for Bukowski himself.

### **Prison appears in collection**

The narrator serves hard time in prison first in "Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1", and then in "Scenes from the Big Time". Both of these stories focus on the petty discomforts of prison, rather than the more serious consequences of incarceration.

Prison also serves as a temporary respite for Bukowski and his pseudonyms, and he spends the night in prison multiple times and for multiple purposes. His most common infraction is being drunk in public, as in "The Great Zen Wedding", but twice, in "Rape! Rape!" and in "No Stockings" Bukowski spends the night in lockup for sexual assault.

### **Shiv appears in collection**

A shiv is a homemade knife usually made from a toothbrush or some other scavenged material in prison. Ned Lincoln buys one to defend himself from Sears, but is too afraid to use it.



## **Panama appears in collection**

A Panama is a type of broad-brimmed hat. Mad Jimmy obtains one and is immensely proud of his appearance in the hat.

## **College Campus appears in collection**

Charles Bukowski does not like to give readings, but when he does they take place on some kind of college campus. In "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?" Henry Chinasky travels to Seattle to read on two different college campuses; in "My Stay in the Poet's Cottage," Bukowski stays at the University of Arizona for one summer.

## **Horse Track appears in collection**

Bukowski spends much of his free time gambling at the horse race track. He usually loses but occasionally he gets lucky. The crowds at the horse tracks are generally desperate men who need to win. They show Bukowski what he could be.

## **Coffin appears in collection**

Bukowski buys a miniature carved coffin for his friends Roy and Hollis to celebrate their wedding. The gift is a piece of art, but is not well-received by the other wedding guests.

## **WorldWay Books appears in collection**

The company that offers Dan Skorski a job after he quits his at the rubber factory. Mr. Signo is the editor in chief, and he believes that Mr. Skorski can contribute to the editorial department of the company, located in New York.

## **Griffo's appears in collection**

The bar and restaurant where Mr. Skorski meets Mr. Signo for the first time, and also the bar where Skorski goes during his unproductive workday at WorldWay books.

## **Movie Theater appears in collection**

Frank Evans goes to a movie theater in "An Evil Town", where homosexual men pleasure themselves and each other.





## **Soup appears in collection**

Mrs. Conners, Mr. Sneed's landlady, brings Mr. Sneed a bowl of thin soup as a gesture of kindness. The soup is unappetizing, and Mr. Sneed throws it out before he dies.

## **Tijuana appears in collection**

After Mr. Skorski leaves New York, he goes to Tijuana to wait for the horse races in San Diego. While there, he gets into some trouble after drinking heavily throughout the day.

## **Birthday Cake appears in collection**

The man buys his daughter, Tina, a birthday cake for her fourth birthday. The little girl loves her cake. Her mother must be asked to join the father and daughter for the birthday song and the cutting of the cake.

## **Air Show appears in collection**

When Bukowski is a young boy he goes to an Air Show to watch airplane stunts, parachute jumpers, and other aerial feats. At this Air Show, he sees a man plummet to his death.

## **LSD appears in collection**

LSD is acid, a drug made popular during the 1960s.

## **Liberated Zoo appears in collection**

Carol owns what she calls a liberated zoo, a collection of nearly sixty zoo animals that roam her house and estate without restriction. The animals are peaceful and docile, but nevertheless her neighbors fear them. One day when Carol and Gordon are in town someone shoots all of the animals to death.

## **Fitment appears in collection**

Fitment is the name of the horse that wins Bukowski's final race on a day in which he has done nothing but lose. Fitment wins Bukowski over \$200, and gains the poet's love and gratitude.



## Blanket appears in collection

Bukowski hallucinates that his own blanket is trying to kill him, and so he shreds and burns the blanket. Afterwards, he discovers a smear of blood on his hands and begins to cry.

# Themes

## Man is an Animal

One of the most prevalent and superficially clear themes to this collection is the concept that man is nothing more than an animal that has learned to wear a mask of civility. Animal traits exhibited by various characters in this book include physical violence to express dominance, inability to think rationally in the face of basic temptations, and the dominance of the strong over the weak.

Physically violent acts establish dominance effectively both in situations between men and women and when men compete with each other. In "Rape! Rape!" as well as in "Reunion", a man physically dominates a woman in order to prove his dominance over her. When Bukowski rapes Vera, he does so not only out of sexual desire but also out of a basic need to take what he wants in order to be a man. Similarly, when Harry hits Madge, he is not physically communicating rage, but sending a reminder of who is in charge in his home. Sears does the same thing to other men in "Scenes from the Big Time", when he first attacks the dominant male in a cell of black prisoners in order to establish his strength and fearlessness, then turns to a weak target so that he can remind the group of his power.

Another ubiquitous animalistic trait is man's inability to weigh consequences when faced with sexual temptation. In "Rape! Rape!" Charles Bukowski follows a woman into her apartment and rapes her without giving a thought to the consequences of committing such a violent crime. In "An Evil Town", the men in the movie theater care not for social appropriateness or safety—their basic sexual urges drown out any relatively flimsy sense of propriety.

The strong dominate the weak in human society in a dynamic identical to that of the animal kingdom. Both "A Dollar and 20 Cents" and "Night Streets of Madness" contain scenes in which an old, weak man is literally abused by a younger, stronger man. Young stud Roy antagonizes Mr. Sneed for no reason than to establish that the old man is worthless and weak. The boy in the white t-shirt beats the older man in the middle of a Los Angeles street for no given reason at all. Men are animals, and the natural order of things is for young men to grow stronger by climbing on the backs of their fathers, not by honoring them as is the human social tradition.

## Reality of Life versus Fantasy of Life

Bukowski is a proponent of life in all its grim reality. His life is neither pretty nor easy, but at least it is real. That opinion is the guiding force that determines his disinclination to spend his life discussing literature. To him, few writers are worth the investment of life that they require to be discussed. Literature is a fantasy of life, another man's interpretation of events and people that are made to be experienced firsthand, not



filtered through a mediocre artist's lens. Ironically, the man who so strongly holds these beliefs is a writer himself. Bukowski avoids discussing literature with both fans and colleagues in "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career", "The Great Zen Wedding", "Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit", and "Notes on the Pest". He discusses writing and poets—but only those who write what he deems to be real experiences and only to other poets that he deems similarly-minded—in "No Stockings", "Notes of a Potential Suicide", and "Beer and Poets and Talk".

Another expression of this theme exists in Bukowski's disdain for idealists. For example, in "One for Walter Lowenfels", the narrator lives with a politically active woman who is for peace, free love, liberation, communism, and equality. She cannot, however, live with those virtues in mind. They exist entirely in the abstract for her, on a global rather than an individual scale. She spends hours chipping away at the problems of all mankind but cannot be bothered to sing happy birthday to her four-year-old daughter. Bukowski believes that good people live in reality and in the present. Such idealists, those who cannot translate their goals into personal action, are as useless as using a poem about cancer to research a cure for the disease.

## Social Conventions and Identity

Although in Bukowski's own mind, he and every other man are nothing more than glorified beasts, he remains a proprietor to the conventions that he outwardly disdains. Because of the lifestyle he chooses, often his conformity to those conventions makes him an outcast even to the infringed people that he calls friends. He defines himself as an outsider yet that identity cannot exist when he is the least outside among a group of infringed people, nor can he call himself a man of society when he feels that he lacks the very trappings that make him a man.

In "The Great Zen Wedding", he is the only wedding guest to wear a necktie or bring a gift. This event marks the first time that he has worn a tie since his father's funeral. Once the other guests begin to arrive and he realizes that he is the only man to have observed the tradition of dressing up to honor a special event, he begins to get drunk. The other guests ask him why he is wearing his necktie. Once he is totally intoxicated, he gives the bride and groom their only gift, a miniature coffin that he means as a sincere gesture but fails miserably. His clothing and his gift both make him an outsider in a group of people characterized chiefly by their departure from such traditions. Bukowski, endearingly, does something that makes him personally uncomfortable in order to honor his friends, and that very act robs him of an essential element of his self-perception.

Another event that reveals Bukowski's reliance on social conventions for his own identity. When, in "No Stockings", he goes to jail for sexual assault, he stays in a large holding cell with two hundred other men. Looking around the room, he realizes that every other man but him is wearing stockings. He is wearing nothing under his shoes and he feels like the lowest man in the room because of it. No matter that he is a professional writer well-regarded in the literary community, that he is a loving father, or

that he has a few close friends. No matter that his crime is relatively minor. The fact that his ankles are bare humiliates him and makes him feel like an uncivilized brute. So suffers the portion of his identity that makes him a man living among other men.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view varies from story to story. The majority of the stories, including all of those which feature Bukowski himself as the narrator, are told from the first-person perspective. The more abstract and fictional stories, those which contain a cast of characters that does not include Bukowski or a thinly-veiled proxy, are told from a third-person point of view. This narrator is not omniscient, although that shift (from first-person introspective to third-person limited perspective) is less jarring here than it might be for other, more emotionally engaged storytellers. Bukowski himself speaks directly to the reader at the ends of such pieces as "A Quiet Conversation Piece", "Scenes from the Big Time", and throughout the more conversational, conceptual discussions found in "Notes of a Potential Suicide", "Notes on the Pest", "A Bad Trip", and "The Big Pot Game". This direct address does not differ markedly from the third-person points of view because Bukowski's first-person narrative is highly observational and minimally emotional.

Bukowski's choices in perspective vary with the scope of the story he tells as well as its proximity to his own life. Although this collection lives in the genre of short fiction, in truth the majority of the stories deal with Bukowski's own life experiences. Those stories, which star Bukowski as Bukowski, must be told in the first person. This marriage to truth is one of Bukowski's most defining traits as an author, and the first-person perspective emphasizes that dedication.

## Setting

The setting for the vast majority of these stories is Los Angeles. Many stories take place inside an apartment, that of Bukowski or of one of his friends or lovers. These intimate settings allow the reader to truly immerse himself in the lives of the characters: not only can he read their words and see their actions, but he can look around the room and experience the very place where the characters live, work, and sometimes die. The apartments are, without exception, ragged and cheap, and most feature a toilet that backs up.

Another common site within the Los Angeles area is a horse race track where Bukowski and his pseudonyms go to win and lose money. In "Cunt and Kant and a Happy Home", for example, Jack Hendley goes to the track and systematically loses all of his money, then goes home in order to prepare for the next day. The track is, in Bukowski's world, a place full of opposites. Both winners and losers converge there. Joy and despair link arms at the ticket counters, connected by the desperation of the gamblers. Bukowski also visits two college campuses (one in Seattle in "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?" and one in Arizona in "My Stay in the Poet's Cottage"), multiple bars, a grocery store ("Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit"), an auto mechanic ("A Rain



of Women"), a mental institution ("Purple as an Iris"), and a long train through the desert ("Love it or Leave it"). These settings are both common and desolate locations that emphasize Bukowski's preference for solitude.

The more fictionalized short stories take place in other settings outside of Los Angeles. Sometimes, that location is specified, as in "Animal Crackers in My Soup", in which Gordon and Carol live on a large estate full of zoo animals outside of San Francisco. Similarly, in "The Stupid Christs", Dan Skorski travels to New York and then on to Tijuana, where he meets some misfortune. However, in "An Evil Town", the name of said evil town is never revealed. The anonymity of the town leaves the reader with the perception that his own town could be that place.

## Language and Meaning

Bukowski's language is his most superficially obvious trademark. He is raw and often foul, utilizing profanities less as punctuation than as a staple of his vocabulary. His style is conversational, observational, and stark. Often, his stories read more as play-by-play summaries of his days than as linear plotlines. This totally unschooled style of writing reflects both Bukowski's contemporaries and his own personality. He is fanatic about truth and reality, and would sooner stop writing than write something phony or contrived. Because of that dedication to his own integrity, Bukowski "tells it like it is" and elaborates little on the significance of events beyond their immediate effects. He is fiercely present at all times, neither obsessing about events of the past nor elaborating on the possibilities of the future.

Throughout the short story collection, the male protagonists all bear some resemblance to Bukowski himself, and that similarity is more often than not expressed through the character's voice, which is identical to Bukowski's. For example, in "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?" Henry Chinasky fantasizes about raping a relatively attractive flight attendant, a desire that Charles Bukowski himself voices in "Rape! Rape!" and "No Stockings". Dan Skorski of "The Stupid Christs" is as aimless and, in many ways, as hopeless as Bukowski is in the rest of his stories. Gordon of "Animal Crackers in My Soup" worships Carol's naked body in the same way that Bukowski is captivated by the female form in stories throughout the collection, notably in "A Rain of Women" and "I Shot a Man in Reno".

## Structure

As the rest of the style points shift from story to story, so does the structure. The autobiographical short stories tend to cover much less ground in terms of time, plot, and character development than do the fictionalized near-myth stories. Generally, the autobiographical stories are either a snapshot of one significant conversation or event, or they simply capture the course of an evening or weekend, without culminating in any real climax. These stories are largely linear in terms of time progression, but they do not follow the standard progression of a build-up to a climax, followed by a denouement. In



fact, many stories proceed directly from the build-up to denouement, without any climax. In ".45 to Pay the Rent", the bulk of the story takes place in a conversation between Duke and Mag, during which Duke gets steadily more angry until suddenly and inexplicably he deflates and asks Mag to make him some food before he goes to work.

Many stories have a climax in the form of a physical assault, followed immediately by the realization that life continues. In "An Evil Town", Evans kills and mutilates the desk clerk in the peak of the action, then watches the man die as he packs his suitcase. In "The Blanket", Bukowski shreds and burns his blanket, then grieves for his own violent deed when he discovers a smear of blood on his uncut hand. Bukowski is beaten by the Zen Master in "The Great Zen Wedding", then goes to prison and spends the night. "Night Streets of Madness" features a young man assaulting an old man, a fight which Bukowski watches only briefly before returning home, falling asleep, and waking the next day alone to listen to the rain.

Some stories build to a climax and end on the apex of the action, without any recovery. "A Dollar and 20 Cents", "Animal Crackers in My Soup", and "A Popular Man", all end with a death as the final action of the story. This structure leaves the reader in shock. Such an end is realistic, the very nature of death, and so is the unbelieving reaction of most readers.





## Quotes

"these industrial cocksuckers of slaves who live in Beverly Hills and Malibu, these guys specialize in 'rehabilitating' cons, ex-cons. it makes that shit parole smell like roses. it's a hype. slave labor. the parole boards know it, they know it, we know it. save money for the state, make money for somebody else. shit. all shit. everybody. make you work triple the average man while they rob everybody within the law - sell them crap for ten or twenty times its actual value. but it's within the law, their law..." A .45 to Pay the Rent, p. 4

"an indecent exposure case had sneaked the dice in. he was one indecent exposure case I didn't like. in fact, I didn't like any of them. they all had weak chins, watery eyes, small rumps, slimy ways. 1/10th men. not their fault, I suppose but I didn't like to gaze upon them." Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1, p. 11

"When I get out, I thought, I am going to wait a while and then I am going to come back to this place, I am going to look at it from the outside and know exactly what's going on in there, and I'm going to stare at those walls and I'm going to make up my mind never to get on the inside of them again. But after I got out, I never came back again. I never looked at it from the outside. It's like a bad woman. There's no use going back. You don't even want to look at her. But you can talk about her. That's easy. And that's what I did for a bit today." Scenes from the Big Time, p. 17

"When he wasn't smoking a cigarette he was rolling a joint or sucking at his wine bottle. He had a Systolic 112 and Diastolic 78 giving pulse pressure of 34. He was good with the women but his hemoglobin was very low; being 73, no, 72 percent. Like the rest of us when he drank he didn't eat and he liked to drink." Nut Ward East of Hollywood, p. 18-19

"I forgot all about Mad Jimmy and felt like a human being for the first time in hours. Living was easy - all you had to do was let go. And have a little money. Let the other men fight the wars, let the other men go to jail." Nut Ward East of Hollywood, p. 31

"It was nice country. Sure, it was nice country. Pines and pines and lakes and pines. Fresh air. No traffic. It bored me. There wasn't any beauty in me. I thought, I'm not a very nice fellow. Here's life the way it should be and I feel as if I were in jail." Would you Suggest Writing as a Career?, p. 35

"'Would you suggest writing as a career?' one of the young students asked me.

'Are you trying to be funny?' I asked him.

'No, no, I'm serious. Would you advise writing as a career?'

'Writing chooses you, you don't choose it.'

That got him off me. I had another drink, then climbed back on stage." Would you Suggest Writing as a Career?, p. 37



"Christ, there were women everywhere and over 1/2 of them looked good enough to fuck, and there was nothing you could do - just look at them. Who'd ever devised such an awful trick? Yet they all looked pretty much alike - overlooking a roll of fat here, no ass there - just so many poppies in a field. Which one did you pick? Which one picked you? It didn't matter, and it was all so sad. And when the picks were made, it never worked, it never worked for anybody, no matter what they said." Would you Suggest Writing as a Career?, p. 40

"I became silent. I had really been proud of my little casket. I had looked for hours for a gift. I had almost gone crazy. Then I had seen it on the shelf, all alone. Touched the outsides, turned it upside-down, then looked inside. The price was high, but I was paying for the perfect craftsmanship. The wood. The little hinges. All." The Great Zen Wedding, p. 53

"I owed the liquor store thirteen-seventy-five plus two six-packs plus cigars and cigarettes and owed the L.A. County General Hospital \$225, and I owed the dirty Jap \$70 and there were some minor utility bills, and we clutched each other and the walls closed in. We made it." Reunion, p. 63

"with me, the racetrack tells me quickly where I am weak and where I am strong, and it tells me how I feel that day and it tells me how much we keep changing, changing ALL the time, and how little we know of this." Goodbye Watson, p. 73

"outside were parked cars, and people walking around. none of them read poetry, talked poetry, wrote poetry. for once the masses looked very reasonable to me. I got to my car, threw the stuff in and sat there a moment. a woman got out of the car next to me and I watched as her skirt fell back and showed me flashes of white leg above the stockings. one of the world's greatest works of Art: a woman with fine legs climbing out of her car." Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit, p. 81

"it was then that I noticed I was the only guy in jail without stockings on. there must have been 150 of them in that tank and 149 wore stockings. many of them just off of boxcars. I was the only one without. you could hit bottom and then find another bottom. balls." No Stockings, p. 132

"he is 43. I am 48. I look at least 15 years older than he. and feel some shame. the sagging belly. the hang-dog hair. the world has taken many hours and years from me with their dull and routine tasks; it tells. I feel shame for my defeat; not his money, my defeat." I Shot a Man in Reno, p. 149

"the stupid ones are the best lays because you hate them - they have the gift of flesh and the brains of a fly." A Rain of Women, p. 156

"but he shouldn't have done that to the old man.'

'that's what old men are for.'

'but what about justice?'

'but that is justice: the young whipping the old, the living whipping the dead. don't you see?'" Night Streets of Madness, p. 165



"well, it may be a matter of the times, so far as poetry goes (and this includes one Charles Bukowski) we simply, at this time, we simply do not HAVE the ramrods, the fearful innovators, the men, the gods, the big boys who could knock us out of beds or keep us going in the dark pit of hell of the factories and the streets." Eyes Like the Sky, p. 178

"shit, it's a horrible thought but most probably true and maybe it will help us bear up under the pest. basically, there is no 100 percent man. we are all run through with various madnesses and uglinesses that we ourselves are not aware of but that everybody else is aware of. how ya gonna keep us down on the farm?" Notes on the Pest, p. 196

"Look at them, Gordon. Really look at them. You can't help loving them. See how they move. Each one so different, each one so real, each one so much itself. They're not like humans. They're contained, they're unlost, never ugly. They have the gift, they have the same gift that they were born with. . ." Animal Crackers in My Soup, p. 207



## Topics for Discussion

Which characters exhibit animalistic traits? What are these traits?

Which characters exhibit entirely human traits? What are these traits?

Does animal instinct help or hinder Bukowski's male protagonists?

Is Charles Bukowski a good man? What makes him a good man? Not a good man?

What role does death play in this collection of stories? Does it remain consistent throughout the collection or does it vary from story to story?

What role does sex play in this collection of stories? How is sex used as a tool by the male characters? The female characters?

Bukowski mentions by name several authors that affect him, both in positive and negative ways. Who are some of these authors? Which authors affect Bukowski positively? Which affect him negatively? What characteristic or characteristics determine how an author's work affects Bukowski?