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# Poverty and Unemployment: A Study of The Great Depression in Charles Bukowski's Novel "Ham On Rye"

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## Abstract

Charles Bukowski through his novels, poetry, short stories, and underground newspaper columns was representing the plights of poor and working class Americans that is why he was called as a Laureate of American low life by Times. Through his autobiographical novel "Ham on Rye" he memoirs his teenage years coming of age during 1930's the time of The Great Depression in America. This paper will conduct socio-political-economical study of The Great Depression in the novel "Ham on Rye" by Charles Bukowski. This paper will show that how poverty and unemployment were affecting the life of poor Americans and how hard life was for Bukowski while growing up during hard time of The Great Depression. This paper will also try to show that how Bukowski was disillusioned with the idea of American Dream and American Myth.

**Keywords:** America, Great Depression, Poverty, Unemployment, American Dream.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was evidently extremely grueling for America due to America's involvement in WW1 and WW2, but both these wars still did not economically cripple America as vehemently as did The Great Depression. From September of 1929 there was dramatically visible fall in the US stock market which completely crashed on October 29 1929 or "Black Tuesday." Thus began the economic Depression that would haunt the whole decade of 1930's. Poverty and unemployment had covered America like the tempest that had planned to never end. The whole generation of late 1920's and 1930's struggled to survive in times when no jobs were advertised and poverty was widespread like the sea without a shore. Very realistically, horror and pains of

life of 1930's decade were penned by Charles Bukowski in his novel "Ham on Rye".

Charles Bukowski (1920-1994), one of the greatest writers and most uniquely distinguished voice of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, wrote his autobiographical novel "Ham on Rye" 1982 which tells the autobiographical coming of age story of Bukowski growing up during The Great Depression era. The novel is first person narrative of Charles Bukowski's absolutely perfect alter ego, Henry Chinaski and showed Chinaski's struggle in growing up during The Great Depression. Charles Bukowski was a teenager in 1930's and whatever happens in teenage years is certainly remembered till life. Charles Bukowski claimed multiple times in interviews and writings that The Great Depression influenced his writing and also provided materials for his writings.

Charles Bukowski in "Ham on Rye" showed how hard life was during The Great Depression and how unemployment caused widespread poverty. In "Ham on Rye," Bukowski depicted the plight of poor working class people who were mostly chocked by the economical hardship during The Great Depression. Bukowski was born to poor German-American parents, who lived in poor neighborhood of Los Angeles. People around him were poor; he too remained mostly poor during his life and wrote for poor that is why Times called Bukowski, "A Laureate of American low life." Throughout the novel Bukowski's parents remained unemployed, his neighbors remained jobless, and later young adult Bukowski remained unemployed. Robert H. Frank in "Principles of Macroeconomics," believed that unemployment in the US rose to 23% during The Great Depression. In 1930's employment department of most of the Industrial offices were shut as no vacancies were advertised and many people who had jobs were defenestrated from their chairs. Humorously Bukowski writes, "It was also true that some companies put ads in papers every day when there were no

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jobs available. It gave the employment department in those companies something to do. It also wasted time and screwed up the hopes of many desperate people. (p.219)”

Bukowski’s jobless father was a cynic and did not like people to know the fact that he was unemployed. In a very painful and pitiful passage, Bukowski wrote, “My mother went to her low-paying job each morning and my father, who didn’t have a job, left each morning too. Although most of the neighbors were unemployed he didn’t want them to think he was jobless. So he got into his car each morning at the same time and drove off as if he were going to work. Then he would return at exactly the same time. (p. 113)” Through the figure of his father, Bukowski showed the psychological depression people went through due to unemployment during The Great Depression. Ironically Bukowski’s father did not want his son to play with poor children because “their parents are poor. (p.27)” Sarcastically Bukowski remarks that, “My parents wanted to be rich so they imagined themselves rich. (p. 27)” Ironically his father wanted to be rich at the time when there were no jobs even to become a clerk. Bukowski indulged several incidents that showed that almost all he knew were unemployed. In one of the incident when Bukowski’s English Teacher asked the whole class about what their fathers do for living, all the children lied their father’s profession as the children were ashamed to declare their fathers as unemployed. “It was terrible. All the fathers in my immediate neighborhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job. Gene’s father sat on his front porch all day.....I’d heard of the stock market crash. It meant something bad. Maybe the stock market had only crashed in our neighborhood. (p.81)” Children were unsure of what The Great Depression was but subconsciously they knew that it is the reason of their father’s unemployment.

Bukowski’s family condition was worst than Americans, they were doubly marginalized, first being poor and second being German. Bukowski’s family was German and had strong German accent. Bukowski vividly depicted the plight of German-Americans during The Great Depression; one of his uncles was drunkard and other criminal. The family of the criminal Uncle John had nothing to eat they were extremely poor, and when the fly entered in their house, Bukowski’s father remarks, “There is nothing to eat here. The fly has come to the wrong place.

(p.24)” Bukowski’s German family without a doubt struggled more than Americans during The Great Depression. Bukowski sarcastically remarked, “My father was a beggar in the streets of India, (p.165)” metaphorically his father was poorest of all men. In one of the incident of the novel, we see the high racism against Germans during The Great Depression as when Bukowski and his friend applied for same job and even they had same degree but in the application form Bukowski honestly wrote Germany as his place of birth, he was rejected and that job was given to his American friend.

During The Great Depression the biggest scarcity was food. Malnourishment was the reason of uncountable deaths. People had nothing to eat and died out of starvation which was evident when Bukowski remarks, “how lucky we were to be eating good food when most of the people in the world, and many in America, were starving and poor. (p.41)” Bukowski’s household was running with the free food distributed by the government, and that food was not much nutritious, Bukowski asserts, “I wasn’t getting proper nourishment. (p.202)” Dorothea Lange’s photograph “Migrant Mother” taken in 1936 without a doubt is most pitiful imagery of The Great Depression, and gives image to poor Americans hopelessness. In the photo an uneducated poor mother was surrounded by her daughters and all of them looked malnourished and their clothes tiered apart. Bukowski’s had ragged clothes and ragged stomach like that Migrant Mother, as he mentioned that he had two pairs of ragged clothes only and very less food to survive this biased life.

Bukowski’s was lamenting at the plight of poor, every line of “Ham on Rye” was adorned with pathos. Unlike his father, Bukowski was acknowledging the fact that he and his neighborhood were poor; that they are the one who were suffering more than rich. Bukowski mentioned, “We were the way we were, and we didn’t want to be anything else. We all came from Depression families and most of us were ill fed. (p.91)” Bukowski continues, “We were the children in the poorest school, we had the poorest, least educated parents, most of us lived on terrible food... (p.48)” Bukowski someway or the other is welcoming that situation of poverty and unemployment and valourising being poor as it made them stronger than the rich.

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Bukowski did not wrought history of The Great Depression according to himself which most of the writers did, rather he presented his fiction with realistic accounts of plights. Bukowski mentioned real important figures on The Great Depression in his novels. In "Ham on Rye" he talked about 31<sup>st</sup> President of US, Herbert Hoover and his false optimism regarding American economy, in whose tenure, The Great Depression started. Bukowski was angry with 32<sup>nd</sup> President, Franklin D. Roosevelt as he "gunned down John Dillinger. (p.125)" Whom Bukowski admired as Robin Hood figure.

In "Ham on Rye," when Bukowski went to L.A County General Hospital for his extreme acne issues, we see that Hospital was not working properly, unkempt, unorganized, lacking with staff and no Doctor was there to check enormous crowd which was waiting since morning. It was reported that during Depression Healthcare facility around the country was crippled. Bukowski presented America of The Great Depression period as total Dystopia. Doctors were unable to cure Bukowski's acne issue and were experimenting on poor Bukowski's body. Here Bukowski very bitterly satirized the rich, "They experimented on the poor and if that worked they used the treatment on the rich. And if it didn't work, there would still be more poor left over to experiment upon. (p.136)" Bukowski was the modern Jonathan Swift. They both wrote bitterest satires ever penned, and coincidentally both were biggest misanthropes of English Literature.

Charles Bukowski was socio-political critic; Bukowski criticized the government and rich at every alternative scene of the plot. Bukowski criticized the rich for being falsely patriotic because they had more to lose during the hard times of The Great Depression. Bukowski claimed that during The Great Depression, it would not be a matter if America was run by Russians, German, Chinese, or Japanese because their current American government was not any better than outsiders. The government of President Franklin D. Roosevelt was behaving with poor as if poor do not belong to America. Bukowski and poor people like him felt socio, economical, and political alienation in 1930's. Bukowski thought that because rich and politicians have not faced poverty during The Great Depression that is why they could not share the pains of the poor. Bukowski satirized, "I guess the only time most people think about injustice is when it happens to them. (p. 198)" Bukowski accused rich Industrialists and politicians for socio-economically crippling the poor

in 1930's. Bukowski showed that poor had desire to become rich but how could they be rich when there were no education and jobs. Bukowski laments, "What a weary time those years were- to have the desire and the need to live but not the ability. (p.215)"

Charles Bukowski novel "Ham on Rye" gives the feel of transgressive fiction where Bukowski's alter ego protagonist Henry Chinaski felt confined in the era of The Great Depression. Poverty and unemployment made Bukowski alcoholic, as through alcohol he escaped the haunts and the horror of the widespread outcry of 1930's. Bukowski not only in "Ham on Rye" discussed The Great Depression but also in his various poems, short stories, novels and underground newspaper columns. Bukowski in poem "Dinosauria, we" wrote some of the greatest lines of The Great Depression period literature:

"born into this into hospitals which are so expensive that it's cheaper to die into lawyers who charge so much it's cheaper to plead guilty into a country where jails are full and the madhouses closed into a place where the masses elevate fools into rich heroes."

Here, Bukowski's imagery is that of dystopia. Same in "Ham on Rye" Bukowski presented America of The Great Depression as dystopian state, where survival was a task and life was unbearable without alcohol. Bukowski wrote "Ham on Rye" with dirty realism technique, which presented the truth of The Great Depression without poetically adorned language. Dirty realism technique prevented Bukowski from the romantic lies and helped Bukowski to write history and autobiography with just a touch of fiction.

Bukowski grew in poverty and saw his parents remained unemployed during The Great Depression. Bukowski witnessed America's economic failure while growing up into a young adult thus he was extravagantly disillusioned with the American Dream and American Myth. In an interview to Los Angeles Times, of American Dream he says, "In this country, if you don't spend your money, they take it away." He was against the whole American system throughout the life, and bitterly criticized America more than his literary comrades like John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. Charles Bukowski respected American nation, but he criticized the politicians and rich Industrialists who were ruling the Industrialist America and were subjugating poor economically.

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Lived experience of The Great Depression provided Charles Bukowski literary materials through which he would raise the issues of the poor Americans. He was not Queen's poet Laureate from England who would flatter just Queen's wealth, he was poet Laureate of poor Americans and he represented their plight of poverty and unemployment during The Great Depression in works like "Ham on Rye."

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