

Piotr Matczak

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

**“THERE OUGHT TO BE A PLACE FOR PEOPLE WITHOUT AMBITION”:
THE AMERICAN DREAM AS A DIVISIVE FORCE IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI’S
*FACTOTUM*¹**

Keywords: the American Dream, Charles Bukowski, social inequalities, ambition

Introduction

One of the ideas that lie at the very core of American identity is, undoubtedly, the American Dream. In its common understanding, it denotes a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the United States especially by working hard and becoming successful. Some of the acclaimed American writers explored this concept in their writing: Mark Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Charles Bukowski, the twentieth-century American novelist, also wrote extensively on the topic of the American Dream, discussing its relevance in a series of novels featuring the character Henry Chinaski, a working-class man disappointed with American reality.

This article analyzes the perception of the American Dream during the Second World War presented in one of Charles Bukowski’s novels, *Factotum* (1975). The methodology is based on the close-reading method and refers to sociopolitical literature on the American Dream in both historical and contemporary sources.

This study aims to locate the events described in the novel within the sociopolitical situation of the United States and present Bukowski's perspective on the nature of the American Dream.

The Concept of the American Dream

The idea of the American Dream can be traced back to, arguably, the Puritan times, since scholars such as Jim Cullen claim that even the Pilgrims "intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their heart" (5). Since then, it has been present in American literature and culture and has never ceased to be a major force driving individuals and groups toward their goals and desires. Throughout American history, the Dream functioned as a peculiar social cement in society, "a kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone (...) can presumably understand" (Cullen 3). In the nineteenth century, the American Dream embodied a philosophy that boosted the territorial expansion of the United States, resulting in large populations inhabiting the newly acquired lands in the hope of succeeding in life.

The American Dream gained increasing popularity in the nineteenth century, which can be linked to the waves of migration from Europe and other continents (Borjas 23). The immigrant groups that were lured to America by the promise of free land and opportunities strongly believed that they could establish a secure future in this new, vast, underdeveloped area of the country. The Dream was fueled especially by the California Gold Rush in the 1840s and 1850s; this phenomenon even received its own name, the California Dream (Starr 443). People continued to inhabit the newly acquired territories throughout the century, making the belief in the American Dream stronger than ever.

The history of the American Dream in the twentieth century hints at certain cracks and fissures. The idea that was once a unifying factor for the whole nation suddenly ceased to meet the needs and requirements of the American people (Cullen 117). Territorial expansion was the main reason for this change, meaning that there were no new lands to inhabit (Cullen 140). Overcrowding became a

problem in already established cities, which was visible, for instance, in the cases of Los Angeles Skid Row². There were fewer possibilities for people to climb the social ladder, and the American Dream started to lose its relevance.

A significant crisis appeared with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which ushered in the decade of the Great Depression. These are the years of Bukowski's childhood and adolescence and, by the same token, the time in which *Factotum* is set. The economic crisis triggered many social changes, from increased unemployment and suicide rates to the altered role of the man in the family: the father stopped being the breadwinner as many had lost their jobs during the Depression (Cullen 154). Therefore, what people understood as a successful way of life changed significantly, with the Dream becoming even less attainable.

During the 1930s, the first essays on the topic of the American Dream were published, the most prominent of them being *The Epic of America* by James Truslow Adams (1931). Adams was the first to use the term "the American Dream"; he praised the idea, describing it as an endeavor to make life "better and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to the ability of achievement" (256). This American author and historian wrote the book to defend American identity, which he considered to be in danger after the socialist reforms introduced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt following the Wall Street Crash (Cullen 4). In the years that followed, American society began to divide in their perspectives on the American Dream, forming two groups: those who favored the Dream and believed in its efficacy, and those who were skeptical of the Dream as an insufficient method of coping with life in the US. However, it is important to note that not all segments of society were equally aware of or engaged with the concept of the American Dream at that time.

The Bukowski family arrived in the United States, having fled the economic crisis in Germany (Sounes 21), just to experience an even greater one in California. Charles Bukowski was an eyewitness of the American reality at that time. Moreover, he also observed how his father's obsession with the American Dream ended with his futile attempts to achieve it. According to Baughan, Charles

Bukowski grew increasingly disillusioned with the American Dream itself, which culminated in his overt criticism of it in his later writing (10).

The Perception of the American Dream during the Second World War

The most significant sociopolitical event that marked the decade of the 1940s in the United States was, undoubtedly, the Second World War. The United States declared war on Japan in December 1941, and celebrated the victory over the Third Reich and Japan in May and September 1945, respectively. However, the reports of Nazi rule in Germany were heard and widely discussed in the US media long before the official outbreak of the war, and the war's aftermath continued to resonate in the following decades.

The Second World War is a crucial context for the analysis of the American Dream in the 1940s as it altered the social dynamics. The military draft resulted in many men being sent to Europe and the Pacific to fight the Nazis, which meant that mostly women, elderly people, and males who for some reason were unfit for the draft stayed in the country (Baughan 19). Charles Bukowski, similarly to Henry Chinaski in *Factotum*, was in this latter group. Although Bukowski "dutifully registered for the draft for World War Two," he was rejected and classified 4-F, which meant unfit for service under the established physical, mental, or moral standards (Sounes 33). By the same token, the fictional Henry Chinaski is left in the United States despite his eagerness to serve in the military. This results in his father, Henry Sr.'s, frequent comments about his son's uselessness: "It's bad enough you don't want to serve your country in time of War..." (Bukowski 19).

In addition to the altered demographics in the time of war, the nature of the conflict triggered the change in the perspective on the American Dream. The persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, at least for some Americans, bore similarities to the racial discrimination of Black Americans in the States. This observation arguably brought back the question of equality as an inherent (albeit long-forgotten) element of the original American Dream. Publishers started to

notice that “the American Dream was of equality—both democratic and economic—which would measure collective, not individual, success” (Churchwell 214). As Sarah Churchwell argues in her book *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (2018), such voices were present in American newspapers of the time. Among other voices, she quotes an article from *Shamokin News-Dispatch* issued on September 22, 1934:

‘If the high hopes of the last 18 months are not to be dashed, maintained a Pennsylvania editorial a few weeks later, it would be wise for the country to recall the ideas ‘which helped, in the early years of the republic, to build that great American dream which has always dazzled our eyes just beyond the horizon,’ namely, ‘that the rights of the humblest man could be made as sacred as the rights of the mightiest, and that progress should mean nothing at all unless it means a better life and a truer freedom for the fellow at the bottom of the heap.’ This ‘noble dream’ may have become ‘stained and frayed’ over time, ‘but it remains our finest heritage; and if the confusion of this era is to mean anything at all, it must mean a revival of that dream and a new effort to attain it.’ (Churchwell 200)

As shown in the quotation above, the American media undertook certain measures to restore the concept of the American Dream, which in their view had become corrupted and overfocused on financial values during the interwar period.

The US accession to the Second World War finally laid the ghost of nineteenth-century isolationism to rest. Having been involved in the First World War, the United States had been balancing on the threshold of isolationism and interventionism in the world’s affairs and was finally drawn into the war by the perspective of Hitler’s domination over Europe². With the changing situation in US foreign policy, the American Dream, which had once been the pillar of American isolationism, started to be employed as a vessel to defend the world against the totalitarian ideologies of fascism and communism. The Dream was praised as a natural American force that saved the country from “succumbing to the pull of totalitarianism” (Cullen 191). Moreover, due to the newfound interventionist strategy, Americans cared even more about how they were perceived by the rest of the world (Kubiak 206).

The grand slogans of patriotism and equality, however, clashed with the reality of the American working class. Although it might have seemed back in the 1940s that the situation of the American people was bound to improve, the historical commentary provided by scholars such as Harrison (148–149), Cullen (151), and Churchwell (260–261) leave no doubt that the Americans were mostly unaffected in any positive way by the declared changes in the Dream ideology. The American Dream was still being perceived through the lens of financial success, and Churchwell argues that the focus on material gain brought about the deterioration of the quality of manufactured goods and offered services (284). She presents the views of Dorothy Thompson, an active opponent of Hitler, who claimed that “the attack [Pearl Harbor] had happened (...) because America had contented itself for decades with a degraded ideal, a dream of just getting by” (Churchwell 284). So, it can be argued that the financial element of the American Dream did not seem to change in any way.

While the financial aspects of the American Dream remained dominant, upward mobility was still unattainable for virtually all working-class Americans. As manufacturing became increasingly automated, companies found workers redundant. Russell Harrison leaves no doubt that “there is no way such work is anything but degrading and an assembly-line worker is never going to be middle-class” (125). The new technology disrupted the relationship between the value of human work and social mobility, making it possible to produce more effectively and with lower financial capital. This transformation left the working class with almost no chances to break from poverty, which had earlier been possible through hard work; the dominant American ideology in the 1940s did not, nevertheless, acknowledge this change yet. As Sounes points, “the patriotic America would say that any one of these people has the chance of becoming a millionaire, but in truth, the vast majority are stuck in their place” (8).

Overall, the American Dream during the Second World War was already a controversial idea, with many people still believing in its efficacy, but also with others denying the value of hard work leading to improved living conditions and

happiness. What once had been a unifying factor for the American nation became a divisive force. This phenomenon of division is explored in *Factotum*.

The American Dream as a Divisive Force in *Factotum*

Factotum (1975) is a novel by Charles Bukowski that criticizes the American Dream in the 1940s from the perspective of the 1970s. In *Factotum*, the reader perceives the American reality through the eyes of a young adult from a working-class family who has little-to-no chance to improve their situation experiencing a gradual, societal downgrade. Henry Chinaski, the main protagonist, works a sequence of dead-end jobs, which lets him tighten his bonds with the working class and experience the struggle of poverty first-hand.

The 2009 edition of *Factotum* is prefaced by the introduction by Neeli Cherkovski, a lifelong friend and biographer of Bukowski. Cherkovski points to the generational differences between Henry Chinaski and his father, which appear in the first part of the novel. As he phrases it, “citizens like Bukowski’s father still believed you could make it through hard work and plain old endurance” (ix). This quote marks the first crucial area in which the American Dream becomes a divisive force: it creates a conflict between the old and the young generations of Americans.

The major division caused by the American Dream is also visible in social classes. Chinaski is a working-class member who perceives the United States through the job market and the (lack of) opportunities it provides for people like him: working-class young adults. In the story, he has grown to understand the pervasive exploitation of the working class by American companies. In an argument with his employer, he bluntly says: “I’ve given you my time. It’s all I’ve got to give—it’s all any man has” (84). The protagonist, like many other employees, often lives from hand to mouth because the salaries are extremely low. On the other side of the social hierarchy are the rich company owners, for whom the working-class people work. In a conversation with one of his bosses, the main character comments that he devotes his time to working at a factory so

that “you [the boss] can live in your big house on the hill and have all the things that go with it” (84). This situation draws the reader’s attention to the ongoing social inequalities in the United States in the 1940s and emphasizes the division between the wealthy and the poor.

Apart from inter-class divisions, the American Dream causes intra-class fissures among the workers. Chinaski views the American Dream, and in turn American capitalism, as the survival of the fittest. He realizes that there are too few jobs for Americans, many of whom are badly paid (130). This leads to a peculiar fight for jobs that can be seen in a scene at a weaving company. As Henry recalls it, he once observed the row of seamstresses sitting at their machines, “the number one seamstress at the #1 machine, bent on maintaining her place; the number two girl at the #2 machine, ready to replace her should she falter” (100). Very often, there is no mutual understanding between the employees because the economic situation demands that they are to be as efficient as possible to be able to keep their jobs.

In another scene, the protagonist is appointed manager of the people who have to do the dishes at the restaurant. This means he needs to visit a square full of people eager to get the job for one day and choose a few to employ for the task. Being in a position of power, he decides to organize a peculiar hunger game by throwing two pennies in the crowd and guaranteeing the job to people who bring them back to him (153). He takes pleasure in watching people fight for jobs, while he is already employed and has a kind of authority over them. From his higher social position, he distances himself from the unemployed masses who still need to fight for jobs.

The American Dream seems to overwhelm Chinaski throughout most of the novel. To achieve it, one needs ambition and perseverance. However, the protagonist openly claims that ambition is something he lacks. This acceptance seems to be a peculiar coping mechanism: by rejecting the element needed to achieve the Dream, he rejects the American Dream as a whole. Moreover, he states that “there ought to be a place for people without ambition, I mean a better

place than the one usually reserved" (97). There is a suggestion that he opposes the present socioeconomic situation of people who do not chase after the unattainable Dream.

The depiction of ambition in the novel is extensive and nuanced. Chinaski claims that, to be successful, one needs passion (5), but for some people "ambition is handicapped by laziness" (80). He belongs to this group as he admits to being passive. When he becomes unemployed and sees his lover Jane going out to the bar alone, he comments: "Yet I had to let it happen, I had to let events take their own course" (83). By giving such a statement, Bukowski places Chinaski in the long-lasting current of inert characters in American literature, with examples of such being Washington Irving's Rip van Winkle, Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, or Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim.

However, lack of ambition is not the only explanation for Chinaski's rejection of the American Dream. Another factor that contributed to this decision is his striving for authenticity. Having observed that diligent work for a company with the hope of social mobility deprives people of originality, Henry seems to keep his real self by refraining from getting engaged in his job. Jane, his lover, remarks that he is "real and present" when she compares him to other people that she knows who "are only ten per cent there or twenty per cent" (105). Chinaski thus gains "the freedom to be able to autopoietically³ define himself" (Di Stefano 12). By eradicating the internal need for self- and social validation achieved through vocational life and social appraisal, he is able to transcend the idea of the working class, based very clearly on the notion of work, and oppose the capitalist system by refusing to adhere to its regulations. The protagonist can, in turn, create his personality as the antithesis of what it means to be a member of the working class in the United States.

Nevertheless, Henry Chinaski at some point experiences a brief change of heart. Having been accepted for publication by one of the literary magazines, he experiences newfound levels of excitement and hope for the future. In ecstasy, he declares the desire to accumulate money and become a prominent writer. His

previously absent ambition is visible for the first time since childhood, and one more time he presents his disputable morality by claiming to “build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men” (43). However, his excitement quickly fades away as he returns to mundane reality. A few scenes later in the novel, he is again horrified by life.

Charles Bukowski portrays Henry Chinaski as a character full of nuances. He creates the protagonist with a complex set of beliefs and opinions on the sociopolitical aspects of the mid-century United States, which includes an expanded view of the American Dream. Influenced by the familial and societal factors during the Great Depression, Chinaski needs to face the challenge of reconciling the historically and culturally conditioned ways of understanding and conceptualizing the American Dream with the twentieth-century reality he grew up in and lived through. All this is pursued with the view to achieving personal integrity. Thus, throughout *Factotum* the reader witnesses how the understanding of the American Dream is being modified and adjusted by its main character. This process, full of meanderings and digressions, is a lengthy yet still incomplete one at that.

Conclusion

To conclude, by no means can Charles Bukowski be labeled as a great defendant of the working class or a writer unanimously critical of the American Dream. His perception of the Dream, which can be observed in Henry Chinaski’s views on that matter, suggests that he had ambivalent opinions on the Dream. On the contrary, Bukowski’s attitude toward it was nuanced and unstable, moving from deep contempt toward the so-called success to hope connected to the potential achievement of the Dream. Even within one person’s mind, the American Dream proved to be a force with a divisive potential.

This ambiguity of the Dream in the author’s mind corresponds with the sociohistorical research presented in the article. Although the idea was meant to signify a unifying force for the Americans, it hardly managed to fulfill this aim.

More commonly, the Dream would be a bone of contention, triggering disagreements and conflicts between and within social classes and American families. People who happened to be in a position of power—among them, at least temporarily, was Chinaski—tended to be more positive toward the Dream, while those who found themselves in different kinds of predicaments seemed to see it as a fallacy, something that will never be attainable.

What is possibly striking, though, is the relative stability of the concept of the American Dream in the past century. When a contemporary reader sees the definition provided by Adams, it turns out that it has remained unaltered until nowadays. The contemporary American may have the same kind of dilemmas concerning the Dream, at the same time believing in its efficacy and doubting its relevance, as the Chinaski/Bukowski tandem had in the middle of the twentieth century. Arguably, it shows how strong the idea of the American Dream has been in the United States from its outset in colonial times.

Endnotes

1. This article presents the results of research done as a part of the author's BA thesis entitled "Debunking the American Dream in Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* and *Factotum*" completed at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 2023.
2. Los Angeles Skid Row is a neighborhood with a considerable homeless population. It serves as an example of an impoverished area where overcrowding made it hard to find decent living conditions.
3. Apart from the vision of Hitler's domination over Europe, the immediate cause of US accession into World War Two was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.
4. *Autopoiesis* is a term coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to denote a biological phenomenon of the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells. It refers to self-creation and self-organization; autopoietic systems are "autonomous, self-referring, and self-constructing" (Maturana and Varela v).

References

- Adams, J. T. 1931. *The Epic of America*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Baughan, M. G. 2004. *Great Writers: Charles Bukowski*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.

- Borjas, G. J. 2006. "Making It in America: Social Mobility in the Immigrant Population," *The Future of Children* 16: 2, 55–71.
- Bukowski, C. 2009 [1975]. *Factotum*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press.
- Churchwell, S. B. 2018. *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*. London Oxford New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Cullen, J. 2005. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Di Stefano, G. 2017. "Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness of Work in Charles Bukowski," *World Futures* 73: 4–5, 271–284.
- Harrison, R. 1994. *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press.
- Kubiak, H. 2013. "The American Dilemma 70 years later," *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 1, 199–229.
- Maturana, H. R. & F. J. Varela. 1980. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Sounes, H. 2007. *Charles Bukowski: Locked In The Arms Of A Crazy Life*. London: Grove/Atlantic.
- Starr, K. 1986. *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Abstract

The paper examines the perception of the American Dream in American society during the Second World War as presented in Charles Bukowski's *Factotum* (1975). The article defines the notion of the American Dream in the 1940s and discusses it as a divisive force in the American society. The research identifies different perspectives on the Dream held by members of various social classes, with particular emphasis on the views presented by the main protagonist, Henry Chinaski. The Dream, which was a once unifying factor, seems to have been a source of deepening fissures in the picture of a coherent American population. *Factotum* presents an idiosyncratic story of negotiating the meaning of the American Dream in the mind of a troubled individual. Influenced by the pervasive belief in the Dream in the 1940s US, he tries to reconcile his inner beliefs with the surrounding reality, in an attempt to find his place in the community. This seems to be an impossible quest: the American Dream is presented to be an oppressive factor that eventually forces him to resign himself to the demi world of American outcasts.

Artykuł analizuje postrzeganie amerykańskiego snu przez społeczeństwo amerykańskie podczas II wojny światowej, przedstawione w *Factotum* Charlesa Bukowskiego (1975). Artykuł definiuje znaczenie idei amerykańskiego snu w latach czterdziestych XX wieku jako siły dzielącej amerykańskie społeczeństwo. Omówione zostały różne perspektywy, jakie na temat snu mają członkowie poszczególnych klas społecznych, ze szczególnym naciskiem na poglądy prezentowane przez głównego bohatera, Henry'ego Chinaskiego. Sen, który niegdyś był czynnikiem jednoczącym, zdaje się być źródłem pogłębiających się pęknięć w obrazie spójnego amerykańskiego społeczeństwa. *Factotum* przedstawia

szczególny przypadek poszukiwania znaczenia amerykańskiego snu w umyśle niespokojnej jednostki. Pod wpływem wszechobecnej wiary w ideę amerykańskiego snu w Stanach Zjednoczonych lat 40. próbuje ona pogodzić swoje wewnętrzne przekonania z otaczającą rzeczywistością, starając się odnaleźć swoje miejsce w społeczności. Wydaje się, że jest to niemożliwe: amerykański sen jest przedstawiony jako czynnik opresyjny, który ostatecznie zmusza głównego bohatera do pogodzenia się z półświatkiem amerykańskich wyrzutków.

Piotr Matczak is a master's degree student of English Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. His primary area of interest is Californian literature of the 20th century. He is currently working on his MA project concerning spatiality in selected novels about 1960s California. His BA project is entitled "Debunking the American Dream in Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* and *Factotum*". Additionally, he is the head of a student team researching the impact of a literary mentoring program on the development of academic skills in high school students. Professionally, he teaches English in a high school in Poznań.