

## The Myth Of Sisyphus

by Michael Bryant

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“And Sisyphus I saw in bitter pains, forcing a monstrous stone along with both his hands. Tugging with hand and foot, he pushed the stone upward along the hill. But when he thought to heave it on clean to the summit, a might power would turn it back; and so once more down to the ground the wicked stone would tumble. Again he strained to push it back; sweat ran down from his limbs, and from his head a dust cloud rose.” -Homer-

The myth of Sisyphus stands as a timeless metaphor concisely teaching man of the human condition. The act of repeating a routine time and again with no final goal nor end in sight, though desperate, is vital to an understanding of what comprises a meaningful life. Camus calls the Sisyphean routine the absurd; “Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm” (12-13). In *Women* Henry Chinaski less eloquently coins it as “a duel to death in a cesspool” (217). But regardless of what it is called, according to Camus, the most important aspect of the absurd is when “one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (13). This “why,” however, is merely the beginning of a quest in search of fundamental meaning and purpose in human life.

What happens after this “why,” this admitting of futility in the everyday routine of modern American life, is what Charles Bukowski explores through his protagomal character Henry Chinaski. From the realization of the absurd in *Ham on Rye* to the model of conquering its inescapable qualities in *Hollywood*, Chinaski provides a model for living from an existential viewpoint freely and truly. It is on this existential journey through the routines of work, sex, and even leisure that Charles Bukowski shows the reader how to avoid judging that everything in life is nothingness and meaningless, and how to avoid the final conclusion that life is not worth living; thus suicide is the only rational finale.

Although the legendary poet of skid row appears to be the unlikeliest candidate for providing any model of living aside from depravity, herein lies Charles Bukowski’s relevance as a modern thinker, a perpetual source of inspiration to overcome the seemingly insurmountable drudgery of common, everyday, existence. Camus asserts “judging whether or not life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (3) and through Henry Chinaski’s endless struggles and misfortunes Bukowski answers this question succinctly with a resounding “absolutely.” As crass and unrefined as Bukowski’s approach to describing American living is, writing him off solely on the basis of aesthetics implies that only the beautiful and socially acceptable can be profound. However, Charles Bukowski is the prophet in a movement of literary thought concerned with communicating life’s frustrations through the usage of authentic emotion in an accurate depiction of the human condition rather than glossing over it with pleasing adjectives. Though his membership in laity is apparent, he writes about the transcendent bonds that connect every human being and the senseless routine that separates and categorizes people into

different classes of the American Dream. In short, Henry Chinaski represents what binds and liberates us from the stranglehold of the absurd and its incessant claim that life is worthless. In this essay I will explain how Henry Chinaski provides a model for existential living and how he liberates himself from the absurd by paralleling the life of Henry Chinaski with the routine of Sisyphus using Charles Bukowski's novels *Ham on Rye*, *Factotum*, *Post Office*, *Women*, and *Hollywood*.

Before we can determine how Henry Chinaski provides an existential model for living with knowledge of the absurd, the absurd must be clearly defined in Camus's terms. Essentially the absurd is the meaningless routine in everyday life that arises when man and the world come face to face and man "feels an alien, a stranger...this divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (6). In short, any routine that has no meaning outside of custom is the absurd. It is something that, once realized, appears contradictory to any justification for its existence. However, the absurd is not governed by routine, but by an unconscious routine, when the routine ceases to be a conscious decision. In fact, "the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together" (30). For Henry Chinaski the absurd is the work place, the sorting of mail, sex with women, betting on the horses. All of these things are not of Chinaski, but results of how Chinaski and the world interact.

Becoming aware of the absurd is simple, just a beginning. Were Bukowski to stop at pointing out the absurd his writing would offer nothing worth considering. It is in the next step of the journey through life, overcoming the absurd, that makes Bukowski significant. Camus writes "there are but two methods of thought" for overcoming the absurd: "the method of La Palisse and the method of Don Quixote" (4). The method of fighting what is worth fighting, or the method of creating something to fight solely for the purpose of overcoming.

Although Chinaski considers manifestations of the absurd to be oppressive giants, appears crazy to those around him, and lives most of his life as the lowest rank in American society, the similarities with Don Quixote end there. Chinaski does not delude himself into believing his female companions are all beautiful maidens, nor is he a self-proclaimed knight convinced that his actions are the rightings of wrongdoings; quite the contrary. Henry Chinaski openly admits the physical abnormalities and faults of his women as well as the futility in toppling a system of tyrannous monsters. Instead, Chinaski understands that he is a disposable cog and a revolting, dirty, man whose actions are often unethical. Unlike Don Quixote, he is fully aware of what he is, and embraces this. Don Quixote gets into "the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking" (8). Camus calls this "eluding" (8).

Because Henry Chinaski understands who he is as a person and does not elude the absurd, his method is more like La Palisse's best explained by "The Song of La Palisse":

Gentlemen, hear if you please  
the song of famous La Palisse,  
You may indeed enjoy it  
as long as you find it fun.  
La Palisse didn't have the means

to pay for his own birth,  
But he did not lack anything  
once his riches were plenty.

He was quite fond of travel,  
going all over the kingdom,  
When he was in Poitiers  
You would not find him in Vendôme!  
He enjoyed a boat ride  
and, whether in peace or in war,  
He would always go by water  
when he didn't go by land.

He drank every morning  
some wine from a barrel,  
For eating at his neighbors  
he would always go in person.  
He preferred at good meals  
his dishes to be tasty and tender  
And had his Mardi Gras  
always on the eve of Ashes.

He shone like a sun,  
his hair was blonde,  
He would have had no equals  
had he been the only one.  
He had diverse talents,  
some even claimed this:  
Whenever he wrote in verse,  
he did not write in prose.

to tell the truth  
a rather mediocre dancer,  
But he did not sing so bad  
if he chose to shut up.  
They tell that he would never  
have taken the decision  
of loading his two pistols  
when he had no ammunition.

Monsieur d'la Palisse is dead,  
he died before Padua,  
A quarter hour before his death,  
he was still quite alive.  
He was by sorry fate  
wounded by a cruel hand  
Since he died of it, we fear  
that the wound was a mortal one.

Lamented by his soldiers,  
his death is to be envied,  
And the day of his passing away  
was the last day of his life.  
He died on a Friday,  
the last day of his age,  
Had he died on the Saturday,  
he would have lived longer.

Chinaski, like La Palisse, is a man who fights against the odds and deems that fight worth dying for. This fight is what allows Chinaski to liberate himself from the absurd and its senseless routines. However, liberation from the absurd does not come easily for Chinaski. Freedom only occurs after an epic struggle through five novels covering nearly 70 years of his life. In fact, “a man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it” (31). Essentially the struggle for liberation from the absurd is not an endpoint in itself. Camus explains that “at this moment the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man’s life and finds its home there” (51). This does not mean liberation from the absurd is impossible, however. Because the absurd is impossible to separate from man due to his constant presence in the world, eternal freedom is impossible, but “if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action” (57): this is Chinaski’s realization. By choosing to bet at the races, or write novels, or have sex with women Chinaski exercises his freedom of action. He finds that the only way to escape the absurd is to remain aware of it and actively choose. In short, to just keep doing.

Integrating Camus’s absurd with the myth of Sisyphus is obvious; the routine of pushing a rock up a hill only to have it fall ad infinitum is the most basic model of the absurd. The endless system of promotions supposedly a realization of the American Dream is no different than Sisyphus’s rock. Every day people struggle to provide themselves with food, shelter, and a few personal possessions all the while convincing themselves that this is meaningful. However, rarely are those personal possessions much less the food and shelter enjoyed. None of those things reflect a life of purpose and conscious action, but a vicious cycle filling their life with the absurd. The idea of sex producing pleasure as an end result is another example of the absurd. Sex becomes a routine meant to help achieve pleasure, but that pleasure is rarely savored. Even leisure becomes routine, just some action to fill time between working. The loss of freedom and the reign of the absurd in all of these three examples is what Chinaski exhibits how to reject. First in *Ham On Rye* Henry Chinaski becomes aware of the absurd avoiding it until the last moment. Then, as he progresses through early adulthood in *Factotum* and *Post Office* he tries to evade the work routine as a means of avoiding the absurd only to find himself trapped in the absurdity of sexual routine in his fifties in *Women*. Finally, however, Chinaski stops avoiding the absurd and accepts it well into his sixties in *Hollywood* thus choosing freedom of thought and action over the mindlessness of the absurd.