

Name:

Professor:

Course:

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Selected poems: the 12 hour night & Suicide Note

The Evil Evolution of Self-Preservation

The entire social-ecological system is built upon interdependence, where animals, plants, and humans compete both within and outside of their species, protecting their resources and bloodlines. In the name of self-preservation, we sacrifice, kill, and exploit. This fundamental principle across all species lays the foundation for the complexities found in the two selected poems, *Suicide Note* and *The 12-Hour Night*. Though neither poem involves direct physical killing, they both reveal how the drive for self-preservation can evolve into greed, self-destruction, and a sublimation of spirit.

Since the dawn of the industrial revolutions, the working class in America has been exploited under capitalism. Workers were often underpaid, forced to work long hours, and subjected to suboptimal conditions and cruelty. With these challenges in mind, the working-class Americans staged numerous strikes throughout the 20th century to demand better working conditions and treatment. *The 12-Hour Night* by Charles Bukowski, written in the latter half of the 20th century, is a literary response to these struggles. The poem sheds light on the narrator's decision to quit his job and the reactions of his co-workers. Through this, Bukowski aims to depict the grim realities faced by workers and to spark awareness and action.

"I was drained, empty and so were my co-workers," Bukowski writes. "We huddled together under the whip, under intolerable conditions... our bodies were worn, our spirits whipped." These lines poignantly capture the physical and mental exhaustion experienced by workers at the time. The brevity of the sentences underscores the grim reality of sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, hopelessness, and the overwhelming drive to survive for the sake of family. The harsh conditions workers endured were not just a matter of inconvenience—they were life-altering.

The historical context of the early 20th century reveals the true dangers of the working-class environment. For instance, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 killed 146 workers, mostly women, due to locked exits and a lack of safety measures. The workers, trapped in the burning building, were left with no way out. This event serves as a powerful example of the disregard for worker safety that permeated industrial America, an element Bukowski does not explicitly discuss in his poem but which is integral to understanding the era's struggles.

Another notable element in Bukowski's poem is the use of the phrase "huddled together under the whip." While this could be seen as an exaggeration, it invites a question: Were all racial groups subjected to this violence equally? Bukowski wrote *The 12-Hour Night* after the civil rights movement, a period when racial discrimination was still rampant in the United States. This raises the possibility that not all workers were treated with the same degree of brutality, especially considering that racial tensions and inequality were still prevalent at the time.

Suicide Note, on the other hand, presents the voice of an Asian American student who takes her own life after failing to meet her parents' academic expectations. The poem underscores the destructive influence of unhealthy parental expectations, particularly within the context of Asian American families, where academic success is often seen as the only pathway to personal and familial honor. The child's drive to please her parents, to achieve perfect grades as a form of self-preservation for the family's social standing, tragically culminates in her death. In this case, the desire for a better socioeconomic future manifests as a dangerous obsession with academic achievement—one that overlooks the mental and emotional toll on the child.

The poem highlights how the pressure to perform academically is not just about personal achievement, but about fulfilling the parental expectation to elevate the family's status. In the third stanza, the narrator reflects on the imagined approval of her parents: "Harder, perhaps to please you. If only I were a son, shoulders broad. As the sunset threading through pine, I would see the light in my mother's Eyes, or the golden pride reflected In my father's dream of my wide, male hands worthy of work" (Mirikitani, 5). This passage, though expressed in a tone of possibility rather than certainty, suggests the deep-rooted gender prejudice faced by the narrator. Her parents, unable to see beyond their narrow vision of success, have placed their hopes not only on her academic performance but also on her gender, wishing for a son who could fulfill certain familial expectations. This too can be seen as a form of self-preservation: a belief that having a male child, capable of certain physical or economic feats, will ensure the family's future prosperity.

Both poems share a thematic undercurrent of exploitation driven by self-preservation. *The 12-Hour Night* captures the emotional and physical toll of working-class Americans as they labor under the oppressive systems of capitalist greed, where their well-being is disregarded in the pursuit of profit. *Suicide Note* portrays the psychological and emotional destruction wrought by parents' narrow, self-centered expectations, where a child's worth is measured solely by academic achievement. In both works, the victims are those who are exploited—whether it be workers or children—and the perpetrators are not just individuals, but also systemic forces: the capitalist system, societal expectations, and even the fundamental instinct of self-preservation that can spiral into greed, selfishness, and harm.

Both *The 12-Hour Night* and *Suicide Note* reveal the destructive side of self-preservation, showing how a drive to survive and succeed can easily become distorted into greed, vanity, and ultimately self-destruction. Whether it is the exploitation of the working class by capitalists or the unbearable academic pressures placed on children by their parents, both poems expose the ways in which societal and familial systems prioritize success at the expense of human dignity and well-being. The victims—working-class Americans and the Asian American student—suffer not only from external forces but also from the internalized beliefs and expectations that society instills in them. Through these narratives, the poets invite us to question the true cost of self-preservation, urging us to consider the moral and psychological consequences when this instinct is taken to an extreme.

Works Cited

the 12 hour night, Charles Bukowski, pg. 5

Suicide Note, Janice Mirikitani, pg.5-6