

Chicago Poems:

The Writing of Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*

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“The snowflakes look so beautiful out there in the dark, don't they Lillian?” Carl Sandburg asked his wife during his break after writing for four hours straight in his trusty pocket notebook. “There is something about how you can see them in the night sky which reminds me of us...”

“How is that?” Lillian asked with her eyes half open, about to go to sleep for the night.

Sandburg then paused, glanced at the pencil half gone in his hand, then looked back up at his wife and said very calmly, “No matter how dark it is, or how dark it may seem, I'm still here. We're still here. And our time to be seen... will come.”

He then got up, kissed his wife on the forehead, went into his room and shut the door. He was on a mission and that mission was to write because it was the only thing that Carl Sandburg had left. He had no audience, only himself, his wife, and his words of sorrow. That autumn of 1913 was a rough time for Sandburg. He lost his job at the *System: The Magazine of Business*, his free verse poem “Chicago” had been rejected by the *American Magazine* (later to be accepted by *Poetry* magazine in 1914) ⁱ, and his second child, whom was a girl, did not survive at birth. ⁱⁱ

But instead of letting his failures ruin his life, he decided to turn sorrow into anger which he put into his poetry. In a way, it was his boss who had fired him, F.M. Feiker, who gave him advice which motivated Sandburg to take that next step. He told him right after he fired him from

the *System*, “I sincerely want to see you in a place where you can develop yourself to best advantage. It is my opinion that you cannot do this in our organization. Consequently I feel that you ought to get into another line as soon as possible.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It was Sandburg’s job to find that “line”. He found a job as an editor for the *American Artisan and Hardware Record*, but it wasn’t what he wanted. He lived in Chicago, but it was in Milwaukee where he was a successful politician and journalist, only writing as a poet as a secondary interest.^{iv} However, it was Chicago that brought the best out of Sandburg. He wrote every night page by page about the city’s people, buildings, and even crime. Along with the city, he also wrote about his personal failures and losses.

Sandburg, having already been up for almost half the night, decided to take a break and took out his then rejected poem entitled, “Chicago” and began to read it out loud to himself, “Hog Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat...”^v

He then paused, placed the poem down and realized that he had to try again. He knew that for some reason, he had to get this poem out there with other works. With this sudden realization, he then glanced out of the window and began to write on newsprint...

Give me hunger,
O you gods that sit and give
The world its orders.

He then continued to write more and more into the night, basing each line, each stanza off of how the outside forces were running his life, and he was not going to take it anymore. He was

poor, had a dead beat job, a beautiful family to take care of, and he was not going to take it anymore. Sandburg then made the realization that had to write and turn his poems into something special. His eyes were then slowly starting to close when he realized he had no title for his newly written piece. For motivation, he glanced outside once more and because of the motivation off of “Chicago” and the snowflakes, he then smiled, stared back down at the newsprint and began to write the title... **At a Window** Sandburg then passed out asleep with his worn out pencil in his hand as the snowflakes of inspiration fell outside of his window of opportunity.

Sandburg continued to write poems and work at the small trade journal for another year, each night in and night out working on new poems, revising old poems, even just writing down notes on future ideas for poems. He was focused on getting his grief and anguish out into the world through his poetry, and it was proven his works.

Sandburg wanted to go deeper into the people and workers of Chicago, so through his job he covered the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Union, which was then led by a man by the name of Sidney Hillman, who was mostly ill in bed throughout the entire struggle. Sandburg visited Hillman often because he wanted as many examples as possible of workers who were affected by businesses and he wanted to improve his attitude towards the abuse of the poor workers of Chicago. ^{vi}

One day after he visited Hillman, who was growing weaker and weaker by the day having to deal with his sickness and the fight that he had within himself for the betterment of Chicago’s workers, Sandburg was in a waiting room awaiting an interview with a juvenile-court judge. While he was waiting, he pictured Hillman’s face which was complete with sorrow,

sickness, and grief, but it also contained optimism. Because of this spark of hope in the face of Hillman, Sandburg began to picture the faces of those workers treated unfairly first handedly by businesses and suddenly had the urge to write.

He took out his pencil and a piece of newsprint that was in his already stuffed coat pocket full of paper he collected, unfolded it, and began to write...^{vii}

The fog comes On little cat feet

Four lines and fifteen words later, Sandburg put his pencil back into his jacket and went into his interview with the judge. On the piece of paper, the title of “Fog” was written on top and the twenty-two word poem underneath the title not only was short and sweet, but it also showed the plain lives of people in America, a very simple but moving piece of work according to Sandburg.

During the interview, Sandburg could not get the poem off of his mind. The judge would answer a question and instead of writing down the answer, Sandburg would think about what he could do to revise or add to his work of wonder next to his heart. That poem was, to him, the springboard for his creative juices to be able to write anything and everything that had to do with the turmoil, pleasures, and shifting lives of the residents that were around him on an everyday basis in his town, their town, Chicago.

Once Sandburg got home, he walked straight into his room, shut the door, and began to take out all the poems that he had ever written during the last few years. Like a kid on Christmas morning, he rummaged through all his poetry written on different sorts of paper that were piled

on his desk, on the floor, even next to his book shelf. He looked at all the different sorts of titles including: “Sketch”, “Masses”, “Lost”, and “Cripple”, which was about an actual handicapped person that he came across a few days earlier and compared him to a large flower full of potential and beauty and looked up to by nature, but is looked down upon by society.

After he read the last line of “Cripple”, Sandburg noticed his “Chicago” poem that was sitting on the edge of his desk from the night before. He picked it up again and began to read out loud where he left off, “...Player with Railroads and the Nation’s Freight Handler; Stormy, husky, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders...”

“City of Big Shoulders.” He then repeated to himself underneath his breath with his mind full of ideas as his eyes slowly began to look up curiously. He continued to read on and while he was reading, he began to remember exactly what he saw and witnessed which motivated him to write the poem...

I was walking down the street staring up at the large buildings with my mindset on the workers of Chicago with their broad shoulders and large statures, but with no positive thoughts.

I compared this to the buildings... **City of the Big Shoulders**

As I continued to walk down the paved street and noticed everyone on the street with high spirits, happy, enjoying the day that was thrown upon them. **another city with**

lifted head singing so proud to be alive... *I then saw a*

group of workers working and began to describe to myself the adjectives that best fit these

*warriors of the city: Bareheaded, Shoveling, Wrecking, Planning, Building, breaking, rebuilding... The workers were so underappreciated even though they were the ones that made Chicago what it was. But instead of quitting and giving up, I noticed they were laughing. I heard them laughing. **Laughing!** What strength I thought. What kind of heart do these workers have to continue to work despite the sneers, the sweat, and the abuse that they were given by their companies and businesses. This is Chicago. This is my home. **Freight***

Handler to the Nation.

“Carl!” Lillian Sandburg then screamed, knocking him out of his trance given to him by the words of his poetry, “You’ve been in here for over three hours! Dinner is ready.”

“Alright,” Sandburg then replied with a smile. But before his wife was able to leave the room, he stopped her and said, “I’m publishing my poetry. I cannot let this one go.” His wife just smiled, gave him a kiss, and said, “Wash your hands before dinner.”

After dinner, Sandburg began to put together his manuscript of all his poetry to be published. His dedication was unable to be measured. He took time into choosing all the pieces that he felt would make his manuscript the best possible. He was almost like a man possessed, putting together pieces upon pieces of emotion, sweat, and tears. Nothing was going to stop him or deny him now... and he knew it.

By the beginning of the new year of 1916, Sandburg finished his manuscript and gave it the title of *Chicago Poems* because of the recommendation from his good friend Alice Corbin

Henderson. Since it was all done and ready to be shipped out, Sandburg mailed his manuscript of 260 poems to the publisher, Henry Holt & Company. A month later, his book was accepted and he was signed. His book was getting published.^{viii}

Although he was very open in his poetry, between the months of acceptance and its actual release, Sandburg kept things quiet. When he was asked by everyone as to why he was keeping it quiet, the only answer he replied was, “I’m trying to unload a book of poetry on the world.”

^{ix}Everyone just shook their heads with smiles and anxiety as to what Sandburg was going to release to Americans across the nation. They were not let down.

Later on that year in the spring of 1916, *Chicago Poems* written by Carl Sandburg, was published. ^x The reviews on it were very impressive. Amy Lowell of the *New York Times* made it out to be “one of the most original books this age has produced.”^{xi} The publishing company that published the book put in the jacket of the volume that Sandburg’s “ability to concentrate a whole story or picture or character within the compass of a few lines” is one of the “best achievements of recent successful American poets.” ^{xii}

Sandburg was finally able to dig himself out of the hole of depression that his life had dug for him. The book was a success and gave Sandburg the title of “The New Spirit in American Poetry.” ^{xiii}

However, with all the fame and recognition of being “the new voice in poetry” Sandburg handed one of his first books of publication to his wife, Lillian, to read. As soon as she looked at the first page of the one hundred and fifty pages of poetry^{xiv}, she noticed the dedication and shed a tear.

Noticing this, Sandburg walked over to his wife to see what she was getting all emotional about. She then calmly pointed at the page that she currently was on and smiled. Through the tear that dampened the page, it read:

Dedicated to “Wife and Pal”

Lillian Steichen Sandburg ^{xv}

Carl Sandburg then closed his hard backed savior with a dark green cover, gave his wife and pal a hug, and whispered in her ear, “I told you we would both be seen.”

He then paused, fixed his white hair, smiled again, and said “I told you our time will come.”

- ⁱ Allen, Carl Sandburg, p. 17
- ⁱⁱ Niven, Carl Sandburg, pp. 232-233
- ⁱⁱⁱ Niven, Carl Sandburg, p. 233
- ^{iv} Niven, Carl Sandburg, p. 234
- ^v Callahan, Carl Sandburg: His Life and Works, p.57
- ^{vi} Callahan, Carl Sandburg: His Life and Works, p. 60
- ^{vii} Niven, Carl Sandburg, p. 249
- ^{viii} Niven, Carl Sandburg, pp. 270-271
- ^{ix} Niven, Carl Sandburg, p. 271
- ^x Crowder, Carl Sandburg, p. 48
- ^{xi} Allen, Carl Sandburg, p. 17
- ^{xii} Sandburg, Chicago Poems
- ^{xiii} Niven, Carl Sandburg, p. 272
- ^{xiv} Crowder, Carl Sandburg, p. 60

^{xv} Sandburg, *Chicago Poems*

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