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Carl Sandburg: The People's Poet

"The Poet is a heroic figure belonging to all ages; whom all ages possess, when once he is produced, whom the newest age as the oldest may produce – and will produce, always when Nature pleases. Let Nature send a Hero-soul; in no age is it other than possible that he may be shaped into a Poet." – Thomas Carlyle (Epstein 47)

According to Joseph Epstein, "to find an American poet who received public adulation worthy of the king of heroism described by Carlyle," shown in the quote above, "one must go as far back as 1878" (47). Written in 1992, twenty five years after Sandburg's death, Epstein states that "perhaps no poet – or literary man generally – was more gaudily praised in his lifetime than Carl Sandburg" (47). But with all this praise Sandburg received, his recognition was not justified and appreciated until the publication of his *Chicago Poems* in 1916. Since that time, numerous critics have "hog butchered" his works and words, yet at the same time, all of them seemed to respect the white haired man that was and always will be Carl Sandburg. Critic Bernard Duffey remarked that Sandburg "is something of an institution" (Beyers). Others talked about how much of a "fine, generous man" he was "as talking about his poetry" referring to him simply as "Carl" (Beyers). It was this personal connection that Sandburg had with his critics, society, and

everything in between whether it was literature, race, Americana, and religion throughout the years since 1916, that has rightfully given Carl Sandburg the title of "The People's Poet."

For starters, Carl Sandburg will always be remembered best for his work in literature whether it be his letters, writings, or more famously, his poetry. Through his words and poetry, Daniel Hoffman states that Sandburg "was a true populist poet who really spoke to the people" (Beyers). Although this positive criticism was given in 1995, one could go back to 1959 and find similar criticism written by Michael Yatron in which he says that Sandburg "devoted his life to translating into poetry the idiom of the people, by whom he meant the majority of native-born and naturalized Americans, who built post-Civil War America with the strength of their hands, the sweat of their brows, and the obstinacy of their spirit" (524). However, before 1916, it wasn't always this way.

Before Sandburg began to receive his praise, his life was full of turmoil and sadness. In the autumn of 1913, he lost his job at *System* magazine, his second child did not survive at birth, and the poem that would launch him into the upper stratosphere of literary greatness, "Chicago," was rejected by the American Magazine (Niven). But once it was finally accepted by *Poetry* magazine in 1914, Sandburg finally reached the turning point of his career that he had been waiting for. In a matter of two years, he went from an out of a job, unknown poet to a "widely acknowledged vanguard of modern poetry" (Beyers). However, it was in "Chicago" that really showed America the political side of Sandburg's writing and "led critics to diagnose a split in Sandburg's poetic personality – the socialist propagandizer versus the lyric poet" (Beyers).

Mark Van Wienen in 1995 argued that *Chicago Poems* "appeared at a time when Sandburg was active both in socialist politics and in literary circles" (89). He also stated that Sandburg's earlier poems are "set in the context of Sandburg's socialist politics of the teens rather than the moderate populism of his later career" (89). With this identification of Sandburg writing poetry with a hint of politics, critics began to point out that "the role of the intellectual speaking on behalf of the People is hardly without complications" (Wienen 93).

One of the critics that Wienen was talking about, Amy Lowell, of *Tendencies of Modern American Poetry* in 1916 wrote that, "Judged from the standard of pure art, it is a pity that so much of Mr. Sandburg's work concerns itself with entirely ephemeral phenomena" (Wienen 94). What the criticism tried to show was to distinguish "the lyrical from the political in Sandburg" (Wienen 95). Lowell was not alone in her review because William Aspenwall of the *Dial* stated that "the first Mr. Sandburg is merely a clever reporter, with a bias for social criticism. The second, within his limits, is a true artist, whose method of concentration, of intense, objective realization, ranges him with those who themselves 'Imagists.'" (Wienen 95). Wienen makes a good overall point when he states, "because of the "propagandistic" lines and poems are at least as vigorous in rhetoric and imagery as the "poetical" ones, *Chicago Poems* undermines the sharp opposition established by critics between poetry and politics, art and propaganda" (99). But with all the talk and criticism that surrounded *Chicago Poems*, Sandburg was also known for another piece of literature, not being in the form of poetry, but in the form of a different sort of medium, biography.

In May of 1940, Joseph Auslander wrote a piece in College English entitled, "A Poet Writes Biography." In this article, he wrote about how "for twenty years Carl Sandburg, poet, teller of fanciful tales, troubadour of American folk song, [had] been writing the life and times of Abraham Lincoln" (Auslander 651). Throughout the piece, he reports on why Sandburg even wrote such a biography and why it turned out to be so well accepted by critics considering he was a poet. "Biography, like poetry," he stated, "is a science and an art: a science in that it is a kind of knowing; an art in that it is a way of writing… in a certain sense every poet is a biographer but not every biographer is a poet" (Auslander 649). This idea rang true throughout the entire article in the reviews by the critics that Auslander felt like including. Edward O'Neill came straight out against Sandburg stating that "there is no argument in this book, no refutation of previous facts, no theorizing, no footnotes or bristling appendices…" (Auslander 651). M.L. Elting disagreed with O'Neill stating that "the more we read, the more we felt that Lincoln himself would have liked tremendously this story of his life and times" (Auslander 652). Although the critics mentioned go back and forth questioning the way in which Sandburg writes Lincoln's biography presented in that of "a storyteller" (Auslander 654), Auslander at the end seemed to love it. "We cannot say that nothing better will ever be written about Lincoln, but we can say that there has been nothing as definitive and noble to date. Every American carries in his heart an unwritten biography of Lincoln. Sandburg has written that biography" (Auslander 657). With the writing of this biography, America truly got to see the range and skill of Sandburg as not just as poet, but as a writer. Since Abraham Lincoln was "one of the major preoccupations of Carl Sandburg" (Satton 19), he did not stop at his biography to talk about him. In his poem, "The People, Yes," Sandburg wrote that Lincoln "saw personal liberty across wide horizons" (Satton

19). It is argued by William A. Satton that "it is this statement which may be used as a keynote of a beginning exploration of Sandburg's consciousness of and attitudes toward the Negro" (19) which again demonstrates that he was indeed the "People's Poet" because of his acceptance by all types of people whether it be ethnicity, class, or race.

Michael Yatron wrote in *The English Journal* in 1959 that "in the area of racial relationships, Sandburg is without prejudice" (525) and that he was "a champion of the Negro" (526). Because of the race riots which occurred after World War I, Sandburg was sent by the *Chicago Daily News* to report on the problem (Yatron 526). His report spawned a book entitled, *The Chicago Race Riots*, which clearly showed Sandburg's "rage against the mistreatment of people" and that "Negroes are, naturally, entitled to the same treatment as anyone else" (Sutton 20-21). Critics of this time, however, were puzzled that Sandburg did not "get more specific and institent… on behalf of broad personal freedom and justice" (Sutton 21). Because of this, *The Chicago Race Riots* did not get the recognition that *Chicago Poems* or Lincoln's biography received, allowing the problem to gradually get worse as proven over time by history. But besides the lack of attention his report received, Sandburg still firmly believed that we are all "named All God's Children" (Sutton 21), and this mentioning of God leads to another topic that Sandburg touched upon in his 1939 "The People, Yes," that being religion.

Critic J.D. Arenstein reported in 2003 that "The People, Yes," is "shot through with biblical source material, analogues, and allusions… although Sandburg set out to celebrate 'the people,' he accomplished this and more, creating a text that updates the biblical focus on the people and their histories and brings this ancient threat into the New World" (Arenstein). A few

years earlier in 1997, critic Alfred Kazin made the point that “Sandburg drew heavily on the Bible and may have intended “The People, Yes,” to serve for this humanistic faith of the New World as the Bible did for the deity-centric religion of the Old, and his thoughts on the matter come to a climax with just such looking, such seeking, such as ‘proof of an American religion” (Arenstein). The main argument, however, made by Arenstein is that “the theme of hope” runs throughout “The People, Yes,” by constituting “a major component of Sandburg’s belief in the potential of the people” (Arenstein).

This potential in people no matter what class, race, ethnicity, size, shape, or type was what made Sandburg the poet of the people and gave him the reputation of being a famous poet with or without the help of critics. Carl Sandburg was much more than that. He is the only American poet ever asked to address Congress, he won two Pulitzer Prizes, he appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, and he was once considered a possible “possible Republican candidate to run in 1940 against Franklin D. Roosevelt” (Epstein). But with all his fame, Sandburg never really wanted it. He once said that “Fame is a figment of a pigment. It comes and goes. It changes with every generation” (Epstein). This ultimately became no further than the truth for Carl Sandburg.

Towards the end of his life, critics and fellow poets attacked his verse. William Carlos Williams, who reviewed Sandburg’s *Collected Poems*, wrote in the September 1951 issue of *Poetry* that “the poems show no development in thought, in the technical handling of the material, in the knowledge of the forms, the art of treating the line” (Epstein). It was this same free verse which, earlier in his career, “became the mode of choice for American poets” and resulted in critics praising his works that it showed “pure, American spirit” (Beyers). In a way,

"Sandburg's contribution to literary history was his updating forms and genres, not his ignoring them" (Beyers). Because of this attack on his verse, he came back stating that "modern poets, the sort of poets vaunted by his enemies the New Critics, were anti-democratic, writing not for the people but for each other" (Epstein).

In a way, this belief is what made Sandburg more than just a poet. "In his politics, Sandburg was for the People: the little man, the worker, the downtrodden, the ground-down" (Epstein), which is what made him Society's Poet. Because of his nonconformity nature and writing about his anger against discrimination against blacks and the topic of religion, he was Race's Poet and Religion's Poet. Historian Steele Commager, who reviewed Sandburg's Lincoln biography stated that, "the poets have always understood Lincoln… it is fitting that from the pen of a poet [Sandburg] has come the greatest of all Lincoln biographies. One of the greatest biographies of our literature" (Epstein), he was History's and the Poet's Poet. Michael Yatron put it best when he said "Sandburg rode freight trains, washed dishes, worked in a construction camp, threshed wheat, learned the painter's trade, enlisted in the Army, was a college student, a hobo, a wandering minstrel, a newspaperman, a militant Socialist, a poet, and a man of letters," (526-527) he was America's Poet. However, it was own wife, Lillian, who stated it best whenever she said in his defense towards the end of his life, "That's all right, he belongs to the world… He is the People's Poet" (Epstein).

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