

CARL SANDBURG'S UNIQUE USE OF LANGUAGE IN POETRY:  
HIS RATIONALE, TECHNIQUES, AND MERITS

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our supervision by DIANA MAE SIMS

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HIS RATIONALE, TECHNIQUES, AND MERITS

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Carl Sandburg

## PREFACE

Although a plethora of written material exists concerning Carl Sandburg--the man, the poet, the biographer, the folk-singer, in the preparation of this thesis my examination of some of that material disclosed no prior synthesis of the ideas which are my central theme here. Therefore, not only have I had the pleasure of investigating an aspect of this multi-faceted author's work, but also have I been able thereby possibly to contribute a fresh approach to Carl Sandburg in which other students and his other admirers may be interested. But at the least, perhaps my study shows that there is still room for further critical research in regard to Sandburg's verse.

My own interest in Sandburg began deductively but thereafter proceeded inductively. As an undergraduate enrolled in a study of modern poetry, I noticed upon leafing through the required textbook that the text contained a representative portion of Sandburg's poetry but that this section was not included in the syllabus for the course. My thesis, then, originated as an attempt to answer my natural question: why was Sandburg's work not a part of our course? However, I soon found so many merits in Sandburg's verse--indications in each poem of Sandburg's purposeful manipula-

tion and utilization of all of the elements of language available to a poet--that my goal became not only to answer that question but also to generalize about what Sandburg tried to do in verse, why he did it, and how well he did so, and finally, to propose his undeniable value to American literature. Today each new reading of a Sandburg poem from his vast body of poetry reaffirms for me the conclusions which I offer here.

In the preparation of this thesis my committee and I deemed it appropriate to place poems under consideration in such a format in the final manuscript that these poems appear as completely visual entities. Carrying out this objective has caused unavoidable spaces on some of the pages of the text. The aim of clarity, however, seemed more important to us than a continuum of appearance wherever a choice between the two was necessary.

During the process of studying and writing about Carl Sandburg's unique use of language in poetry, three persons have given me much of their time and many valuable suggestions. I am indebted to Dr. J. Dean Bishop for his assistance in all areas of the form of the manuscript and to Dr. Turner S. Kobler for her seminal ideas which became some of the propositions here advanced. In addition, Dr. Lavon B. Fulwiler's knowledgeable assistance concerning

Anglo-Saxon etymologies was essential to my discussion of Sandburg's diction, and Dr. Fulwiler gave unselfishly of her time, interest, and support from our first discussion of my subject to her reading of the final form of this thesis.

  
Diana Mae Sims

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## CHAPTER I

### THE RATIONALE IN SANDBURG'S POETRY

Poetry is an art practised with the terribly plastic material of human language.

--Carl Sandburg

To the middle-aged American who as a youth read Carl Sandburg's poem "Grass" and memorized Sandburg's "Fog," who a priori associates any study of Abraham Lincoln with Carl Sandburg's prize-winning biography of Lincoln, and who enjoys reviewing that memorable collection of photographs The Family of Man, to which Sandburg contributed headnotes for its pictures--to a person with that kind of veneration for Carl Sandburg the response inevitably is perplexity upon discovering that a study of modern poetry in the 1970's may very likely not include "Grass" or "Fog" or, indeed, any of Sandburg's poetry. Although still anthologized, Sandburg's verse now rests with that of five other American poets whom one literary historian categorizes as poets popular briefly in their day, in a chapter aptly entitled for his purposes, "Sic Transit Gloria: Six Famous Poets."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 443.



Writing within the last decade, an English professor observes this dichotomy in the popularity of Sandburg's verse:

His [Sandburg's] reputation has suffered in almost direct ratio to the rise of Eliot's and Pound's, both members of his own generation; and this is unfortunate, for he has written some poetry that deserves to live.<sup>1</sup>

And a critic worried a generation ago that Sandburg's language, his "new poetic diction expressive of a modern world," would limit his

poetry's appeal in time and place. Slang, after all, has a brief life; and nothing is quite so woebegone as a slang phrase passed out of current use.<sup>2</sup>

But a study of Carl Sandburg's verse proves its enduring poetic value and shows specifically that Sandburg's use of ordinary speech in verse is the haecceitas of his poetry: the essence upon which it can take its stand as appropriate to that genre and deserving of continued inclusion in vital American literature. Undeniably, Carl Sandburg's use of language is purposefully unique in several ways. In particular he employs those new methods not merely to be distinctive but to accomplish traditional poetic purposes in a form adapted to the uniqueness of Americana. He

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<sup>1</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, "Carl Sandburg: Fire and Smoke," The South Atlantic Quarterly, 59 (Summer, 1960), 316.

<sup>2</sup>Rica Brenner, Ten Modern Poets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), p. 133.

employs four unique technical devices, all of which combine to achieve poetic value: his standard diction to mirror his conception of typical American expression, life, and character; slang and colloquialisms to incorporate by reference their social and cultural contexts and to highlight by contrast his repetitive theme; lapses from standard American grammar to portray his subjects through authentically-spoken discourse; and his rhythms to reflect the cadences of actual speech. Indeed, Sandburg records his attitude toward, and his purposes for, the ways he uses language:

Unless we keep on the lookout we write book language and employ the verbiage of dead men instead of using the speech of people alive to-day, people whose tools, games, crimes, and sacrifices are wearing out an old language and making a new one.<sup>1</sup>

And Richard Crowder, who has written extensively concerning American literature, distills Sandburg's purpose in this respect:

Sandburg made conscientious effort to achieve the very thing he had said in "Onion Days" [a poem written by Sandburg in 1913] could not be done-- to capture through language, arrangement, and rhythm the mood and theme of his material.<sup>2</sup>

In connection with purpose in poetry Babette Deutsch, a well-known literary critic and translator,

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Sandburg, quoted in Harry Hansen, Midwest Portraits: A Book of Memories and Friendships (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Crowder, Carl Sandburg (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 58.

theorizes that succeeding critics may not rank Sandburg among distinguished modern poets simply because they fail to recognize that Sandburg has goals different from those of the modern poets whom critics celebrate in Sandburg's stead:

Sandburg may be disturbing, as, some eighty years ago, Walt [Whitman] was disturbing, though to a lesser degree; but he will not puzzle anybody except those who continue to measure poems by the foot and who have never learned the value for poetry of the "anti-poetic." . . . But he is not writing for other poets, or for critics, or for pedagogues; he is writing for the average wayfar-  
ing man.<sup>1</sup>

And Sandburg's friend and literary associate Harry Hansen in a reminiscence written early in Sandburg's career ponders this subject of purpose in poetry and whether critics are aware of Sandburg's objectives:

I have often heard Carl speak on this subject. . . . It dawned upon him very early that American life was not being expressed in its own terms, but that men were writing about the street, the country, the plain, the valley, and the people who inhabited them in a tongue that was accurate, scholarly, and full of learning, but actually not used by the people; which was in reality an alien language, like a suit of clothes imported from London.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, if Sandburg's goals be determined, then his poetry possibly can attract the appreciation which it deserves.

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<sup>1</sup>Babette Deutsch, "Poetry for the People," The English Journal, 26 (April, 1937), 274.

<sup>2</sup>Hansen, p. 57.

Sandburg himself speaks on this issue of goals in poetry, and he does so in verse form. In his poem "One Modern Poet" he characterizes a modern poet and illustrates his idea of the modern poet's design:

"ONE MODERN POET"

Having heard the instruction:  
 "Be thou no swine,"  
 He belabored himself and wrote:  
 "Beware of the semblance  
 of lard at thy flanks."<sup>1</sup>

Sandburg demonstrates in these lines of verse his view that the modern poet appropriates an expression of prose or a thought occurring in life and generates its poetic form by employing a level of diction, a type of grammar, and a form of rhythm entirely different from his model. The implication in Sandburg's commentary in verse, then, is that since he disparages the modern poet's methods, Sandburg's goal is different: he, instead, aims to reproduce his paradigm faithfully through authentic diction, grammar, and cadences of speech.

Undoubtedly, Sandburg's aim in poetry is the same as the overriding thematic purpose in the prose which won for Sandburg a Pulitzer Prize. Describing Sandburg's six-volume

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Sandburg, "One Modern Poet," The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), p. 671. Hereafter the text will cite the page number of lines of Carl Sandburg's poems quoted, and poems will be from the same edition.

biography of Abraham Lincoln which received that award for history in 1940, the Columbia Encyclopedia recites that the central thesis of this monumental work is that Lincoln is the "symbol and embodiment of the American spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Sandburg's Complete Poems received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951 for the reason that its contents, a collection of all of his poetry written from 1913 until 1950, reveal Sandburg's power as an "original and vital poet of the American scene."<sup>2</sup> And, as the Encyclopaedia Britannica relates, indeed Sandburg's "bludgeon-like phrases alternating with lovely, singing lines, . . . together with his unaffected humanitarianism, won him several prizes for his verse,"<sup>3</sup> such as that 1951 Pulitzer award.

Sandburg's rationale, then, is to use in his poetry a language uniquely characteristic of America in order to exhibit by authentic speech his American subjects and in order to portray faithfully that American spirit and that American scene. As a recent biographer of Sandburg asserts about his verse, "to have read Sandburg is to have been in the company of a profoundly sincere American and of a

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<sup>1</sup>William Bridgwater and Seymour Kurtz, The Columbia Encyclopedia, 3d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), s.v. Sandburg, Carl.

<sup>2</sup>Bridgwater and Kurtz, s.v. Sandburg, Carl.

<sup>3</sup>"Carl Sandburg," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th ed., XIX, 935.

craftsman capable of communicating pity, scorn, brawn, beauty, and an abiding love"<sup>1</sup>--in sum, his own spirit and in turn, the spirit typical of his compatriots. Likewise, Michael Yatron, an analyst of Sandburg's poetry, appraises Sandburg's purpose and the achievement of it by saying that Sandburg

is a poet descriptive of the surface, whose eye and ear are keen and who reproduces America as no one else has.<sup>2</sup>

Another aspect of Sandburg's rationale arises from his attitude toward his readers. Sandburg "was trying to communicate to an audience which was not sophisticated verbally, to whom the connotations of words are very closely related to their denotations, and to whom literary allusion and subtle metaphor are meaningless,"<sup>3</sup> continues Yatron. Thus, Sandburg's collateral aim is to attract Americans from simple walks of life to his body of literature through the use of a lingua communis.

But before an examination of the techniques by which Sandburg pursues those goals and effects a unique use of language for poetic expression, any study of his verse must counter the charge levied by not a few of Carl Sandburg's

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<sup>1</sup>Crowder, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Yatron, "Carl Sandburg: the Poet as Non-conformist," The English Journal, 48 (December, 1959), 527.

<sup>3</sup>Yatron, p. 527.

critics--the question of whether or not his work is poetry at all. And to define poetry so as to include Sandburg's verse under that genre requires answers to the questions, what is a literary work of art and, indeed, what is art itself?

One instructor of fine arts discussed these questions and cited opinions by accomplished artists in literature, architecture, and fine arts; that instructor's own definition is impressive in its validity as a universal criterion: art is an area of order.<sup>1</sup> Narrowing that category to defining a literary work of art, one linguistic expert states:

A verbal structure is literary if it presents its topic at more than one level of presentation at the same time--or, alternatively, if one and the same utterance has more than one function in the structure of meaning in which it occurs.<sup>2</sup>

And since poetry is a literary genre, surely it must fulfill both the broad criterion for a work of art and the test for a literary work of art. But distinctions between poetry and other forms of literature need to be clarified before a work by Sandburg can be classified as a poem. As one example in the attempt to make such a distinction, Edgar

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<sup>1</sup>Shirlee Shaver, lecture for "Understanding the Arts--Art," Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas, June, 1971.

<sup>2</sup>Winifred Nowottny, The Language Poets Use (London: The Athlone Press, 1965), p. 2.

Allan Poe's definition of poetry has received critical acclaim; to Poe a poem has only one criterion:

I would define the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of beauty. Its sole arbiter is taste. With the intellect or with the conscience it has only collateral relations.<sup>1</sup>

And Gerard Manley Hopkins conceived of poetry as

speech framed . . . to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand the conditions under which emotions are felt and then recorded are the primary characteristics of poetry in William Wordsworth's view:

Poetry is the imaginative expression of strong feeling, usually rhythmical . . . the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, rhythm and the poet's theme are of utmost importance to Thomas Carlyle, who commented, "Poetry, therefore, we will call musical Thought."<sup>4</sup> And Emily Dickinson broadens the form which poetry can take to virtually limitless bounds in her interpretation of poetic expression:

<sup>1</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, quoted in William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, rev. C. Hugh Holman, rev. ed. (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1960), p. 365 s.v. Poetry.

<sup>2</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoted in Thrall and Hibbard, p. 365 s.v. Poetry.

<sup>3</sup>William Wordsworth, quoted in Thrall and Hibbard, p. 365 s.v. Poetry.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Thrall and Hibbard, p. 365 s.v. Poetry.



If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold  
 no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry.  
 If I feel physically as if the top of my head were  
 taken off, I know that it is poetry.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Robert Frost's conception of poetry is pertinent and noteworthy because Frost has much in common with Sandburg. Both are poets, both are Americans, and both are of the same generation. Frost defines poetry as "words that have become deeds" and a poem as an instance "where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words."<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, from a synthesis of these views it is clear that concepts of what constitutes poetry vary to the extent that there is no objective, accepted formula for this mode of expression; rather, if any one statement can be made with certainty about poetry, it is that each writer has his own definition of this genre--a genre which is simply another form of communicating thoughts and feelings. This form of communication has a generally-accepted modern concept, however, which is that the poet

instead of attempting to reduce an unearthly elusive sensation to the lucidity of simple language--  
 invents for it a vocabulary and a syntax as unfamiliar as the sensation itself. . . . He leaves

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<sup>1</sup>Emily Dickinson, quoted in Thrall and Hibbard, p. 366 s.v. Poetry.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Frost, quoted in Brenner, p. 16.

the reader to gather from the poem the feeling, never overtly described, which inspired the poet to write it.<sup>1</sup>

Carl Sandburg's fundamental theory of the form which poetry should take, according to one critic, is the "romantic concept that poetry is simply words arranged to evoke emotion" and that poetry is the "record of a brief intensity of feeling, capable of producing similar intensities in others."<sup>2</sup> The poet John Crowe Ransom praises this theory and states in response to that definition that "this is precisely the highest function of poetry."<sup>3</sup> But there should be no perplexity about Sandburg's concept of poetry because in 1928 he published his list of thirty-eight definitions for it; one of these definitions states metaphorically:

Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.

(p. 318)

As a result of these divergent interpretations and definitions, critics have questioned the stature of Sandburg as a poet. Typical of these detractors is Yatron, who accuses Sandburg of writing prose and labeling it poetry.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Davie, "What Is Modern Poetry?" in Approaches to the Poem: Modern Essays in the Analysis and Interpretation of Poetry, ed. John Oliver Perry (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 315-16.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, p. 321.

<sup>3</sup>John Crowe Ransom, cited by Allen, p. 321.

Yatron seems sure that some of Sandburg's verse does not qualify as verse:

The language of prose and the language of metrical composition are two different entities. Thus Sandburg's work quite often degenerates into a pedestrian prosaism summed up by the word "talk."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, in 1916 when Sandburg published Chicago Poems, his first mature collection of verse, academe greeted the work with either condescension or accusations of "failure to distinguish prose matter from poetic material" and of "assaults on the English language."<sup>2</sup> But countering that posture by literati, Louis Untermeyer, critic and writer on the American scene for many years, advances the judgment that Carl Sandburg's coarseness and vulgarity in diction and form merely suit the fact that such poems deal with coarse and vulgar subjects.<sup>3</sup>

Harriet Monroe, who published much of Sandburg's early verse in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse which she founded and edited, silences those persons who cavil against Sandburg's slangy diction and absence of rhyme and metrics:

<sup>1</sup>Yatron, p. 527.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry, new and enl. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), pp. 15-16.

<sup>3</sup>Untermeyer, p. 16.

These [persons] should be reminded of Debussy's aphorism: "No fixed rule should guide the creative artist--rules are made by works of art, not for works of art."<sup>1</sup>

According to Monroe's dictum, then, a reader must examine Sandburg's poems to see what Sandburg has actually done to create art rather than how his work fulfills fixed concepts of art. To do this analysis the reader must possess that willing suspension of disbelief for which all works of art entreat, and certainly any examination of this type must deal with this poet's unique use of language.

Since there is in all poetry a rich compression and complexity arising from its intensity of feeling, its use of words to say new things or to revive a freshness of meaning, and the mingling of unusual and simple words, there is a need to explicate poetry: a complete understanding of it requires an analysis by line or stanza.<sup>2</sup> Thus, every element of poetic utterance is important, and a poet has available for artistically controlling every language moment the devices or methods of diction; meter; the sound of words, syllables, or letters; syntax or grammar; rhyme; rhythm;

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<sup>1</sup>Harriet Monroe, "Carl Sandburg," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 24 (September, 1924), 322.

<sup>2</sup>W. B. C. Watkins, Perilous Balance (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), pp. 6-8.

comparisons; and vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the poet speaks in a language of indirection and resorts to those devices or methods not only because language at best has limitations but also because poetry is in form so compressed that the poet must make each word as well as the very patterns of his words have meaning.

Out of these alternative elements of poetic language Carl Sandburg chooses to emphasize and to employ uniquely diction, vocabulary, grammar, and rhythm. In particular, Sandburg's choice of words is remarkable for its manifold illustration of his unique use of the language of poetry. And he who would understand Sandburg's rationale in that purposeful and peculiar use of the language of poetry needs to look at Sandburg's recurring subjects--The People--and at his cardinal theme--the character of American life--and to examine the deliberate use of poetic language to convey those subjects and that theme by incorporating thereby an unwritten but intended sense. In order to identify and to describe the unique techniques Sandburg uses in his verse, he needs to examine Sandburg's distinctive diction and liberal use of slang and colloquialisms, as well as to explore the linguistic ramifications of Sandburg's distinctive grammar in verse and rhythm of speech or

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<sup>1</sup>John Nist, "Hopkins and Textural Intensity: a Linguistic Analysis," College English, 22 (April, 1961), 498.

cadences of spoken discourse which Sandburg employs instead of meter. Finally, to determine the merits of Sandburg's poetry he needs first to appraise Sandburg's subjects and theme in their medium as valuable to literature for being a rich lode of Americana, and second to evaluate Sandburg's contributions to literature, the reasons for undulations in the popularity of Sandburg's poetry, and Sandburg's compensations for the student of today and tomorrow. Therefore, the logical point at which to begin an examination of Sandburg's distinctiveness in the language of poetry is his diction--a poetic element which he uses in surprisingly manifold ways.

## CHAPTER II

### TECHNICAL DEVICES OF DICTION IN THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY

Poetry is the capture of a picture, a song,  
or a flair, in a deliberate prism of words.  
--Carl Sandburg

To discuss Carl Sandburg's unique poetic diction is first to discuss what is diction in the language of poetry and then to examine the many distinctive means by which Sandburg utilizes this element of poetic utterance. Diction is choice of words, and words collectively are vocabulary. The American vocabulary is in turn many vocabularies: every occupation, pastime, social stratum, academic discipline, and, indeed, every individual's environment has varying habits of word usage.<sup>1</sup> Doubtless, Sandburg recognizes the individuality of language as an expression perhaps unique to or understandable only by each person himself, and he says so in poetic form in his poem "Fifty-Fifty":

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<sup>1</sup>Winifred Nowottny, The Language Poets Use (London: The Athlone Press, 1965), p. 39.

"FIFTY-FIFTY"

How can we be pals  
 when you speak English  
 and I speak English  
 and you never understand me  
 and I never understand you?  
 (p. 724)

In addition to the individuality of language on those personal levels, American communication systems such as newspapers, television networks, commercial billing, and timetables employ their own special written conventions of word choice. These verbal usages overlap, but in those areas where a distinction is clear, a poet can use those unique systems of communication in order to incorporate into his poem by way of reference the social and cultural context distinctive to such words or phrases.<sup>1</sup> That Carl Sandburg sought such distinctions when he composed his verse is implicit in a statement about Sandburg's diction by the well-known writer and critic Carl Van Doren:

He will not select his language from among the tried and prosperous words of poetry, but insists on grabbing up any or all words and hammering them into the shape he chooses.<sup>2</sup>

This distinctiveness is attested to by the bewilderment of British readers of Sandburg's verse as early as 1930 when the Westminster Gazette carried a comment that much of the poetry by Sandburg is "meaningless to the average Eng-

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<sup>1</sup>Nowottny, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Van Doren, Many Minds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1924), p. 149.



lish reader, so packed are his verses with strange words and phrases, alien to our genius and our language."<sup>1</sup> From this stance only a simple step, perhaps, bridges the distance between that complaint and a conclusion that it is an American language which Sandburg writes--something markedly different from the language of the English people and something like that which the commentator Malcolm Cowley describes:

Sandburg is alien to most of the Anglo-Saxon elements in American life. Its aspects which he chooses to describe are those precisely which distinguish it from life in England. . . . He is an American; not an Amayrican with the r trilled lightly against the upper teeth as in Back Bay, but a ril Amurricn.<sup>2</sup>

That same contemporary of Sandburg, writing in 1922 in the Dial, a journal of literary criticism, noted in Sandburg a new diction for poetry only eight years after Sandburg's verse first became known to the literary world through Monroe's Poetry magazine. That perception is clear in this comment from the Dial:

Sandburg writes American like a foreign language, like a language freshly acquired in which each word has a new and fascinating meaning. It is a language, in fact, which never existed before; the

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<sup>1</sup>Rica Brenner, Ten Modern Poets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "Two American Poets," Dial, November, 1922, p. 565.

separate words existed, but in the speech of no one man; Sandburg was the first to thesaurize them.<sup>1</sup>

This distinctiveness, again, is the "fruit of the most rigorous word-selection, to the end that the impression shall be conveyed with micrometric exactness . . . ,"<sup>2</sup> according to the literary essayist Llewellyn Jones. In regard to that relationship of word-selection to the impression conveyed, Sandburg, speaking of his own poetry, once remarked:

I cut out all words ending in "ity" and "ness," words describing a state of being. I search for picture words as the Indians and Chinese have them.<sup>3</sup>

And in the belief that effective poetry must have that diction of "micrometric exactness," Sandburg, notes Crowder, spent a great deal of time, often a month or more, seeking the right word.<sup>4</sup>

In respect to such exactness in word-selection a noteworthy aspect of Sandburg's diction is that, except for some adjectives, the content words in his poems, that is, his nouns, verbs, and adverbs, are all either base words--

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<sup>1</sup>Cowley, pp. 565-66.

<sup>2</sup>Llewellyn Jones, First Impressions: Essays on Poetry, Criticism, and Prosody (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1925), p. 226.

<sup>3</sup>Carl Sandburg, quoted in Karl Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1941), p. 141.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Crowder, Carl Sandburg (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 86.

minimum free forms to which suffixes can be added--or inflectional forms of such base words. These inflections are adaptations of words to grammatical functions, and the words do not undergo a change in lexical meaning. But Sandburg avoids using content or form words that are the result of derivational changes (which are achieved by attaching affixes which alter the original meaning of the form or even its part of speech).

This practice is significant in the fact that word changes involving inflections are automatic linguistic behavior to a native speaker of English. Derivational words, on the other hand, are generally confined to formal or scholarly expression in American English; they are "limited in their freedom of occurrence . . . and their meaning changes with the change in form"<sup>1</sup> even when the part of speech has undergone no change in the process of deriving another word. Thus, in a representative poem such as "A Couple" Sandburg chooses no nouns, verbs, or adverbs formed by attaching prefixes to other content words since

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<sup>1</sup>Study Guide: Linguistics for English Teachers, rev. ed. (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1965), p. 63.

prefixes, for example, are always derivational;<sup>1</sup> nor does he choose any words resulting from adding derivational suffixes to a form word.<sup>2</sup> He utilizes, however, many inflectional forms of nouns, pronouns, and verbs; these inflectional forms in that poem are underlined in the following table:

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<sup>1</sup>Jeanne H. Herndon, A Survey of Modern Grammars (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup>Sandburg's derivational expressions Postal Telegraph in line one and telegraph again in line seven of "A Couple" are interesting combination nouns well known to the generation which first saw this poem although they are perhaps esoteric to today's readers. Telegraph itself is a combination form word composed of the two bases tele- 'afar' and graph 'write.' Thus, the word telegraph is derivational in the sense that to the free form graph some adjunction has occurred although it is another base, not a suffix, which has been affixed (Robert E. Wolverton, Classical Elements in English Words [Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1965], pp. 29 and 55). But the interesting feature of Sandburg's use of the proper noun phrase Postal Telegraph is that in 1928, the date of publication of "A Couple," the Postal Telegraph was a company familiar to Americans--a competitor of Western Union no longer in existence.

## TABLE I

## INFLECTIONAL FORMS OF CONTENT WORDS IN "A COUPLE"

	<u>Line</u>
<u>He was</u> in Cincinnati, <u>she</u> in Burlington	
<u>He was</u> in a gang of Postal Telegraph linemen.	
<u>She was</u> a pot rassler in a <u>boarding</u> house.	
"The <u>crying is</u> lonely," <u>she wrote</u> him.	
"The same here," <u>he answered</u> .	5
The winter <u>went</u> by and <u>he came</u> back and <u>they</u>	
<u>married</u>	
And <u>he went</u> away again where <u>rainstorms</u>	
<u>knocked</u> down telegraph <u>poles</u> and <u>wires</u>	
<u>dropped</u> with <u>frozen</u> sleet.	
And again <u>she wrote</u> him, "The <u>crying is</u> lonely."	
And again <u>he answered</u> , "The same here."	
<u>Their five children are</u> in the public <u>schools</u> .	10
<u>He votes</u> the Republican ticket and <u>is</u> a tax-	
payer.	
<u>They are known</u> among <u>those who know</u> them	
As honest American <u>citizens living</u> honest	
<u>lives</u> .	
Many <u>things</u> that <u>bother</u> other people never	
<u>bother</u> them.	
<u>They have their</u> five <u>children</u> and <u>they are</u> a	
couple,	15
A pair of <u>birds</u> that <u>call</u> to each other and	
<u>satisfy</u> .	
As sure as <u>he goes</u> away <u>she writes</u> him, "The	
<u>crying is</u> lonely"	
And <u>he flashes</u> back the old answer, "The same	
here."	
<u>It is</u> a long time since <u>he was</u> a gang lineman at	
Cincinnati	
And <u>she was</u> a pot rassler in a Burlington	
<u>boarding</u> house;	20
Yet <u>they never get</u> <u>tired</u> of each other; <u>they</u>	
<u>are</u> a couple.	

(p. 380)

Even in regard to adjectives in "A Couple" Sandburg draws from the morphologically-defined class for his adjectives such as lonely (ll. 4, 8, and 17), old (l. 18), and long (l. 19). Thus, other than for numbers, in only two in-

stances are his adjectives derivational in this poem: public (l. 10) and honest (l. 13).

Noteworthy in "A Couple," too, is Sandburg's frequent, almost monotonous, use of inflectional forms of the verb be as the simple predicate for thirteen of the clauses in this twenty-one-line poem. These inflections of be are anomalous to the productive inflectional verb class today. But their retention is because all of them are in constant use<sup>1</sup>--a speech habit which Sandburg faithfully observes in his verse. Perhaps, then, assumptions may be drawn about the Americans whom Sandburg characterizes in his poems. Ordinary persons feel safe with the inflections which they learn unconsciously in childhood, and they prefer to employ a diction which avoids a possible shift in meaning occurring with derivational forms. If these assumptions be true, Sandburg, then, purposefully mimics his subjects by selecting base words or their inflectional forms to carry the burden of his poetic diction.

Thus, true to his stated method of avoiding derivational words like those ending in -ity and -ness, none of such combinations appears in "A Couple," which Sandburg published in 1928, early in his long literary career; nor,

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<sup>1</sup>Turner S. Kobler, lecture for "Problems in English Grammar and Syntax," Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas, February, 1972.

to substantiate this point, do such combinations appear in a later poem of his, "Fame if Not Fortune," published in Wind Song (1958). In that poem most of the adjectives are true adjectives; that is, they may show comparative and superlative degrees by adding the inflectional suffixes of -er and -est. And rather than being derivational adjectives, those which are not true adjectives are the present participial or past participial forms of weak verbs, the productive class of verbs today. These adjectival forms, true adjectives or participial forms, are underlined:

TABLE II  
INFLECTED ADJECTIVAL FORMS IN  
"FAME IF NOT FORTUNE"

A half-dollar in the hand of a gypsy  
tells me this and more:  
You shall go broken on the wheel,  
lashed to the bars and fates of steel,  
a nickel's worth of nothing,  
a vaudeville gag,  
a child's busted rubber balloon kicked  
amid dirty bunting and empty popcorn  
bags at a summer park.  
Yet cigarmakers shall name choice Havanas and  
paste your picture on the box,  
Racehorses foaming under scarlet and ochre jockeys  
shall wear your name,  
And policemen direct strangers to parks and schools  
remembered after you. (p. 728)

Indeed, the only adjectives which do not fall into those classes already shown to be employed in common speech are the words denoting color, "scarlet" and "ochre." Thus, again, Sandburg mirrors typical American expression by employing for most of his modifiers either true adjectives,

participial forms of weak verbs, or nouns in the possessive case such as "a nickel's worth" and "a child's busted rubber balloon" (*italics added*).

And surely the narrator of "Fame if Not Fortune" in his use of base words and inflectional forms demonstrates Sandburg's concepts of the common man about whom he writes: the ordinary American feels safer in using such words than in attempting to include in his spoken discourse a type of diction, the meaning of which he is not sure of; and perhaps, in fact, the ordinary American has a competence in a language consisting only of such words. Sandburg's poem "Cricket March" reaffirms these ideas by the use of inflected comparative and superlative degrees of true adjectives to the exclusion of any derivational adjectives other than participles. The inflected forms of the true adjectives are underlined:

### TABLE III

#### INFLECTED TRUE ADJECTIVES IN "CRICKET MARCH"

As the corn becomes higher  
 The one shrill of a summer cricket  
 Becomes two and ten  
 With a shrilling surer than last<sup>1</sup> month.

As the banners of the corn  
 Come to their highest flying in the wind,  
 The summer crickets come to a marching  
 army.

(p. 349)

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<sup>1</sup>The word last is an instance of a true adjective which inflects internally by retaining the alternative Old



In this regard a linguistic rule of thumb holds that the more common a word is in use, the greater is the likelihood that such a word will retain irregular inflections.<sup>1</sup> The productive class of verbs today, regular or weak verbs, forms in English its past tense and past participle alike by adding a -d, -ed, or -t suffix whereas strong verbs employ an internal vowel change to show tense. But strong verbs illustrate that rule of thumb, a phenomenon of speech. For example, the strong verbs still in popular use like sit and lie or set and lay, intransitive and transitive verbs, respectively, form their third person present singular, past tense, and past participle in a manner different from the inflectional method of the productive class of verbs today.

Where a strong verb occurs in Sandburg's poetry, Sandburg employs its irregular inflections for the very reason that such words are so widely used in common speech. Examples of this practice are the irregular verbs in their various inflectional forms in Sandburg's poem "Corn and Beans." The regular or weak verbs have a single underline added, and the irregular or strong verbs have a double underline added in this poem:

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English superlative inflection of late (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, ed. William Morris [New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1971], s.v. last).

<sup>1</sup>Kobler, February, 1972.

TABLE IV  
INFLECTIONAL FORMS OF VERBS IN  
"CORN AND BEANS"

Having looked long at two gardens rows  
And seen how the rain and dirt have used them  
I have decided the corn and beans shall have names.

And one is to be known as the Thwarted Corn of a  
Short Year  
While the other shall be called the Triumphant  
Beans of Plenty Rain.

If I change these names next Sunday I shall let  
you know about it.

(p. 347)

The logical conclusion is that Sandburg wishes to show typical American speech--speech which includes words in common use and words with familiar meanings of which the speaker is confident.

Noteworthy, too, for its parroting of its original--authentic American speech--is Sandburg's choice of words composed largely of sounds which require relatively little interference in the mouth when spoken. This dominance of easily-uttered consonantal phonemes is typical of American speech<sup>1</sup> and includes the gliding sounds of r, y, w, and wh; the lateral l phoneme; and the nasal sounds of m, n, and ng. Sandburg's poem "Little Candle" displays a diction that reflects this American linguistic habit:

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<sup>1</sup>Kobler, February, 1972.

TABLE V  
SELECTED CONSONANTAL PHONEMES IN  
"LITTLE CANDLE"

Light may be had for nothing  
or the low cost of lookng, seeng;  
and the secrets of light come high.  
Light knows more than it tells.  
Does it happen the sun, the moon  
choose to be dazzling, baffling?  
They do demand deep loyal communions.  
So do the angles of moving stars.  
So do the seven sprays of the rainbow.  
So does any little candle  
speaking for itself in its personal  
corner.

(p. 672)

The gliding, lateral, and nasal consonants which are underlined clearly dominate the consonantal phonemic elements of the entire poem.

And in an attempt to mirror authentic American speech and to convey a conception of the true character of American life through the subjects and themes of his poems, Sandburg also purposefully incorporates a preponderance of words having an Anglo-Saxon origin. Such dominance is typical of informal usage in the American language in contradistinction to formal or academic discourse with its abundance of Latinate and French words. In fact, approximately one-half of the English vocabulary is of Latin and French origin,<sup>1</sup> but the diction in Sandburg's poems is almost entirely of Anglo-Saxon derivation to reflect the verbal competence of Sandburg's speakers or subjects and

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<sup>1</sup>Albert C. Baugh, A History of the English Language, 2d ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 9.

thereby to reinforce his portrayal of people as they are.<sup>1</sup>  
 This prevalence of Anglo-Saxon diction, that is, of words from the Middle and Old English vocabulary as modified in modern use in contrast to words which came directly into Modern English from Latin and French, can be illustrated by a paradigm which follows the text of the poem "Glimmer" by Sandburg:<sup>2</sup>

"GLIMMER"

	<u>Line</u>
Let down your braids of hair, lady.	1
Cross your legs and sit before the looking-glass	2
And gaze long on lines under your eyes.	3
Life writes; men dance.	4
And you know how men pay women.	5

(p. 248)

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<sup>1</sup>Herndon, pp. 22 and 47.

<sup>2</sup>The etymologies shown in the paradigm are from A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, ed. James A. H. Murray (Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1897), s.v. each respective word in the poem and in its title.

TABLE VI  
ETYMOLOGY OF DICTION IN "GLIMMER"

Line of Poem	Word from Poem	Language of Ancestral Base	Etymologic Base
1	glimmer let down your braids of hair lady	Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon	glimorian laetan dún iower braegd of haer
2	cross your legs  and sit before the looking- glass and gaze	Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Early Middle English from Old Norse Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon	hlaefdige cros iower leg legg-r and sittan beforan sē lócian glæs
3	long on lines under your eyes life writes men dance	Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Late Middle English from Old French	and gaase gasa lang an lin under iower éage lif writan menn daunse dance-r
4	and you know how men pay women	Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Anglo-Saxon Early Middle English from Latin Anglo-Saxon	and eow cnáwan hū menn paie pax wifmenn

Certainly, this analysis of one of Sandburg's poems selected at random graphically supports the conclusion that Sandburg uses, as Americans use, Anglo-Saxon words in preference to a diction not so derived. Even in those instances in "Glimmer" where the ultimate ancestral form of a word is Latin or Old French, the chart illustrates that such bases came through either Old or Middle English before their inclusion in Modern English. And since Modern English dates from about A.D. 1500, the chart therefore reflects that all of Sandburg's words in "Glimmer," even his title for this representative poem, are selected in accordance with this habit of common American speech: they derive from forms which were in the English language prior to the inception of Modern English and therefore prior to the direct borrowings of Latinate or other foreign words used today chiefly in academic or formal expression.

A comparison of those words and their ultimate sources with the diction and its etymology in a poem by a contemporary of Sandburg, T. S. Eliot, for example, exhibits the purely Anglo-Saxon speech which Sandburg strives purposefully to use so as to mirror its prevalence

in American common usage. The choice of a poem by Eliot serves this purpose because, as Deutsch notes,

He [Sandburg] is comprehensible, as those who belong to the school of Eliot or of Pound can never be, to the immense half-literate public.<sup>1</sup>

A passage from Eliot's celebrated poem The Waste Land illustrates that Eliot's poetic diction, unlike that of Sandburg, includes Latin and French words which have come directly into Modern English. These borrowed words are underlined in the text of the poem and then set out in a succeeding paradigm:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Babette Deutsch, "Poetry for the People," The English Journal, 26 (April, 1937), 273.

<sup>2</sup>The etymologies in the paradigm are from A New English Dictionary, s.v. each respective word selected from the poem.

TABLE VII  
FRENCH AND LATINATE DICTION IN  
THE WASTE LAND

	<u>Line</u>
The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, Glowed on the marble, where the glass Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines	
From which a golden <u>Cupidon</u> peeped out (Another hid his eyes behind his wing) Doubled the flames of sevenbranched <u>candelabra</u>	80
Reflecting light upon the table as The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it, From satin cases poured in rich profusion;	85
In vials of ivory and coloured glass Unstoppered, lurked her strange <u>synthetic</u> <u>perfumes</u> ,	
Unguent, powdered, or liquid--troubled, confused And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air	
That freshened from the window, these ascended	90
In fattening the prolonged candle- flames, Flung their smoke into the <u>laquearia</u> . <sup>1</sup>	

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, Modern American Poetry, ed. Louis Untermeyer, new and enl. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), pp. 383-92, ll. 77-92. Hereafter the lines will be cited in the text and the same edition used.



TABLE VIII  
ETYMOLOGY OF SELECTED DICTION IN THE WASTE LAND

Line of Poem	Word from Poem	First Recorded Instance in English	Language of Ancestral Base	Etymologic Base
80	Cupidon	1824	French	Cupid
82	candelabra	1815	Latin	candēlābrum
87	synthetic	1697	French	synthétique
87	perfumes	1533	French	parfum
92	laquearia	1706	Latin	laque

Thus, in this relatively short passage Eliot employs several words new to Modern English. The etymologies of the five underlined words show them to have been first observed in literary use in the English language during years after the beginnings of Modern English in 1500.

In addition to that departure from the exclusive use of Anglo-Saxon diction this passage of Eliot's verse also illustrates another contrast to Sandburg's avowed rationale: Eliot is willing, whereas Sandburg is not, to select for his verse a derivational noun such as profusion (l. 85) and a derivational verb such as freshen (l. 90). Eliot, then, is true to his reputation as a literary poet through his occasionally non-Anglo-Saxon verbiage and his derivational diction. But it is an important incidence in this respect that one element of Sandburg's verse which should insure its

popularity results ironically from the fact that Sandburg, unlike Eliot, is not a literary poet. Since his poetic language is that of simple folk, Sandburg probably will continue to be understood and read by them, the majority of Americans.

In addition, Sandburg has another objective in his purposeful diction, that of using a preponderance of "plus-words"--words which have positive semantic features. In Sandburg's poem "Cricket March," for example (see above, p. 25), the noun cricket is a plus-word in its semantic connotation of <+animate> and <+count>; and the verb come is a plus-word because of its lexical features of <+action> and <+present>. By contrast, a noun such as precautions is in many respects a minus-word because it is <-concrete> and <-singular>; and the adjective dead is a minus-word because of its lexical features of <-action> and <-transitive>.<sup>1</sup>

The extensive use of plus-words by Sandburg is surely purposeful in order to parallel semantic norms and to impart a positive tone to a poem. His "Wistful" is an example of this method:

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<sup>1</sup>In accordance with the practice of Roderick A. Jacobs and Peter S. Rosenbaum in English Transformational Grammar (1968), possible semantic features for content words which are nouns or verbs include these plus-items:

"WISTFUL"

Wishes left on your lips  
The mark of their wings.  
Regrets fly kites in your eyes.  
(p. 266)

The textual form and lexical entries for the plus-features of the content words in this poem are set out in the following paradigm:

TABLE IX

POSITIVE SEMANTIC FEATURES FOR CONTENT WORDS	
Noun Features	Verb Features
<+noun> <+common> <+human> <+singular> <+concrete> <+count> <+animate> <+reflexive> <+definite> <+near> <+demonstrative> <+pronoun> <+masculine> <+feminine> <+accusative> <+place> <+time> <+preposition> <+first person> <+second person> <+third person> <+affix>	<+verb> <+present> <+action> <+transitive> <+perfect> <+progressive> <+particle> <+copula> <+affix> <+_____ human> <+human _____> <+_____ animate> <+animate _____>

Words having the contrasting feature in each instance are marked <-human> or <-concrete>, for example. Semanticists consider that a plus-word is the norm and that a minus-word is somehow different from the norm.

TABLE X

Lexical Entries for Content Words in "Wistful" Showing Plus-Features Only				
wishes	left	on	your	lips
[ <+noun> <+common> <+count> <+third person> <+affix> ]	[ <+verb> <+action> <+transitive> ]		[ <+noun> <+pronoun> <+common> <+human> <+singular> <+masculine> <+feminine> <+genitive> <+concrete> <+count> <+animate> <+definite> <+second person> ]	[ <+noun> <+common> <+count> <+animate> <+concrete> <+third person> <+preposition> <+affix> ]
the	mark	of	their	wings
[ <+noun> <+common> <+singular> <+concrete> <+count> <+definite> <+third person> ]			[ <+noun> <+pronoun> <+common> <+concrete> <+count> <+count> <+genitive> <+definite> <+third person> ]	[ <+noun> <+common> <+concrete> <+count> <+third person> <+preposition> <+affix> ]
regrets	fly	kites	in	your
[ <+noun> <+common> <+count> <+third person> <+affix> ]	[ <+verb> <+action> <+transi- tive> <+present> ]	[ <+noun> <+common> <+concrete> <+count> <+affix> ]	[ <+noun> <+pronoun> <+common> <+human> <+singular> <+masculine> <+feminine> <+genitive> <+concrete> <+count> <+animate> <+definite> <+second person> ]	
				eyes
				[ <+noun> <+common> <+count> <+animate> <+concrete> <+affix> <+prepo- sition> <+third person> ]

Clearly, the paradigm shows that all content words have several plus-features semantically. That Sandburg has a purpose for selecting such plus-words is surely possible if he intends that the poem have a normative and positive tone. His attitude toward his subject in this poem is that both wishes and regrets can have good consequences; wishes-- hopes, ambitions--leave their mark on a person's life whether they are realized or not; and regrets beget images which remain and cause a person to be wistful--a state of mind which Sandburg perceives as nostalgia without rancour, and a state of mind which is a positive rather than a negative mood.

And in connection with the intent of positive tone, Sandburg's liberal use of adverbs or adverbial phrases in his poems is also notable. An adverb, more than any other part of speech except a verb, suggests power and positive action; and Sandburg surely intends to impart a tone of assertive action through his language as do the speakers whom he portrays. His short poem "Margaret" illustrates this feature of his diction. The adverbial words and phrases are underlined as units in the poem:

TABLE XI  
ADVERBIAL WORDS AND PHRASES IN  
"MARGARET"

Many birds and the beating of wings  
Make a flinging reckless hum  
In the early morning at the rocks  
Above the blue pool  
Where the gray shadows swim lazy.

In your blue eyes, O reckless child,  
I saw today many little wild wishes,  
Eager as the great morning.

(p. 60)

Approximately one-half of this poem consists of adverbial expressions which contribute to a mood of positive action; and since so much of its content is adverbial expression, the meaning of "Margaret" must turn on that content as well as on its verbs. All of the verbs in this poem are assertive, of course: in the two sentences which compose "Margaret" the first complex sentence contains the action verbs make and swim; and the final sentence includes the verb saw, also an indication of action. And the adverbs do express action, too: the entire subordinate clause of the first sentence is assertive in its identification of place--"where the gray shadows swim lazy." The phrases which precede that clause connote a progression from general to particular, from time, "in the early morning," to place, "at the rocks / Above the blue pool." The same assertion of particularity results in the second sentence by Sandburg's use of "today" to assert immediacy and of "in your blue eyes" to specify particularity.

Thus purposeful attempt to connote action by means of the frequent use of one type of content word is a distinctive technique when this poem is compared to representative verse of Sandburg's contemporary, Eliot. The opening passage of Eliot's The Waste Land includes only one adverbial phrase:

April is the cruellest month, breeding,  
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
 Memory and desire, stirring  
 Dull roots with spring rain.  
 Winter kept us warm, covering  
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
 A little life with dried tubers.  
 (ll. 1-7)

Perhaps this method, this use of words of action and power, is what one critic means when he says of Sandburg:

Much of his force derives from his trick of describing his visions of power in short, blunt words, in the diction of the streets and the smoking-rooms. Sandburg is an indigenous American poet from several points of view: in his romantic enthusiasm, in his diction and poetic method, . . . <sup>1</sup>

In this and many other respects, then, it is evident that Carl Sandburg considers diction itself important as well as the type of verbiage peculiar to him. Indeed, Sandburg explicitly relates in poetic form his conviction that diction is consequential when he entreats the reader of his poem "Basket" to

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<sup>1</sup>Donald W. Heiney, Essentials of Contemporary Literature (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1954), p. 410.

"BASKET"

Speak, sir, and be wise.  
 Speak choosing your words, sir,  
     like an old woman over a bushel  
     of apples. (p. 266)

And the words which Sandburg uses in his poem "Prairie" to express the panorama of America which he knows well is an example of carefully-selected diction, perhaps typical of that which the Westminster Gazette deplored. In that poem Sandburg unabashedly asserts:

"PRAIRIE"

I speak of new cities and new people.  
 I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.  
 I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down,  
     a sun dropped in the west.  
 I tell you there is nothing in the world  
     only an ocean of tomorrows,  
     a sky of tomorrows.

I am a brother of the cornhuskers who say  
     at sundown:  
 Tomorrow is a day. (p. 85)

The Gazette surely would protest the reference to the past as a "bucket of ashes," the informal words "I tell you," the run-on expression "nothing in the world only an ocean of tomorrows," and the provincialism "cornhuskers."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The word cornhuskers has its origin and usage in the United States. The earliest written use of corn-husk was in an issue of the American Medical Journal in 1808 to describe the husk of coarse leaves which enclose the ear of Indian corn. By 1864 the word corn-husker appeared to denote a person who strips the husks from the ears of Indian corn; and in 1890 an American newspaper advertisement of the day listed "the best corn-husker made" evidently to describe a device for the process of stripping those husks (A New English Dictionary, s.v. corn-husk).



In this and other particulars many literati aver Sandburg's definite filiation from Walt Whitman, but three critics comment on this position and on the nature of Sandburg's unique diction in these ways:

His language is even plainer than Whitman's, his later verse being written largely in the lingo of the man in the street. . . . <sup>1</sup>

Sandburg knows his music thoroughly, and uses it with almost invariable deftness. His matter may be casual or worthless, but his skill persists. . . . his method parrots his low original so closely that the effect, powerful to all, offends the thin-skinned.<sup>2</sup>

His language and the arrangement of the words were simple, unsophisticated, candid--the product of his Midwest.<sup>3</sup>

And Parry Stroud, a modern student of Sandburg, concludes that the language of Sandburg's poetry reveals a conception of Americans as a duality of "hero and hoodlum" fused within each of the people.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Carl Sandburg's diction despite his Midwestern roots is a universally American, not parochial, language. Crowder cites as proof the concept that when Thoreau was in jail for civil disobedience, he

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<sup>1</sup>Deutsch, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup>Clement Wood, Poets of America (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1925), p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>Crowder, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup>Parry Stroud, "Carl Sandburg: A Biographical and Critical Study of His Major Works," Dissertation Abstracts, 17 (1956), 367 (Northwestern University).

was no provincial.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Sandburg can use a poetic diction which is typically American although derived from his Midwestern background; and because of this ability and achievement certain features are abundant in his poems: content words which are usually base words or their inflectional forms, words which are in common use despite their not being among current productive classes, words with familiar meanings of which his speakers are confident, words composed of sounds requiring little interference in the mouth when spoken, words having Anglo-Saxon origin, words having normative semantic features in order to impart a positive tone, and adverbs to connote assertive action.

These features, these typical American speech habits, are the distinctive means by which Sandburg utilizes the poetic element of diction in his unique use of language in verse. But in connection with any discussion of Carl Sandburg's diction his use of slang and colloquialisms demands attention because of its ubiquity in Sandburg's poetry. An examination of this singular technique, this liberal use of the vulgate, is a sequitur to a study of Sandburg's choice of words both because diction and slang, an aspect of the poetic element of vocabulary, are subjects in common and because Sandburg relies extensively on that kind of verbiage in much of his verse.

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<sup>1</sup>Crowder, p. 158.

### CHAPTER III

#### SLANG AND COLLOQUIALISMS AS TECHNIQUES OF POETIC LANGUAGE

Poetry is a puppet-show, where riders of sky-rockets and divers of sea fathoms gossip about the sixth sense and the fourth dimension.  
--Carl Sandburg

In addition to multiple, distinctive uses for standard diction in verse, Carl Sandburg employs uniquely the element of vocabulary in his poetic language. This new verbiage for poetry, Sandburg's slang and colloquialisms, is so pervasive and exceptional that Untermeyer can assert:

Sandburg's speech is simple and powerful; he uses slang as freely as his predecessors used the now archaic tongue of their times. Never has the American vulgate been used with such artistry and effect.<sup>1</sup>

Many critics, however, deride Sandburg's use of that vulgate and feel that it has no place in the genteel tradition of poetry. Consequently, then, a question arises concerning the virtues of slang as well as of Carl Sandburg's use of it.

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry, new and enl. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 197.

But in support of Sandburg, Clement Wood, a literary analyst in the 1920's, finds worth in using slang in poetry: it brings reality back to poetry, he says, since the natural inclination of poetry is to divorce itself from reality and to tend to be snobbish.<sup>1</sup> Referring to Sandburg's departure from that genteel tradition which preceded him, Wood believes that only an innovator can bring life and poetry back together. It is Wood's appraisal that Sandburg accomplishes that rapprochement.<sup>2</sup>

What stronger affirmation can Wood make for his thesis than when he says that "This is magnificent literature, in its utter fidelity to its foul-mouthed original,"<sup>3</sup> in reference to Sandburg's powerful blast in the poem "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter" against the evangelist Billy Sunday? Sandburg declares eloquently in that poem:

"TO A CONTEMPORARY BUNKSHOOTER"

You come along . . . tearing your shirt . . .  
yelling about Jesus.  
Where do you get that stuff?  
What do you know about Jesus?

Jesus had a way of talking soft and outside of a  
few bankers and higher-ups among the con men  
of Jerusalem everybody liked to have this  
Jesus around because he never made any fake  
passes and everything he said went and he  
helped the sick and gave the people hope.

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<sup>1</sup>Clement Wood, Poets of America (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1925), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup>Wood, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup>Wood, p. 252.

You come along squirting words at us, shaking your  
fist and calling us all dam fools so fierce the  
froth slobbers over your lips . . . always  
blabbing we're all going to hell straight off  
and you know all about it.

. . . . .

I say the same bunch backing you nailed the nails  
into the hands of this Jesus of Nazareth. He  
had lined up against him the same crooks and  
strong-arm men now lined up with you paying  
your way.

(p. 29)

Written in 1914, these lines in their vulgate be-  
speak a fervor and a theme as valid and as fundamental to  
Americans in the 1970's as to contemporaries of Billy Sun-  
day. Sandburg conveys his sympathy with the ordinary  
American not only by the total expression in these lines but  
also by his choice of vocabulary in which to articulate that  
thought: his slang to mirror the common man's problems  
being presented. As Jones pointed out in 1925 and surely  
might say validly today, this poem challenges a demagogue's  
"authority to interpret the life and death of Jesus, and is  
couched in the slangiest vernacular."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Sandburg is concerned with the average com-  
patriot, his problems and joys; and by commandeering the  
slang expressions of the factory or street for poetry,

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<sup>1</sup>Llewellyn Jones, First Impressions: Essays on Poetry, Criticism, and Prosody (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1925), p. 59.

Sandburg marshals a language which mirrors the proletarian sentiments about which he writes.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this poet's purpose thereby is to "attempt to get into verse the whole disorderly and humid life of the twentieth-century United States, with its violence, its grandiosity, its social tensions, and its waste of human impulse and power."<sup>2</sup> Given his purpose, Sandburg, then, logically selects his words from where they should come--"the inexhaustible reservoirs of American slang."<sup>3</sup>

But what, after all, is this slang for which Sandburg is both condemned and condoned? To define slang though is to encounter the same subjective variations of ideas discovered in attempting to limit poetry to fixed rules. A common concept of slang is that it is extravagant expression which is not standard and therefore not appropriate for expression in prestige circles of a society, and that it consists largely of newly-coined words in a state of

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<sup>1</sup>It is interesting that it was with Sandburg and writers who followed his lead in directing attention to the working class that the term proletarian came into general American use (Walter Blair et al., The Literature of the United States, 3d ed., II [Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966], 872).

<sup>2</sup>Newton Arvin, "Carl Sandburg," in After the Genteel Tradition: American Writers 1910-1930, ed. Malcolm Cowley (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Arvin, p. 71.

flux in regard to their use or acceptance. A more specialized concept of slang is offered by Mario Pei:

Slang: a type of language in common use, produced by popular adaptation and extension of meaning of existing words and the coinage of new words without regard for scholastic standards and the principles of the linguistic formation of words, and peculiar to certain classes and social or age groups.<sup>1</sup>

And William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard provide a meaning for the word slang and a threefold fate for all expressions which fall into this category:

Slang: a vernacular speech, not accepted as suitable for formal usage, though much used in conversation and colloquial expression.

Slang terms ultimately pass in one of three directions: (1) they die out and are lost unless their vividness is such that (2) they continue as slang over a long period and (3) they frequently become accepted good usage.<sup>2</sup>

These varying definitions for slang have two common denominators--the unacceptability of the word labeled as slang, and the supposition that slang originates in popular speech. But neither of these common denominators has pejorative connotations. Thus, if Sandburg uses words which some critics choose to label as slang, that usage need not as a consequence be unacceptable literary expression.

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<sup>1</sup>Glossary of Linguistic Terminology (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 251-52 s.v. Slang.

<sup>2</sup>A Handbook to Literature, rev. C. Hugh Holman, rev. ed. (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1960), p. 462 s.v. Slang.

And in connection with the ultimate destiny of a slang expression which Thrall and Hibbard propose, it is provocative to note a study in 1925 by Clement Wood, who analyzes Sandburg's vocabulary and estimates its merit. That writer frets that Sandburg's frequent use of slang may mean that he may not be understood by later generations and that his poetry will then need to be annotated in "the college curriculums of 1975"<sup>1</sup> as are modern editions of Beowulf and Shakespearean drama. Wood selects from Sandburg's poems examples of slang which he believes will "decimate his [Sandburg's] admirers of tomorrow."<sup>2</sup> But it is ironic that these familiar words which Americans now use comfortably and frequently make up most of Wood's list:

humdinger	galoot
frame-ups	hoosegow
getaway	booby hatch
come clean	hokum
buddy	junk <sup>3</sup>

Obviously, words such as these have significant selectional restrictions and semantic features of which Sandburg surely is aware. For example, certain popularly-accepted complements are called for within a context which includes buddy, a word that requires within its sentence a masculine pronoun; getaway calls for a human possessive

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<sup>1</sup>Wood, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup>Wood, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup>Wood, p. 260.



pronoun; come clean selects a human subject; and humdinger calls for an inanimate complement. In addition, each of these words has semantic connotations: booby hatch, an insane asylum, connotes ludicrous activities on the part of its inmates; frame-ups arouses images of "cops and robbers" on the level of the Al Capones of Sandburg's prime and of the Mafia today; hoosegow, a jail, is a special kind of jail--a dirty one or a prison in which certain personal injustices are meted out.

Perhaps, then, Sandburg has reasons for using the slang of the day. Undoubtedly there is one word, and only that word, to express exactly what Sandburg wishes to say; and in the standard American vocabulary, that word did not exist which would express Sandburg's notion at the time he wrote a particular poem. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that a word cannot be slang if no other word exists to fit its definition. But by choosing slang Sandburg obviously wishes to incorporate within a poem all of those selectional restrictions and semantic features which are an aspect of a slang expression just as they are of any English content word.

Thus, Sandburg's aim is incorporation by reference despite the fact that a word he needs is so new in usage or so confined to particular groups that it is labeled slang by proponents of standard vocabulary and despite Sandburg's

awareness that slang has an uncertain future. But Sandburg's vulgate does not suffer the fate normal to slang because, for the most part, his slang words survive. Surely, then, Wood's consternation at Sandburg's use of slang is ironic in light of the familiarity of all those words from the vulgate almost a half century after Wood's commentary. Indeed, it may be the opinion of some observers that these words are acceptable verbiage in the informal spoken discourse of the middle class today. Monroe expresses the only logical deduction here:

It is enough to say that any writer who can use the common speech of the people for beauty thereby enriches and revivifies the language. . . . This use of so-called vulgar speech--of slang--is often in the service of his [Sandburg's] rich and whimsical humor. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, instances of slang which have died out can also be found in Sandburg's poems, and determining their meanings then becomes a problem in research. For example, the poem "Mag" (1916) contains the phrase "on the bumpers":

Yes, I'm wishing now you lived somewhere  
away from here  
And I was a bum on the bumpers a thousand  
miles away dead broke.

(p. 13)

In the early 1900's that phrase was in use by drifters who rode the metal horizontal bars on the front and rear of railroad cars and described their illicit practice as riding "on the bumpers." Enforced regulations against that

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<sup>1</sup>Harriet Monroe, "Carl Sandburg," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 24 (September, 1924), 326.

practice have caused the disappearance of it and of its colloquial description.

Similarly, in "Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio" (1920) Sandburg uses slang that has not survived. Of persons gathered at a tavern he mentions that "The chippies talk about the funnies in the papers" and that "The cartoonists weep in their beer," both slang expressions which probably hold no definitive meaning today. Moreover, this poem is pertinent to an illustration of the fate of Sandburg's slang words. The slang is underlined in the text of the poem and then is annotated in a chart immediately following the poem:<sup>1</sup>

# "HONKY TONK IN CLEVELAND, OHIO"

It's a jazz affair, drum crashes and cornet razzes.  
 The trombone pony neighs and the tuba jackass snorts.  
 The banjo tickles and titters too awful.  
 The chippies talk about the funnies in the papers.  
     The cartoonists weep in their beer.  
     Ship riveters talk with their feet  
     To the feet of floozies under the tables.  
 A quartet of white hopes mourn with interspersed  
     snickers:  
         "I got the blues.  
         I got the blues.  
         I got the blues."  
 And . . . as we said earlier:  
     The cartoonists weep in their beer.

(p. 164)

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<sup>1</sup>The annotations are from a private interview with Delbert Caulfield and Irene Caulfield held in San Benito, Texas, in March, 1972. Both of them are contemporaries of Sandburg and lived in Cleveland, Ohio, during the period in which Sandburg wrote this poem.

TABLE XII  
SLANG IN "HONKY TONK IN CLEVELAND, OHIO"

Expression in Poem	Annotation
jazz affair	An occasion happening in a lively or improvisational way. <u>Jazz</u> is an example of slang of the 1920's which today is not slang but rather informal expression.
razzes	Offers additional spirited vigor and frills. Sandburg probably shortened <u>razzes</u> from the nominal expression used often in the 1920's, <u>razzmatazz</u> , denoting then gaudiness and frills.
chippies	Usually, but not necessarily, prostitutes.
cartoonists	Inveterate bar habitués.
floozies	Scatterbrained young women of the 1920's, bold in their unconventional dress and behavior.
white hopes	Black prizefighters, so named because white persons placed their boxing wagers on these men.

As this chart shows, the vulgate of one period may be obscure to succeeding generations; but some colloquialisms or slang expressions in "Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio" have had different fates. While chippies is surely

unrecognizable to a modern reader, floozy is still in use as a slang word which has assumed the added denotation of prostitute. And jazz has passed through vulgate and colloquial use into accepted standard usage. Even in instances, however, where Sandburg's slang has gone out of use in American speech, the inclusion of slang in poems has merit, for through the living present of literature there is exhibited a moment in time, a period of American socio-cultural history, which might otherwise be lost. Writings such as Sandburg's verses insure that integral though fleeting instances of Americana may live on for succeeding generations to discover.

Moreover, in further defense of Sandburg's use of slang, Gay Wilson Allen agrees with Monroe's appraisal of the worth of slang in poetry and advances another reason for the use of vulgate: its juxtaposition with standard expression within a poem can produce desired emphasis of an idea. Allen cites lines of slang and subsequent lines of lofty expression within a poem by Sandburg to illustrate Sandburg's obvious intention "to change pace and highlight by contrast the more dignified language that usually follows";<sup>1</sup> and Allen notes the consequent impact on a reader. In "A. E. F." Sandburg employs this method of juxtaposition

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<sup>1</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, "Carl Sandburg: Fire and Smoke," The South Atlantic Quarterly, 59 (Summer, 1960), 329.

for purpose of emphasis; in this poem, however, the vulgate follows the elevated language. The colloquialism at the end of the poem is the contrasting verbiage which points out Sandburg's intended theme:

"A. E. F."

There will be a rusty gun on the wall, sweetheart,  
 The rifle grooves curling with flakes of rust.  
 A spider will make a silver string nest in the  
     darkest, warmest corner of it.  
 The trigger and the range-finder, they too will be  
     rusty.  
 And no hands will polish the gun, and it will hang  
     on the wall.  
 Forefingers and thumbs will point absently and  
     casually toward it.  
 It will be spoken among half-forgotten, wished-  
     to-be-forgotten things.  
 They will tell the spider: Go on, you're doing  
     good work.

(p. 194)

The final colloquial clause, "Go on, you're doing good work," is obviously in juxtaposition to the lyrical language of the rest of this poem. Thus, if Allen's theory be valid, the impact intended by Sandburg occurs after the change of pace; and the theme lies in the one line of vulgate which follows informal, lyrical expression. Clearly, then, Sandburg's theme in "A. E. F." is that time as it passes, like the spider as it spins its web, works to envelop and obliterate all things, even such gravities as the casualties and effects of war.

Indeed, in much of Sandburg's poetry, as "A. E. F." illustrates, "slang and beauty combine in a spiritual union to show the poet at his best"<sup>1</sup> and to testify to a purposeful use of these anomalous levels of verbiage: Sandburg wishes to accentuate the idea contained in an abruptly-contrasting level of vocabulary. "Cool Tombs," a poem which has wide acceptance even among critics who insist that Sandburg has only a few great poems, is another example of this intentional and valid use of the vulgate. The lines of colloquial English are underlined to show their juxtaposition to otherwise lofty verbiage in this poem:

## TABLE XIII

JUXTAPOSITION OF COLLOQUIAL AND FORMAL  
DICTION IN "COOL TOMBS"

When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs,  
he forgot the copperheads and the assassin  
. . . in the dust, in the cool tombs.

And Ulysses Grant lost all thought of con men and  
Wall Street, cash and collateral turned ashes  
. . . in the dust, in the cool tombs.

Pocahontas' body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as a  
red haw in November or a pawpaw in May, did  
she wonder? does she remember? . . . in the  
dust, in the cool tombs?

Take any streetful of people buying clothes and  
groceries, cheering a hero or throwing con-  
fetti and blowing tin horns . . . tell me if  
the lovers are losers . . . tell me if any  
get more than the lovers . . . in the dust  
. . . in the cool tombs. (p. 134)

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry: A Critical Survey (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), p. 212.

Reiterating that concept of juxtaposition in order to achieve emphasis of a theme by contrasting levels of verbiage, Amy Lowell, a contemporary of Sandburg who feels that he produced some of the most original works of their age, talks about "Cool Tombs" and writes that surely here are

serious, beautiful lines alternating with the slang of the day, and all to bring about a grave and moving whole.<sup>1</sup>

That "grave and moving whole" expresses Sandburg's theme that only in death, the ultimate democracy, lies the equality which Americans think they have in life. And that central idea in the stately lines is successfully conveyed because of the intense contrast in the colloquial passages.

Thus, as a result of these techniques involving the use of slang and colloquialisms, Sandburg's poetry is representative of American speech. Surely it is true, as Deutsch believes, that

Carl Sandburg is important because he is of the vulgar, . . . frankly expressing in their own language, the deeper emotions of the common people. [His verse] . . . is quick with the speech of ordinary men and women, the slogans and the cant, worn by-words and new-minted slang.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Untermeyer includes Sandburg's poems among a list

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<sup>1</sup>Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 227.

<sup>2</sup>Babette Deutsch, "Poetry for the People," The English Journal, 26 (April, 1937), 272.



of works composing the "new poetry" during the first quarter of the twentieth century, poetry which enjoyed financial success because people could read it without an acquaintance with classical allusions or rare words:

The new work spoke to them in their own language.  
And it did more: it spoke to them of what they  
rarely had heard expressed; it was not only closer  
to their soil but nearer to their souls.<sup>1</sup>

Sandburg's poetry, then, had during his own day the doubly fortuitous effect of appealing to more persons than had poetry ever before appealed and of rewarding him economically for his efforts.

Finally, the effect on the work of other poets of Sandburg's new use of the vulgate for verse cannot be denied. Thus, two literary historians state that Sandburg paved the way for the reading public to accept the prosody of a generation younger than Sandburg's through his method of deliberately employing in verse the "catchwords, the particular moments in time through which the narrative takes its course."<sup>2</sup> And in conveying those words and moments Sandburg not only employs uniquely the poetic ele-

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<sup>1</sup>Untermeyer, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, A History of American Poetry: 1900-1940 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), p. 250.

ments of vocabulary and diction but also resorts to a departure from accepted standards of grammar and to a division of lines in verse based upon a device unorthodox to traditional poetry.

## CHAPTER IV

### POETIC ELEMENTS OF GRAMMAR AND RHYTHM IN THE USE OF LANGUAGE

Poetry is a projection across silence of cadences arranged to break that silence with definite intentions of echoes, syllables, wave lengths.

--Carl Sandburg

In addition to a unique diction and a distinctive vocabulary in the clear objective of reflecting authentic American character and life, Sandburg also employs in verse a departure from the traditional grammar of standard American English<sup>1</sup> and a substitution of the cadences of actual speech for poetic rhythm or meter. Both grammar and rhythm are elements of poetic language, and Sandburg has his own extraordinary methods and forms for these sources of effects in poetry.

An insistence upon traditional grammar was perhaps an accepted criterion for good poetry until Sandburg's

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter the term grammar will mean standard usage although there is a distinction between standard usage and what is really grammar, that is, that method by which people communicate within a language.

verse received critical acclaim. Thus, Amy Lowell, already an established poet when Sandburg first published his mature poetry, complains of Sandburg's use of grammar. She states that his using will for shall, would for should, and around for round prevents Americans from becoming literary people. Admitting that language must change "as life grows more complex and inventions increase"<sup>1</sup> and that current speech will exhibit changes in language, Lowell nevertheless decries Sandburg's grammatical practices in his verse:

It is perhaps inevitable, although to be regretted, that current speech should exhibit occasional incorrectness, but it is strange that an author should permit faults of grammar to appear in his printed work. The only answer is--he does not notice them.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Sandburg's poem "Fire Pages" demonstrates Lowell's complaint concerning the use of will for shall. Sandburg's grammatical faults in Lowell's view are underlined in the text of this poem, and Lowell's correction is interpolated above each instance:

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<sup>1</sup>Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup>Lowell, p. 229.

TABLE XIV  
 AMENDED GRAMMAR IN  
 "FIRE PAGES"

[shall]  
 I will read ashes for you, if you ask me.

[shall]  
 I will look in the fire and tell you from the  
     gray lashes

And out of the red and black tongues and stripes,

[shall]  
 I will tell how fire comes

And how fire runs far as the sea.

(p. 266)

Or possibly a portion of Sandburg's poem "Mag" with its numerous grammatical departures justifies Lowell's accusation of faults in grammar even more than does "Fire Pages":

"MAG"

I wish to God I never saw you, Mag.  
 I wish you never quit your job and came along  
     with me.  
 I wish we never bought a license and a white  
     dress  
 For you to get married in the day we ran off to  
     a minister

And told him we would love each other and take  
     care of each other  
 Always and always long as the sun and the rain  
     lasts anywhere.  
 Yes, I'm wishing now you lived somewhere away  
     from here  
 And I was a bum on the bumpers a thousand miles  
     away dead broke.

(p. 13)

Certainly the narrator in "Mag" communicates vividly his feelings; for some linguistic scholars the poem therefore has grammaticality in that its words fulfill one definition of grammar: "the way words interact with each other in sentences in order for people to communicate."<sup>1</sup> But traditional grammarians probably would cite the grammatical problems indicated above each of the underlined portions of the poem "Mag" in the following chart:

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<sup>1</sup>Turner S. Kobler, lecture for "Problems in English Grammar and Syntax," Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas, January, 1972.

TABLE XV  
GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS IN "MAG"

I wish [idiom] to God [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ I [faulty tense] \_\_\_\_\_ never saw  
you, Mag.

I wish [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ you [faulty tense] \_\_\_\_\_ never quit  
your job and [faulty tense] came along with me.

I wish [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ we [faulty tense] \_\_\_\_\_ never bought a  
license and a white dress

For you to get married [dangling  
preposition] in [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_  
the day [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ we ran [colloquialism] off  
to a minister

And told him [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ we would love [redundancy] each other  
and take care of each other

Always and always [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ long as the sun and  
the rain [faulty agreement] lasts anywhere.

Yes, [contraction] I'm wishing now [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ you  
lived somewhere away from here

And [ellipsis] \_\_\_\_\_ I [incorrect mood] was a [elision] bum  
[slang]  
on the bumpers a thousand miles away  
[colloquialism; misplaced modifier]  
dead broke.



Corrections in "Mag" based upon Lowell's standards of grammar produce a new version of this poem. In order to make graphic the differences between these two versions, the grammatical elements in question are underlined:

TABLE XVI  
AMENDED GRAMMATICAL  
ELEMENTS IN "MAG"

I wish of God that I had never seen you, Mag.  
I wish that you had never quit your job and come  
along with me.  
I wish that we had never bought a license and a  
white dress  
In which for you to get married on the day that  
we ran away to a minister  
And told him that we would love and take care of  
each other  
Always and always for as long as the sun and the  
rain last anywhere.  
Yes, I am wishing now that you lived somewhere  
away from here  
And that I were a bummer traveling on a train,  
completely penniless, a thousand miles away.

Clearly, the revised version no longer reflects the personality which Sandburg faithfully achieves through the use of grammar. In place of a narrator who exhibits the characteristics of a workingman with little formal education, the grammatical changes yield a speaker in command of formal expression, a member of a prestige class; Mag's husband, concerned about a loveless marriage, is no longer the typical, ordinary American whose problems are always Sand-

burg's concern. Therefore, Sandburg purposefully departs from standard grammar in order to depict his subject through authentic American speech.

Similarly, Sandburg's short poem "Drowsy" succinctly mirrors grammatical expressions common in spoken American discourse despite their unacceptability by standard rules:

"DROWSY"

Sleep is the gift of many spiders  
The webs tie down the sleepers easy.  
(p. 662)

"Drowsy," of course, is one sentence--a run-on sentence; and its speaker uses an adjective instead of the adverb easily to describe how webs tie down sleepers. Both the run-on sentence and the adjective easy in an adverbial slot, however, are expressions true to the speech habits of some Americans.

Another feature of Sandburg's use of the poetic element of grammar, unique because it is at variance with the traditional view of syntactic acceptability, is his frequent bending of words. Like the Americans whom he portrays, Sandburg habitually uses form words in slots alien to those prescribed for formal expression. Thus, Sandburg's poetry is rich with nouns used as adjectives or

verbs and with verbs used as adjectives. The lexicons of prescriptive grammarians, whether they be traditionalists or transformationalists, label words by class if they are form words, that is, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs; and these grammarians insist that each class play its respective role in any English sentence. For example, one traditional grammarian directs in a recent college textbook:

Break the noun habit. English has always used nouns as adjectives, as in "railroad," "railroad station," "court house," and "noun habit." But modern prose has aggravated the tendency beyond belief; and we get such monstrosities as child sex education course, whole strings of nothing but nouns. . . . We have all caught the habit.<sup>1</sup>

But three determinants which pervade American life militate against that kind of purist attitude toward the role which a word need retain: advertising, journalistic style, and social discourse. That Sandburg undoubtedly recognizes the effects of these influences on the language of his subjects and deliberately incorporates such expressions in verse is evident in his poem "Remorse." Each example of the bending of a word is underlined and the grammatical problem indicated above that word:

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<sup>1</sup>Sheridan Baker, The Complete Stylist (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), pp. 162-63.

## TABLE XVII

## BENDING OF WORDS IN "REMORSE"

The horse's name was Remorse.  
There were people said, "Gee, what a nag!"

[noun used as an adjective]  
And they were Edgar Allan Poe bugs and so  
They called him Remorse.

When he was a gelding  
He flashed his heels to other ponies  
And threw dust in the noses of other ponies  
And won his first race and his second  
And another and another and hardly ever  
Came under the wire behind the other runners.

And so, Remorse, who is gone, was the hero of a  
play  
By Henry Blossom, who is now gone.

What is there to a monicker? Call me anything.  
A nut, a cheese, something that the cat brought  
in.

[shortened noun used as a verb]  
Nick me with any old name.

[noun used as a verb] [verb used as an adjective]  
Class me up for a fish, a gorilla, a slant head,  
an egg, a ham.  
Only . . . slam me across the ears sometimes . . .  
and hunt for a white star  
In my forehead and twist the bang of my forelock  
around it.

[noun used as a verb]  
Make a wish for me. Maybe I will light out like  
a streak of wind.

(pp. 213-14)

Thus, as his admirers believe, Sandburg purposefully  
departs from formal grammatical practice so that his poems  
may faithfully portray their subjects through the authen-  
ticity of current American speech. Indeed, a reader may not  
complain about Sandburg's use of grammar if he understands

the poet's reason for using it, if he takes into account the dichotomy in American English--the gap between common usage and scholarly grammatical rules for the language.

That gap Sandburg reflects when the language of the speakers in his poems includes the use of determiners before proper nouns--a use which despite its clear violation of traditional prescriptive grammar is nevertheless true to linguistic habits of some Americans. Transformational grammarians, for example, believe that proper nouns do not work with determiners,<sup>1</sup> those words which traditionalists have labeled possessive pronouns, articles, and demonstratives.<sup>2</sup> But Sandburg's speaker in "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter" uses the determiner this before the proper noun Jesus in order to stress his anger at the demagoguery of the "contemporary bunkshooter," Billy Sunday, in contrast to the true religious spirit of Jesus:

TABLE XVIII  
DETERMINERS MODIFYING PROPER NOUNS IN  
"TO A CONTEMPORARY BUNKSHOOTER"

This Jesus was good to look at, smelled good,  
listened good. (p. 29)

. . . . .

It was real blood spurted in red drops where the  
spear of the Roman soldier rammed in between the  
ribs of this Jesus of Nazareth. (p. 31)

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<sup>1</sup>Herndon, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Study Guide: Linguistics for English Teachers,  
rev. ed. (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1965),  
p. 73.

And, again, Sandburg mirrors this purposeful peculiarity of common usage in contrast to arbitrary standards of grammar in his verse "Chamfort." The underlined portion below also reflects this colloquial practice; in this instance, however, the determiner this before the proper noun Chamfort indicates the speaker's disdain for the subject:

## TABLE XIX

## COLLOQUIAL USE OF DETERMINER IN "CHAMFORT"

There's Chamfort. He's a sample.  
 Locked himself in a library with a gun,  
 Shot off his nose and shot out his right eye.  
 And this Chamfort knew how to write  
 And thousands read his books on how to live,  
 But he himself didn't know  
 How to die. . . .

(p. 19)

Another noteworthy trait of Sandburg's grammar in terms of a purposeful use of it as an element of poetic language is his frequent writing of poems entirely in the imperative mood. The subject of the sentences in such poems, in most cases the person addressed, is not explicitly stated and often not ascertainable. Two examples of this technique are the short poems "Bones" and "Pals":

## "BONES"

Sling me under the sea.  
 Pack me down in the salt and wet.  
 No farmer's plow shall touch my bones.  
 No Hamlet hold my jaws and speak  
 How jokes are gone and empty is my mouth.  
 Long, green-eyed scavengers shall pick my eyes,  
 Purple fish play hide-and-seek,  
 And I shall be song of thunder, crash of sea,  
 Down on the floors of salt and wet.  
 Sling me . . . under the sea.

(p. 58)

# "PALS"

Take a hold now  
On the silver handles here,  
Six silver handles,  
One for each of his old pals.

Take hold  
And lift him down the stairs,  
Put him on the rollers  
Over the floor of the hearse.

Take him on the last haul,  
To the cold straight house,  
The level even house,  
To the last house of all.

The dead say nothing  
And the dead know much  
And the dead hold under their tongues  
A locked-up story.

(p. 59)

In "Bones," which is entirely in the imperative mood, the speaker is making a plea that he be buried at sea; the persons commanded are never explicitly stated but are probably the attendants at the speaker's death rites. The persons addressed in "Pals," though, are clearly pallbearers at a funeral; but in this poem it is perhaps significant that Sandburg's final stanza, not in the imperative mood, is not aligned with the preceding three stanzas but is indented to show its contrasting indicative mood.

The impersonal "you," that understood subject in the imperative mood, is possibly a characteristic American linguistic device so that no contrast can be made between one person and another. In the United States there is an

effort to avoid a person's being characterized by his speech, and the use of the imperative mood in discourse helps to avoid that contrast. That Sandburg recognizes this linguistic tendency is evident from his practice in poems such as these.

Thus, grammar clearly shares with diction and vocabulary Sandburg's singular use of language in verse, but Sandburg's use of a new rhythm in poetry is also an element in his unique use of poetic utterance. That new rhythm consists of free verse used in a distinctive way: the mimicking of cadences of actual speech to produce lines of verse. In his poetry Sandburg always remains consistent in the use of vers libre, or vers libertine according to his detractors. Not a few critics suggest that in this fidelity to a poetic use of loose rhythm, Sandburg sacrifices his claim to distinction, for, as Untermeyer contends, "what the creator enjoys is the feel of a firm medium"<sup>1</sup> which can provide a lasting shape. Nevertheless, a doctoral candidate in language and literature concludes a study of Carl Sandburg with the opinion that this poet is "capable of considerable artistry in free verse."<sup>2</sup> If Sandburg then

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry, new and enl. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Parry Stroud, "Carl Sandburg: A Biographical and Critical Study of His Major Works," Dissertation Abstracts, 17 (1956), 367 (Northwestern University).



achieves artistry by means of his free verse, there is a need to relate the characteristics of free verse to the use of language in Sandburg's poetry. In that respect Llewellyn Jones writes that "Free verse is simply language written in cadence. . . . It is prose with the rhythm emphasized by the line structure."<sup>1</sup> Another commentator states that "verse is free when its rhythm is not primarily obtained by the metered line."<sup>2</sup>

In order to perceive the presence of verse in Sandburg's prosody as well as Sandburg's achievement in terms of rhythm, the lines of a poem may be arranged into a succession of sentences in the form of a paragraph of prose. Reading that prose aloud reveals that the paragraph falls into rhythmic units, or cadences, according to the natural pauses of speaking; thus, the original lines of verse rely for their poesy upon the cadences of ordinary speech. As one critic states,

Cadenced verse . . . must submit to structural and organizational boundaries, as must all art. The only freedom cadenced verse obtains is a limited freedom from the tight demands of the metered line. . . . Only the great artist is capable of attaining a sharp pattern by a heavy reliance on cadence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Llewellyn Jones, First Impressions: Essays on Poetry, Criticism, and Prosody (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1925), p. 231.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Allen, "Cadenced Free Verse," College English, 9 (January, 1948), 196.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, pp. 198-99.

And the rhythmical units of Carl Sandburg's poems do reflect purposefully the cadences of actual American speech. The evaluation that Sandburg "triumphs because he has an ear for the rhythms as well as the vocabulary of colloquial speech"<sup>1</sup> is justifiable in the case of Sandburg's poem "Soup":

### "SOUP"

I saw a famous man eating soup.  
I say he was lifting a fat broth  
Into his mouth with a spoon.  
His name was in the newspapers that day  
Spelled out in tall black headlines  
And thousands of people were talking about him.

When I saw him,  
He sat bending his head over a plate  
Putting soup in his mouth with a spoon.  
(p. 165)

Notable initially is that the lines of "Soup" vary in length in respect to the number of words in each line. But the lines also contain varied lengths of juncture--the amount of time which passes during a natural pause of the voice as the reader speaks a line. For Sandburg the pauses in the natural flow of speech determine his rhythmic units or cadences and thereby divide his expression into lines of verse. If Sandburg's punctuation be retained but the lines of "Soup" be arranged into paragraphs of prose, the poem instead appears in this form:

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<sup>1</sup>Babette Deutsch, "Poetry for the People," The English Journal, 26 (April, 1937), 271.

TABLE XX  
PROSE FORM OF "SOUP"

I saw a famous man eating soup. I say he was lifting a fat broth into his mouth with a spoon. His name was in the newspapers that day spelled out in tall black headlines and thousands of people were talking about him.

When I saw him, he sat bending his head over a plate putting soup in his mouth with a spoon.

If now these paragraphs be read aloud, the natural pauses of spoken discourse may occur as marked in this modified paragraph:<sup>1</sup>

TABLE XXI  
JUNCTURES IN PROSE FORM OF "SOUP"

I saw a famous man / eating soup. # I say // he was lifting a fat broth / into his mouth // with a spoon. # His name / was in the newspapers that day // spelled out / in tall black headlines // and thousands of people // were talking about him. #

# When I saw him, // he sat bending his head / over a plate / putting soup in his mouth // with a spoon. #

Even if these junctures be inserted into the original lines of verse, they separate into approximately equal reading units in respect to the time allotted for groups of words within each line of the poem. A diagram illustrates this result by the use of superscripts to denote the equivalent units of time for spoken groups of words:

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<sup>1</sup>A single bar indicates a brief pause in speaking; a double bar signifies a pause longer than that of a single bar; and the sign # denotes terminal expressions having consequent pauses longer than those indicated by single and double bars within the larger context of the entire passage.

## TABLE XXII

## EQUIVALENT SPEAKING UNITS IN VERSE FORM OF "SOUP"

I saw a famous man / eating soup. #

I say // he was lifting a fat broth /

Into his mouth // with a spoon. #

His name / was in the newspapers that day //

Spelled out / in tall black headlines //

And thousands of people // were talking about him. #

# When I saw him, //

He sat bending his head / over a plate /

Putting soup in his mouth // with a spoon. #

Clearly, then, "Soup" relies for its linear divisions on the natural cadences, that is, rhythmical units, of spoken discourse, and those natural units, as the diagrams illustrate, result both from the instinctive or habituated pauses in spoken discourse and their length and also from the natural time allotted by a speaker to groups of words within that speaker's verbal expression as a whole. It is noteworthy that the line "When I saw him" is not aligned with the others; it is indented. That indented space in print becomes in reading the first unit of equiv-

alent time needed to make that line equal in length to the lines in the rest of the poem. Hence, the division into lines--a requisite--results from spoken language.

In connection with natural spoken discourse and its cadences, Deutsch discusses Sandburg's use of "plain and irregular sounds"<sup>1</sup> and cites as illustrative the lengthy poem published originally as a book, The People, Yes, with lines such as these:

The people, yes,  
Being several stories and psalms nobody would want  
to laugh at  
interspersed with . . .  
the roar and whirl of street crowds, work gangs,  
sidewalk clamor,  
with interludes of midnight cool blue and  
inviolable stars  
over the phantom frames of skyscrapers.

(p. 437)

Surely there are plain sounds in the auditory imagery of the "street crowds, work gangs, sidewalk clamor" about which Sandburg writes; here, too, are plain sounds in Sandburg's conventionally poetic use of gliding sounds to describe the crowds' "roar and whirl" and of liquid sounds to characterize midnight as "cool blue." And in a larger sense than vocal sounds or imagery, Deutsch affirms and augments the thesis that Sandburg's use of ordinary speech in verse is purposeful, is appropriate to prosody, and merits continued distinction:

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<sup>1</sup>Deutsch, p. 270.

Sandburg's free, unrhymed cadences and casual American language are no more classical than a folk song or a barber-shop ballad. But it [The People, Yes] is, in a profound sense, a poem of the people, for the people, and by the people.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in Carl Sandburg's unique use of language to create poetry, his structural lines of verse take their place along with his diction, his use of the American vulgate, and his liberties with grammar. Indeed, that unique use of language is the very stuff of which his verse is made and from which it can claim its verity as poetry. Consequently, Parry Stroud in his critical study of Sandburg's life and work characterizes Sandburg's poetry as a "vivid recording of speech,"<sup>2</sup> and surely it is. Surely, too, it is true that Carl Sandburg used

the language of the people as his almost total means of expression. . . . Sandburg had entered into the language of the people; he was not looking at it as a scientific phenomenon or a curiosity (as had H. L. Mencken). He was at home with it.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps from those appraisals of the appropriateness to poetry of recording the language of the people, an assertion of the merits of Sandburg's extraordinary use of poetic language is in order.

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<sup>1</sup>Deutsch, p. 270.

<sup>2</sup>Stroud, p. 367.

<sup>3</sup>Crowder, p. 125.

## CONCLUSION

Poetry is a pack-sack of invisible keepsakes.  
--Carl Sandburg

If the recording of the language of ordinary people is appropriate to poetry, then whether Sandburg's verse merits continued distinction requires for answer an examination of the significance of his subjects and themes, an explanation for the fluctuating popularity of Sandburg's poetry, and an evaluation of his literary contributions. And, indeed, Sandburg is a poet of subject--the American spirit and American life--and having written over so long a period, he thereby captures in verse many moments in time which no longer remain. As the critic Bernard Duffey believes, there is in Sandburg's verse life, validity, and power because he allows his subjects to speak for themselves out of his experiences with the realities of labor and populism.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if for no other reason, Sandburg's poems remain vital American literature because they insure that elements of Americana will always be recoverable.

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard Duffey, The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters: A Critical History (East Lansing: The Michigan State College Press, 1954), pp. 216-18.

Indeed, with the renaissance of populism in the 1970's perhaps a renewed interest in Sandburg's populist poetry is prefigured. And populist it is in his ever-recurring theme of the character of American life. Even a critic who labeled Sandburg's early poetry as merely "socialist political oratory" can praise Sandburg's succeeding work as a "remarkable achievement," as the true "sound of the American idiom."<sup>1</sup> Since most of that work was written and published by Sandburg during the decades of social protest and the rise of the proletariat to a position of political power, Sandburg's subjects concern humanity and its contemporary struggle. For these reasons he was widely read when his poetry first appeared. Thus, one of his biographers offers this salient reason for his contemporary popularity:

Carl Sandburg came right out in poetry and named names. He named people and streets in his verse,<sup>2</sup> real people and real streets that everybody knew.

Today, however, when most of these epic struggles are resolved and the stress is on technology, there has been a movement away from Sandburg's poetry and its seemingly outdated sociological and political overtones.

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<sup>1</sup>Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), pp. 453-55.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1941), p. 135.



Granted that such a view is current, as Gay Wilson Allen believes,

Readers will either learn to distinguish the poetry from the propaganda and sentimentality or Sandburg's name will fade from the history of twentieth-century poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, apart from the topical propaganda of its day, Sandburg's poetry has intrinsic value in that reproduction of America which no one else has ever achieved.

Furthermore, it is one English professor's thesis that Sandburg's work serves well as an entree to a study of poetry. He encourages teachers to use Sandburg's verse since Sandburg "can attract to poetry many of our youth who would normally be repulsed by other poets who seem to say nothing in antiquated and dull language."<sup>2</sup> And the professor's suggestion continues with the idea that after Sandburg "has given the student the thrill of recognition and of understanding,"<sup>3</sup> then the study can proceed to traditional poetry. Therefore, what greater value can a poet ask of his work than that service to

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<sup>1</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, "Carl Sandburg: Fire and Smoke," The South Atlantic Quarterly, 59 (Summer, 1960), 316.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Yatron, "Carl Sandburg: the Poet as Non-conformist," The English Journal, 48 (December, 1959), 527 and 539.

<sup>3</sup>Yatron, p. 539.

young American scholars when this service is combined with the merit of preserving some of America's past through living literature? And as Allen declares, Sandburg "is worthy of respect and deserves to be read--the kind of immortality dearest to every poet."<sup>1</sup>

Surely Carl Sandburg deserves that immortality. He is a poet whose creations offer a panorama of American life, a poet so indigenously American in themes and lyricism that succeeding generations may discover in his verse the spirit, essence, and history of a way of life in the first half of the twentieth century. And that verse is indigenously American simply because Sandburg uses the American language uniquely: for the first time in poetry authentic speech depicts the true character of America.

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, p. 331.

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