

"Chicago Poems," by Carl Sandburg

1. Carl Sandburg published "Chicago Poems" in 1916, with the help of a usually conservative publisher (Holt and Harcourt), and the book is full of contradictions (harsh urban realities/ an pleasing rural natural world, socialism/democracy, harsh truth/sympathetic truths, identification with soldiers at war/pacifist peace-loving activism, cruelty of the human race/a sympathetic values of human life). How many examples of these contradictions can you find in specific poems, beginning with the poem "Chicago?" What is your response to these contradictions? Does this book inspire sympathy, pride, repulsion, shock, or anger?
2. Carl Sandburg spent a few years as a socialist newspaper writer, and eventually had to quit socialist parties to make a living and get a stable job. Some might say those Democratic Socialist ideals and beliefs influenced the writing of "Chicago Poems," and yet he doesn't use the word "socialism" or "communism" in the book. Would you call these poems sympathetic to immigrants, poor people, laborers, and office workers poems of a democratic ideal or socialist sympathy poems? How many examples of this sympathy can you name in the book?
3. "Chicago Poems" seems to be a time capsule into Carl Sandburg's life and beliefs in the early 20th Century. Are these poems dated or still true in their human experience [today](#)? The people described in this book seem like characters in a novel about realism. How do you feel about this people being described?
4. The poem "To Contemporary Bunkshooter" was originally named "Billy Sunday," who was a religious evangelist from the Chicago area, who was a demagogue, manipulating people through angry sermons. This poem seems to express the speaker's disillusioned stance toward religion. How many examples of the negative stance on religion can you find in the book?
5. The section of "Chicago Poems" called "War Poems" depicts the lives of soldiers in a harsh way. Are they sympathetic to soldiers doing their patriotic duty, or are they harsh criticisms against acts of war, or both?
6. Carl Sandburg seemed to re-invent himself as a Democratic patriot after the success of "Chicago Poems," eventually working on an epic biography of Abraham Lincoln. Do you believe some of these poems hint at his evolution as a "socialist poet" to a "democratic poet?" Or do you believe that socialist causes like fair worker's wages, care for the disabled and elderly, education for the needy, health care for the sick, housing for workers are also Democratic ideals? It's important to note that Sandburg later supported FDR, and wrote patriotic newspaper columns and poems during World War II. Does this make you feel these early poems are conflicted, contradictory to the beliefs of his time?
7. The second part of "Chicago Poems" is filled with poems that describe the natural world, namely the poem "Fog." Is this a contrast and departure for the first poems in the book? How many can you point out that are appealing or harsh in nature, or both, simultaneously?
8. Carl Sandburg wrote about racial identity frequently in "Chicago Poems." How many racial poems can you point out, and do they come across as "human," "American," "stereotypical," "sympathetic," "critical," or all of the above? (See poems "Ni--er," and "Aztec," and "Happiness.")

9. How do you think the speakers in these poems feel about the wealthy class or the rich. What was Sandburg's critique of these upper classes in poems like "Graceland," and "Fences?"

10. Do you believe "Chicago Poems" is a great achievement? What is it that you like or don't like about these poems? Can you name any other writers to compare this book with, like Walt Whitman, Edgar Lee Master's "Spoon River Anthology," William Carlos Williams, or Theodore Drieser's "Sister Carrie?" Do you like Sandburg's "plainspoken," and "simple" approach to writing? Would you call this book "Realism," "Naturalism," or "Modern?"