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### "Chicago" and "Prairie": Carl Sandburg and a Yearning for Paradise

Pamela Lannom '88

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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**"Chicago" and "Prairie" :  
Carl Sandburg and a Yearning for  
Paradise**

*Pamela Lannom*

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*Photo by Jim Schniepp*

In *Rediscoveries: Literature and Place in Illinois*, Robert Bray discusses literature from the period around the turn of the century that for one reason or another has been neglected. He focuses on the polarity that exists between the farming regions in the central and southern sections, and the city of Chicago in the northern part of the state. This polarity, he believes, is "definitive of Illinois experience."<sup>1</sup> Although Carl Sandburg's poems have not suffered from the type of neglect Bray discusses, many of them do involve some type of conflict between urban and rural Illinois. Two of Sandburg's poems, when read in conjunction, serve as especially good examples of Sandburg's treatment of this type of conflict. Both "Chicago" and "Prairie" contain the same types of imagery, and although they differ in many ways, they obviously deal with the same subject matter in a very similar manner. The basic conflict behind these two poems is Sandburg's love of both Chicago and the prairie, combined with his inability to completely accept either as his "safe place."

For Sandburg the prairie has many qualities which are very appealing. The images of the prairie throughout the poem are ones of a nurturing, providing, eternal entity. As Bray discusses in *Rediscoveries*, nature in the west (Illinois for all practical purposes can be considered the west—or at least "western"—for this time period) had the ability, in the mind of the romantic to "make men and women whole again,"<sup>2</sup> and the prairie of Sandburg's poem has had just that type of influence on him. Early in the poem, he describes the prairie as a place where he can "rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart" (line 14).<sup>3</sup> The prairie also has a voice in the poem, and her role is a nurturing

one, as she is “mother of men” (line 124). In this particular stanza, the role of prairie as provider is strongly emphasized, as she claims as her own people, places and animals. The use of the possessive phrase “They are mine” repeatedly through this stanza indicates not only that the prairie claims all she mentions as her own, but also seems to imply that they in turn owe her for their existence. She is also responsible for nourishing “the lonely men on horses” (line 28), and feeding “the boys who went to France in great dark days” (line 45). Sandburg realizes the prairie’s role as mother and nourisher and addresses her saying, “O prairie mother, I am one of your boys” (line 190), once again placing the prairie not only in a feminine role, but also in that of a nurturer. Although she does refer to herself once as brother and mother (line 38), her role is primarily as mother, and as such, the prairie is a distinctly feminine entity in the poem.

The treatment of the prairie as a feminine entity is one that is common to American literature, and, according to Annette Kolodny, part of the myth of the American landscape. Kolodny states that one of the oldest and most important American fantasies is

a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

Kolodny goes on to say that once America “finally produced a pastoral literature of her own, that literature hailed the essential femininity of the terrain in a way European pastoral never had.”<sup>5</sup> Sandburg is an obvious example of a writer who views the landscape not only as woman, but also as mother.

In addition to its femininity and its nurturing aspect, the land in the prairie is also depicted as being eternal. One stanza demonstrates this particularly well:

I am here when the cities are gone.  
I am here before the cities come...  
I am dust of men (lines 26-30).

The prairie suggests an inherent permanence in herself that is non-characteristic of the cities. This coincides very closely with her sense of being the source of all life she sustains. As an eternal being, she is able to hold this responsibility for all of the time. This permanence also gives a sense of continuity and a feeling of the past in the prairie. Her history looks back to the days of the prairie of James Fenimore Cooper and Natty Bumppo, in which the whites are still struggling against the Indians for possession of the land. Sandburg even makes reference to these days of the past, as the prairie is one who has "seen the red births and the red deaths" (line 45).

Yet Sandburg's prairie, both as he experiences it, and as it exists in his poem, is very different from the prairie Natty and Ishmael Bush inhabit. Cooper's prairie is one in which the settlements of the white man are considered an invasion upon the prairie, and the "progress" of industrialization, no matter on how small a scale, is unwelcome. The prairie is often described as "naked" and "Still," and an overland passenger train would definitely be out of place in this environment. Natty is also very conscious of the white man's use and abuse of the land. He talks of the white man who settles the prairie with Ishmael and says, "He tames the beast of the field to feed his idle wants, and having robbed the brutes of their natural food, he teaches them to strip the 'earth of its trees to quiet their hunger.'" Only Natty, because of his

Indian background and knowledge of correct use of the land, is able to live on the prairie and remain at peace with nature. For Sandburg, the prairie can adapt not only to the settlements of white men, but also the machines they bring with them. As Kolodny says of Cooper's prairie, "Not only do the prairies' distance from the settlements make the arrival of the axe and the 'chopper' highly improbable, but, more important, their very terrain renders that aggression impotent."<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps one of the most notable and important differences between Cooper's prairie and Sandburg's prairie is the use of three distinct images and motifs that Carl S. Smith discusses in his analysis of *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920* as common to authors of the time writing about Chicago. These three images include the railroads, the stockyards, and the large buildings. The significance of these three symbols arises from their common characteristic: they are all "either machines of locomotion or [they] contained within themselves such machines."<sup>8</sup> The appearance of these three motifs in relation to Chicago is expected; their appearance in "Prairie," however, is somewhat surprising. Even something as fundamental as the structure of the poem is based on the movement of a train through the midwestern prairies. Although Sandburg does criticize the "overland passenger train" in the city as being "choked," with pistons that "hiss" and wheels that "curse" (lines 22-23), the train on the prairie "flits on phantom wheels and the sky and / the soil between them muffle the pistons and cheer the wheels" (lines 24-25). Sandburg's prairie is able to accept mechanization, growth, and civilization in a way that Cooper's could not. Sandburg appears to be disturbed by the image of men in the mills "Playing their flesh arms against the twisting wrists of steel" (line 95), but yet the prairie claims as its own both the "old zigzag rail fences, [and] the new barbwire" (line 135). Most importantly, Sandburg de-

Lannom '88: "Chicago" and "Prairie": Carl Sandburg and a Yearning for Paradise  
picts the cities as part of an atmosphere of growth and promise.

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 (lines 194-97).

The vitality and energy of the prairie lie not so much in its possession of the past, but in its eternal focus on the future. As the prairie tells the reader at the end of this stanza, "There is nothing in the world / only an ocean of tomorrows, / a sky of tomorrows" (lines 199-200).

Yet at other times Sandburg seems to criticize the city for more than its choked passenger trains, and depicts it on a level inferior to that of prairie. At the times these criticisms are juxtaposed with images of the prairie; this has the effect of elevating the "uncivilized" prairie over the city. For example, two stanzas near the end of the poem contain two such descriptions.

A thousand red men cried and went away to new places  
for corn / and women: a million white men came  
and put up skyscrapers, / threw out rails and  
wires, feelers to the salt sea: now the  
smokestacks bite / the skyline with stub teeth.

In an early year the call of a wild duck woven in  
greens and purples: / now the riveter's chatter,  
the police patrol, the song-whistle of the /  
steamboat (lines 78-84).

Sandburg has created, within a single poem, images of the same location that contrast with one another. The imagery in the first stanza reproduced above is an especially caustic view of the city. The image of smokestacks "biting" the skyline suggests a hostile and invading presence in the city—and yet Sandburg has already accepted the city as



the promise of the future. Even within this one poem, he seems unable to make up his mind about his opinion of the appearance of the city on the prairie, and the mechanization it brings with it.

Sandburg is also unable to reach a decision in "Chicago." The city is very appealing to Sandburg, for a number of reasons. The city of this poem is new, like the cities in "Prairie," and also possesses a type of raw energy that fascinates Sandburg. His descriptions of the city concentrate on images of action and growth. Chicago is "alive and coarse and strong and cunning" (line 16); a "tall bold slugger" (line 18) which is "Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted / against the wilderness" (lines 19-20). According to Smith, such imagery was common to authors of the time writing about Chicago. "Since the middle of the nineteenth century," he states, "visitors had spoken of Chicago in terms of its raw vitality" (p. 2). This vitality seems to be the main attraction of Chicago for Sandburg.

Yet Sandburg does not view Chicago with pure admiration, either. Another characteristic of the authors of the period, according to Smith, is a combination of admiration for the city, and a questioning of its consequences. Authors during this period, Smith writes, were "trying not only to capture the city's energy . . . but also to question the sources and implications of these qualities and the disruptions, both good and bad, that the rise of the city had caused in society and in the lives of individuals" (p. 7). Sandburg fits into this category of authors perfectly. In lines six to twelve of the poem, the Chicago Sandburg describes is less than ideal. He believes when they tell him that the city is "wicked," "crooked," and "brutal" (lines 6, 8, and 10). Not only does he agree with these opinions, however, but he proceeds to provide the reader with the evidence which has convinced him of his opinions.

Sandburg is obviously caught between a feeling of admiration and one

of criticism. As Bray indicates in *Rediscoveries*, Sandburg's collection of Chicago Poems "reveals the attraction-repulsion conflict he would always have with Chicago."<sup>9</sup> This conflict is clearly evident in both "Chicago" and in "Prairie."

In addition to his attraction to the vitality of Chicago, however, Sandburg's attraction to the city does become evident as he negates his earlier criticism (if it can be considered criticism; it is mainly a mere acknowledgment of some negative characteristics of the city) in the second half of the poem by praising the city in one form or another. One form of praise exists in the images of vitality and energy that Sandburg associates with Chicago. The second form of praise occurs in the comparison of Chicago to a youth that Sandburg makes in the last eight lines of the poem. Smith discusses this comparison in his work, and states that,

This comparison of Chicago to a healthy and well-meaning youth appears well into the twentieth century, most notably in Sandburg's "Chicago." Such comparisons rationalize the city's undisciplined growth and crudity and neatly summarize the expectation that, once the body matures, the mind (i. e. the cultural amenities) will follow.<sup>10</sup>

This analysis is a very accurate one; Sandburg's youth is very crude — he is described as an "ignorant fighter" (line 28) who laughs as one who is undefeated. In describing him in this manner, Sandburg implies that at some time in the future, once he had gained knowledge and experience, he will no longer be laughing. Thus, Chicago one day will also cease laughing; perhaps this will result from an eventual recognition of the damage to the individual that appears to be inherent in city life — once it recognizes the marks of "wanton hunger" on the faces of its women and children (line 12). Yet at the conclusion of the poem, the

fighter, and Chicago, remain proud of what they are (line 33). This would appear to be an inconsistency, unless it is taken into consideration that Sandburg judged Chicago's pride as false and uneducated — the image of a proud, happy, ignorant Oedipus comes to mind. The fate of Chicago in the poem is left as a very uncertain one, as Sandburg's descriptions of the city and the comparisons he makes are filled with conflict and inconsistency.

After reading and analyzing these two poems simultaneously, the reader is left with an inability to reconcile the different viewpoints Sandburg takes in each of the poems, and even within the poems themselves. Several critics have attempted to reconcile this difficulty for themselves. Amy Lowell, in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, suggests that "his American experiences have sown his heart thickly with a strange combination of dissatisfaction and idealism,"<sup>11</sup> and that "It is . . . [a] belief in joy in the midst of a joyless world that makes the paradox of Mr. Sandburg's writings."<sup>12</sup> Bray, also editor of *A Reader's Guide to Illinois Literature*, states in an essay in that work that "Most fiction critical of the city tries to find an accommodating middle ground on which their protagonists can meet Chicago's nearly impossible demands without sacrificing their ethical selves."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Sandburg attempted to find some middle ground in his poems, in which he could praise and criticize simultaneously. Either of these seem to be acceptable explanations of the inconsistency within the poems.

The best explanation, however, is one that is much less favorable to Sandburg. Bray, this time in an unpublished manuscript, discusses Sandburg in an extremely critical light. In a general statement about Sandburg, he provides an excellent explanation of the conflict in these two poems. "The poet calls the world what he wants to," Bray asserts, "despite its claim to objective existence, makes words work his

Lannom '88: "Chicago" and "Prairie": Carl Sandburg and a Yearning for Paradise  
will rather than their own, and may wear as many personas or speak in as many voices as there are poems."<sup>14</sup> The usage of an unlimited number of voices does explain Sandburg's inability to reach a conclusion in either poem—it would seem as if he was not looking for a conclusion, or for any type of consistency, either in his work as a whole, or in a specific poem. Kolodny discusses the realization on the part of Americans that despite their image of the land as a nurturing, feminine entity, "the despoliation of the land appeared more and more an inevitable consequence of human habitation."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Sandburg realized that the development of the land, and its ensuing destruction of the prairies, was a fate neither he nor the country as whole could avoid, and at the same time was unable to release his ties to the maternal prairies. Perhaps, in looking for a "safe place," he was unable to overcome the desire of the early settlers in the New World — a desire termed, by Kolodny, as a "yearning for paradise."<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bray, *Rediscoveries: Literature and Place in Illinois* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Given Sandburg's background and experiences, he can reasonably be equated as the speaker in most of his poems. As David Hoffman states in *Moonlight Dries No Mittens* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1979, p. 5), "Sandburg excludes nothing, or at least very little, of his own experience from his poetry."

<sup>4</sup> Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Kolodny, p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> Carl S. Smith. *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Bray, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1921), p. 202.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bray, ed., *A Reader's Guide to Illinois Literature* (Springfield: Illinois State Library, 1985), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Bray, *The People Maybe, the Place Perhaps*, Unpublished Manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> Kolodny, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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