

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Chicago

CARL SANDBURG

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First appearing in Poetry in 1914, Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago"—the first of nine poems he wrote about the city in his 1916 collection Chicago Poems—describes the "City of the Big Shoulders" that Sandburg loves, despite its imperfections. Sandburg had moved to the city in 1912, just two years before writing the poem. The poem is an early example of social realism, a form of art that became popular in the 1920s and 30s with paintings such as Grant Wood's American Gothic (1930) and photographs such as Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother (1936).

Best known for his poems and biographies, Sandburg (1878–1960) grew up in a middle-class family in Galesburg, Illinois. Dropping out of school after the eighth grade, he took many odd jobs until enlisting in the military during the Spanish-American War. After the war, he developed his writing skills at Lombard College (which he left before graduating) and while working as a journalist at the Chicago Daily News. The author of nearly 50 books of poetry, history, folklore, and stories for children, Sandburg won the Pulitzer Prize three times: in 1919 for Corn Huskers, a book of poetry; in 1940 for Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, a biography of Lincoln; and in 1951 for his collection Complete Poems.

As you read Sandburg's "Chicago," pay attention to the way that the poet personifies the city. In what ways are cities like the people who inhabit and form them? In what ways are they different or separate? Thinking of your own city, what personal characteristics would you say it exhibits? How does Sandburg's acknowledgment that things are not perfect in Chicago make his admiration for the city more palpable?

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women
under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

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And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill
and go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I
have seen the marks of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give
them back the sneer and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse
and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set
vivid against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the
wilderness,

Bareheaded,

Shoveling,

Wrecking,

Planning,

Building, breaking, rebuilding,

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,

Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,

Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,

Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the
people,

Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to
be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight
Handler to the Nation.

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