

In 1968, Brooks was named Poet Laureate for Illinois, succeeding Carl Sandburg. She was known as a tireless teacher and supporter of younger writers, attending poetry “slams” and often sponsoring awards out of her own pocket. Some critics believe Brooks was underappreciated—but by the latter part of her life, many awards and honors had come to her, including appointment to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1976, and the establishment of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Creative Writing and Black Literature at Chicago State University. In a eulogy for Brooks following her death in December, 2000, U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove said:

As a gawky adolescent I spent the whole of a muggy midwestern summer combing the local library shelves for something that might speak to me. . . the poems of Gwendolyn Brooks leapt off the pages of the book in my hands and struck me like a thunderbolt. These were words that spoke straight from the turbulent center of life—words that nourished like meat, not frosting. . . I know that Gwendolyn Brooks was among the few who gave me the courage to insist on my own story.

About the author

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1917; shortly afterward, the Brooks family moved to Chicago. Brooks’s gift for writing was recognized and supported while she was still a young girl. At the age of 16, she met and received encouragement from poet Langston Hughes, and at 17, she began to contribute poems to the *Chicago Defender*. She graduated from Wilson Junior College in 1936, in the heart of the Depression. Brooks’s first collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, appeared in 1945, and the following year she won the first of two Guggenheims. In 1953, Brooks published her one novel, *Maud Martha*, a sequence of short chapters chronicling the down-cast life of the dark-skinned Maud Martha Brown.

She received a lifetime achievement award from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1989, and in 1994 was named Jefferson Lecturer by the National Council on the Humanities. Gwendolyn Brooks died at her home in Chicago on December 3, 2000, at the age of 83.

Additional reading

Gwendolyn Brooks. *Maud Martha*, 1953.
In the Mecca, 1968.
Family Pictures, 1970.
Report from Part One, 1972.
To Disembark, 1981.
The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems, 1986.
Blacks, 1987.
Report from Part Two, 1996.

Discussion questions

Both Sandburg and Brooks write about working-class life in Chicago. In which poems in particular do they have the most common ground? For each poet, which factors are most responsible for shaping that life?

What human qualities would each of these poets say are most important for survival or happiness?

Both poets make social commentary in their poems; how overtly do they express their judgments, and in what ways do they agree and disagree with each other?

If you were to pick one poem from each poet that represents what each does best, which would it be? And for each poet, what single line or image sticks with you most forcefully?

Chicago Poems

by Carl Sandburg

Selected Poems

by Gwendolyn Brooks

StoryLines Midwest
Discussion Guide No. 9

by David Long
StoryLines Midwest
Literature Consultant



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Chicago Poems

by Carl Sandburg

"There was a puzzlement as to whether I was a poet, a biographer, a wandering troubadour with a guitar, a midwest Hans Christian Andersen, or a historian of current events," Carl Sandburg writes in the preface to his *Complete Poems* (1950). It was true. In 1940, he'd won the Pulitzer Prize in History for his monumental work of love, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. He won another Pulitzer for the *Complete Poems* in 1951. He wrote journalism, he wrote for children, he was an avid folklorist, a lecturer and performer, a revered public figure in mid-century America.

Son of Swedish immigrants, Sandburg grew up in Illinois speaking both English and Swedish. His father was a blacksmith who had worked on the transcontinental railroad. "Sandburg's vision of the American experience was shaped in the American Midwest during the complicated events which brought the nineteenth century to a close," one critic has written.

After leaving school at 13, Sandburg took a miscellany of jobs; at 18 he rode cross-country using his father's railroad pass, fueling a life-long wanderlust. In 1912, Sandburg gravitated to Chicago where he began writing for socialist journals and newspapers, and tried to get the poems he had been writing for several years published. His break came in 1914 when Harriet Monroe accepted a half-dozen for her avant-garde magazine *Poetry*. Monroe believed American poetry had become lifeless and hide-bound—she saw in Sandburg's muscular new writing an antidote.

This recognition brought Sandburg into the company of writers responsible for a Chicago-based renaissance in Midwestern literature—Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay and others. It was also through *Poetry* that Sandburg met Ezra Pound, one of Modernism's great movers and shakers. Sandburg was encouraged to assemble a book of his work; the young publisher Alfred Harcourt brought it to print in 1916 as *Chicago Poems*. In its populism and loose-limbed free verse,

Chicago Poems was a direct descendant of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and the same criticisms leveled at Whitman were now aimed at Sandburg—that the writing was too "vulgar," too clumsy and prose-like to be poetry. But critic Louis Untermeyer called him an "emotional democrat," the "laureate of Industrial America." Others championed his dogged use of "the American vernacular," the speech of ordinary people.

In *Chicago Poems*, Sandburg writes in the first-person, but we never feel the subject is himself. We find him roaming, bearing witness. From our early twenty-first century vantage point, *Chicago Poems* is at its best in two kinds of poem. In the first, Sandburg looks at the city through the lens of his socialist idealism, giving us portraits of working-class citizens. The work is often memorable, studded with real-life detail, as in "Onion Days" or "Ice Handler" or "Muckers" ("The muckers work on. . . pausing. . . to pull / Their boots out of suckholes where they slosh").

In the other sort of poem, Sandburg records snapshots of less politically charged moments—moments of quiet beauty, as in "Picnic Boat": "A big picnic boat comes home to Chicago from the peach / farms of Saugatuck. / Hundreds of electric bulbs break the night's darkness, a / flock of red and yellow birds with wings at a standstill."

Finally, for all Sandburg's earnestness, a dark humor often surfaces in these poems, as in the wonderfully droll "Limited." Mixed in among *Chicago Poems*, it should be said, are lesser pieces—fragments, poems that don't come to much, poems that try too hard to echo Whitman. It's as if, in his egalitarian heart, Sandburg couldn't bear to leave anything out.

Chicago Poems opens with "Chicago," Sandburg's much-recognized anthem to the city ("Hog Butcher for the World / Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat"). "'Chicago' remains one of the great works to connect Midwestern urbanism to a broad and complex view of people at work, and was one of the first poems to bring modernism into the national consciousness," writes critic Sean Robisch. It's tempting to read the Sandburg of "Chicago" as a booster of the city, a champion of industry—and he has been read this way. But Sandburg was fully aware of how hard the city could be on its workers. It's *their* industry he sings the praises of. As Robisch says, "He believed in them with mystic faith."

About the author

Carl Sandburg was born in January 1878 in Galesburg, Illinois. After a brief stint in the Spanish-American War, he attended Lombard College, married Lillian Steichen, and worked for the Social Democratic Party in Wisconsin. In the early 1920s, Sandburg began a study of Abraham Lincoln, a labor that would occupy him for nearly two decades. Sandburg traveled all his life, and continued his work as a folklorist and public performer. He also produced various Lincoln-related materials, children's books, and a novel, *Remembrance Rock* (1948). He collaborated on screenplays and wrote for magazines, from the *Saturday Evening Post* to *Playboy*. Sandburg was given numerous honorary degrees and awards for both history and poetry. In 1945, the Sandburgs left the Midwest for Flat Rock, North Carolina, where he died in July 1967.

Additional reading

Carl Sandburg. *The Chicago Race Riots, July 1919, 1919. Rootabaga Stories, 1922. Carl Sandburg's New American Songbag, 1950. Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years, 1954. The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (rev. and expanded), 1969.



Selected Poems

by Gwendolyn Brooks

In 1963, Gwendolyn Brooks published *Selected Poems*, gathering together her first three books of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1949), and *The Bean Eaters* (1960), plus a section of new work. In this collection, Brooks shows her technical virtuosity in a wealth of forms—ballads, sonnets, blues, blank verse, and others of her own devising.

Like many poets, Brooks is best known for a single poem—in her case, "We Real Cool" from *The Bean Eaters*, eight terse lines about the dead

end faced by a pack of young pool shooters: "We real cool. We / Left school. We / Lurk late. We / Strike straight. We / Sing sin. We / Thin gin. We / Jazz June. We / Die soon."

But the strengths of this short poem—among them economy, intense love of word sounds and rhythm, and close attention to lives lived in the black neighborhoods of Chicago—are present throughout her early work. In 1950, Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*, becoming the first black writer to receive a Pulitzer in any genre. This collection's centerpiece is a mock-epic cycle of seven-line stanzas called "The Anniad," which chronicles the coming of age of a young black woman in the inner city.

By *The Bean Eaters*, Brooks's work had begun to reflect the attitudes of the Civil Rights movement. In "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," a man with a young family yearns to own a home: "Where at night a man in bed / May never hear the plaster / Stir as if in pain. / May never hear the roaches / Falling like fat rain." When his new neighbors shatter his windows with rocks, bloodying his daughter, he goes on a rampage and is killed.

Even at her most scathing, Brooks maintains a sublime restraint and keenness of vision. In "The Lovers of the Poor," women from the Ladies' Betterment League visit a slum, wishing to help "The very very worthy / And beautiful poor." They find things somewhat more squalid than they'd bargained for. Leaving, the ladies walk down the center of the hall: "They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall."

At the Fisk University Writer's Conference in 1967, Brooks met younger poets associated with the Black Arts movement. This encounter galvanized her, she wrote in the first installment of her autobiography, *Report From Part One* (1972); it constituted an awakening. Her next book, *In the Mecca* (1968), which was nominated for the National Book Award, showed a new emphasis on racial injustice and social commentary, as well as a leaner, tougher poetic style, more reliant on free verse. The title poem tracks a ghetto mother's efforts to locate her young daughter, who is found murdered. In the early 1970s, Brooks left Harper & Row to support the efforts of small black publishing houses, bringing out books from Broadside Press in Detroit and Third World Press in Chicago.