

College Guild
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

Poetry Club

~ The Poems of Carl Sandburg ~

Unit 1 of 8

Welcome graduates of Creative Language. In Poetry Club, we'll be discussing the poems you write as well as the work of other poets. Perhaps the biggest challenge in writing poetry was summed up by French writer and poet Antoine de Saint-Exupery: *Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.* Here are some other considerations in reading and writing poetry:

- poet's message & how successfully it's conveyed
- creativity of subject and presentation
- emotional impact
- clarity
- flow
- choice of format
- choice of words, phrases
- meter (the beat/number of syllables in a line)
- rhyme (if appropriate) & smoothness of fit into lines
- visual presentation
- line breaks
- punctuation

Taking these into account, it means you'll be discussing how poets approach their work, and how powerfully the poem conveys its message to you. "To you" is important, because there are often very different opinions and interpretations of a poem. The feedback from College Guild readers will reflect their own take on your work – you don't have to agree!

The power or humor or beauty of a poem does not come from something as simple as finding words that rhyme. Poems don't have to rhyme! If you have written only rhyming poetry in the past, give free verse a chance. Too often, good vocabulary, phrases, and metaphors are sacrificed to the search for a rhyming word.

Unit 1 contains six poems by CARL SANDBURG, a poet who portrayed the lives of ordinary men and women in verse. One critic observed that he "turned the Mid-western voice into a sort of music." Carl Sandburg is one of the United States' best known poets. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951.

Before you start writing, read these poems again and again. (Ideally, you can read them aloud to help hear and see the images.) Ask yourself what makes the poems unique, what makes the poems good, what do you like or not like about them? The poetry you read will help you discover what techniques you can use to best convey your own message. Note how few words are needed to convey the message of the following poem, *Choose*.

CHOOSE

*The single clenched fist lifted and ready
Or the open asking hand held out and waiting.
Choose:
For we meet by one or the other.*

1. Who is the “we” Sandburg is referring to in *Choose*? Who else could “we” refer to?

THE JUNK MAN

*I am glad God saw Death
And gave Death a job of taking care of all who are tired of
living:*

*When all the wheels in a clock are worn and slow and the
connections loose.
And the clock goes on ticking and telling the wrong time
from hour to hour
And people around the house joke about what a bum
clock it is
How glad the clock is when the big Junk Man drives his
wagon
Up to the house and puts his arms around the clock and
says:*

*“You don’t belong here,
You gotta come
Along with me.”*

*How glad the clock is then, when it feels the arms of
Junk Man close around it and carry it away.*

This is a poem built around a metaphor.

2. Who are the junk man and the clock?

3. Does using metaphor make this poem more powerful? If so, how?

4. Write a poem built around a metaphor, where the characters represent something or someone else.

*TROTHS**

*Yellow dust on a bumble
bee’s wing,
Gray lights in a woman’s
asking eyes,
Red ruins in the changing
sunset embers:
I take you and pile high
the memories.
Death will break her claws
on some I keep.*

[* loyalties]

Death is mentioned in both *Troths* and in *The Junk Man*, but compare how the poet feels about Death in each. In *Troths*, Sandburg makes his memories so specific and wraps them in such beautiful language that the images are easy to see.

5. Think of another metaphor to represent how powerfully we hang onto special memories.

THEME IN YELLOW

*I spot the hills
With yellow balls in autumn.
I light the prairie cornfields
Orange and tawny gold clusters
And I am called pumpkins.
On the last of October
When dust is fallen
Children join hands
And circle around me
Singing ghost songs
And love to the harvest moon;
I am a jack-o'-lantern
With terrible teeth
And the children know
I am fooling.*

Poets sometimes use the voice of another, or even an object, like the pumpkin in this poem.

6. Would the image of autumn be as strong if a person were speaking instead of a pumpkin? Why?

7. If the poem had ended with the line, "With terrible teeth", how would that have made the poem different?

WARS

*In the old wars drum of hoofs and the beat of shod feet.
In the new wars hum of motors and the tread of rubber
tires.
In the wars to come silent wheels and whirr of rods not
yet dreamed out in the heads of men.*

*In the old wars clutches of short swords and jabs into
faces with spears.
In the new wars long-range guns and smashed walls,
guns running a split of metal and men falling in tens
and twenties.
In the wars to come new silent deaths, new silent hurlers
not yet dreamed out in the heads of men.*

*In the old wars kings quarreling and thousands of men
following.
In new wars kings quarreling and millions of men
following.
In the wars to come kings kicked under the dust and
millions of men following great causes not yet
dreamed out in the heads of men.*

Sandburg certainly foresaw the twenty-first century in this poem. Read the last lines again – the word “great” can have different meanings.

8. How do you define “great” in *Wars*?

9. What do you consider a “great” cause today? How do you define great when it comes to the cause you picked, and what makes it great?

10. Write a poem about a cause, evil or worthy, from another time or today.

A TEAMSTER’S FAREWELL
Sobs En Route to a Penitentiary

*Good-by now to the streets and the clash of wheels and
locking hubs,
The sun coming on the brass buckles and harness knobs,
The muscles of the horses sliding under their heavy
haunches,
Good-by now to the traffic policeman and his whistle,
The smash of the iron hoof on the stones,
All the crazy wonderful slamming roar of the street—
Oh God, there’s noises I’m going to be hungry for.*

Unlike the light-hearted *Theme in Yellow*, where a pumpkin is speaking, in *A Teamster’s Farewell*, Sandburg speaks in the voice of a man being sent to prison. Note what the condemned man is thinking about. He was a teamster, his identity tied to a life driving horses in a busy city.

12. How do we know “A Teamster’s Farewell” is describing a different time period than today?

13. Would we know the man better if he were mourning the people he was leaving?

14. Pick a different time period. Write a poem in the voice of a man, woman, child, animal or object that takes your reader to that specific time and place.

Remember Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s quote at the beginning of this unit? *Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.* Ask yourself for every poem you write: Would fewer words would result in a stronger impact?

15. Write an original poem, one created specifically for this course, on the subject of your choosing.

When you write your poems, think about format, vocabulary and imagery as well as your message. If you are struggling to fit the whole poem around rhyming words, ask yourself if the poem needs to rhyme. Instead of assuming that your first draft is complete, leave the poem for a few days, then come back and read it. Your goal is to convey your message or paint a scene in a way it’s never been done before!

16. What have you learned from Sandburg’s poetry that you might want to apply to your own work?

17. Which Sandburg poem in this unit is your favorite and why?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes