

Humanism in the Poetry of Carl Sandburg

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Introduction

Humanism is the belief that men through the use of intelligence “can create for themselves without aid from a god or religion a rational civilization in which each person enjoys security and finds cultural outlets for whatever normal human capacities and creative energies he possesses” (1). It has also been defined as a strong faith in people, in all humanity that people can live a worthwhile and dignified life of happiness and purpose using their intelligence and reason rather than depending on a god or religion. It aims at providing adequate grounds for establishing basic human norms and values. It is in fact, indispensable to justify claims for social and political justice on behalf of any oppressed, excluded or marginalized minority

The term humanism owes its origin to the classical period of the ancient Greeks. The Sophists (500 B.C) are said to be the founders of the intellectual movement of humanism nurtured by Socrates. Protogoras, the most famous of the Greek Sophists,

stated that man is the most important thing on earth and the ultimate source of values. His dictum that “ man is the measure of all things” came to be applied to the human nature and the general values common to many Renaissance humanists as well as to a number of later writers in the same tradition. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More started a movement called New Humanism in America which “argued for a return to a primarily humanistic education and for a very conservative view of moral, political and literary values that is grounded mainly on classical literature” (2)

Literary Humanism

The literary humanism was the result of the Renaissance of the 14th century Italy, which elevated man as worthwhile, dignified, potential and possessor of infinite abilities and capacities. The chief concern of the literary humanism was to revolt against the earlier concept of man as a born sinner awaiting redemption on the day of judgement. The humanists exhibited enormous interest and love for learning and aesthetics. They advocated freedom and individuality. They fought for the deliverance from bondage. They aspired to establish a democratic society in which everyone should be strictly governed by ethical norms. They strongly pleaded that the democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity should pervade all the spheres of life.(3) These principles of trinity should effect a society in which the class differences should be totally eliminated.

The women should be treated on a par with men. With this background, this article tries to make an attempt to bring out the essential aspects of humanism as embedded in the poems of Carl Sandburg.

Carl Sandburg was a poet, novelist, children's author, folklorist and biographer of Abraham Lincoln. He is often said to have captured the essence of America in his works. He recorded and celebrated the history of the American people and became the people's poet. His poetry reflects his respect and hope for the common man. Sandburg's own background provided a basis for his strong humanist feeling. He was born the second of seven children on January 6, 1878. The son of illiterate Swedish immigrants, he travelled widely through the Middle West as a self-styled hobo, working a variety of odd and even mean jobs like dishwashing, trucking, milk- route, soldiering, etc, before becoming an organizer for the Socialist Party and a reporter of the Chicago Daily News. These variegated experiences of his in the formative years of life equipped him to emerge as the voice of the voiceless in America.

Carl Sandburg- a humanist par excellence

Carl Sandburg was the representative spokesman for Americans among the literary figures of his life time. The most devastating impact of the Great Depression of America during the years between 1865 and 1930 was human suffering. There was rapid industrialization of the country leading to a change in the occupational life of the

people. Industrialization brought with it urbanization, dirty and crowded city slums, poverty, unemployment, child labour, exploitation and the disparity between the rich and the poor. Sandburg is a humanist par excellence and has centered his world –view on man himself. In him humanism reveals itself as a movement for survival and social justice for the weak and the poor. He writes in 1904 even before he published his first volume of poetry in 1916

To whom my mind goes out
The unapplauded ones who bear
No badges on their breasts
Who passes on the street with
Unfearing, patient eyes
Like dumb cart horses in the street. (4)

Sandburg finds much ugliness and unhappiness around him. His poems, thus, speak of the lives of the people in small towns, in ghettos and of the energy and the broke pattern of the industrial life of his times. They reflect his respect and hope for the common man. He wrote of injustice in a scathing manner; life left much to be desired, especially for the ordinary people whom he glorified in his poems. He deplores the pitiable condition of the family of Mrs. Giovanitti in his poem *Onion Days*

...Mrs. Pietro Giovanitti, whose husband was killed in a tunnel explosion
through the negligence of a fellow servant

works ten hours a day, sometimes twelve

Picking onions for Jasper on the Bowmanville road. (C.P 14)

In spite of having inflicted poverty on the family of Giovannitti, her employer dropped her pay to six cents a box from eight cents because “so many women and girls were answering the ads in the Daily News” The poem *Masses* presents the poet’s loyalty to the poor and the downtrodden: the fate of these people is

To work, broken and smothered for bread and wages

To eat dust in their throats and die empty- hearted

For a little handful of pay on a few Saturday nights (C.P 6)

The intense love for the poor and the downtrodden assumes various forms of expression in the lofty poems of Carl Sandburg. *Cripple* a poem of thirteen lines describes a tuberculosis victim slowly dying a tortured death in the slums. The second part of the poem expresses the poet's preference for a life of a sunflower. Whereas the cripple needs air, the sunflower is enjoying rain and dew. The cripple’s pathetic loneliness is made more poignant by the sunflower’s companionship with its own kind – poppies and hollyhocks. Sandburg concludes that he would rather not be a man at all than to have to suffer as this victim must. In his poetry, humanism becomes the love of mankind. The poet is very much disturbed by the sight of the poor who dwell in the slums and ghettos. They were not cared for; they were neglected and thrown to the directions.

The poet charges the industrial system that allows the poor to suffer in dark and loneliness.

Being a lover of mankind, Sandburg attached much importance to the poor leading precarious life. He writes about common people- the portrayal of a *Fish Crier*, *The Dynamiter*, *Mag*, *Ice Handler*, *Boes*, *Jack who*

worked thirty years on the railroad, ten hours a day and his hands were rougher than sole- leather. (CP 22)

and others exhibits Sandburg's intense love of mankind especially the neglected portion of the society. It is pathetic that toilers toil all day and all year with no prospect but toil and dirt and poverty.

The Principles of Trinity

Humanism does not tolerate discrimination and division among the people. The men of this earth should enjoy all eligible rights and eschew hatred. Animosity in any forms should be wiped out. In the poem *A Fence* for example, Sandburg expresses his strong indignation at the sight of tall fences built around the houses of rich men to "shut off" the poor and children from entering their houses

As a fence, it is a masterpiece and will shut off the rabble and all vagabonds and hungry men and all wandering children looking for a place to play.

Passing through the bars and over the steel will go nothing except Death and the Rain and Tomorrow. (C P.16)

Regarding man's relations with his fellow-beings, Sandburg's poem explains that the relation between them should be imbued with the spirit of love and brotherhood. This is the reason why Sandburg is prepared to sit in company with a dynamiter at "the supper eating steak and onions" (?). He likes to sit by the dynamiter because he has fought in the labour cause, worked deep days and nights, fought actively for social justice and is called an enemy of the nation. He lives dangerously, a lover of life, a lover of children, a lover of all free, reckless laughter everywhere (C P.21). Besides, the poet's attitude toward the simple people who earn their living by simple professions is one of respect and cordiality. He never looks down upon them as untouchables and treats them with utmost love and respect. In the same way, Sandburg expresses his profound sympathy, not condemnation, for even the painted women "under the gas lamps luring the farm boys"(C P.3)

Well- aware of the garish misery of the ageing prostitutes, Sandburg writes of an unknown one who is

Waiting in the dark and

Smiling a broken smile from a face

Painted over haggard bones and desperate eyes

All night she offers passerby what they will
Of her beauty wasted, body faded,
And no-takers (C P 62)

This does not mean that the poet condones women trafficking, but realizing the dignity of every individual, he pities them living in such a pathetic condition.

Child Labour

Like most humanists, Sandburg is opposed to the employment of children in factories and business firms. He records the pathetic conditions of such children in his poem *They Will Say*

Of my city the worst that men will ever say is this:
You took little children away from the sun and the dew
And the glimmers that playd in the grass under the great sky
And the reckless rain; you put them between walls
To work, broken and smothered, for bread and wages. (C P 5- 6)

With the same pity and pathos, Sandburg tells about a working girl, *Anna Imroth*, a poem named after the girl, who failed to make the jump when the fire broke in the factory. The cause of her untimely death is the absence of “fire escapes”. The poem bears the nuances of human anguish too bitter to be endured in silence.

Her mother will cry some and so will her sisters and brothers.

But all of the others got down and they are safe

.....

It is the hand of God and the lack of fire escapes. (C P16)

In the beginning of this article, it has been stated that humanism is secular in character and hence against religion. Sandburg is not a rank atheist but when he finds the Church allied with Big Business uses religion as a mask to hide its despicable violations of social justice and travesties the teachings of Jesus, Sandburg is provoked to righteous indignation to denounce the Church and its messengers. One of the strongest denunciations of certain type of theology is Sandburg's, *To a Contemporary Bunkshooter*.

You tell people living in shanties Jesus is going to fix it up all right with them by giving them mansions in the skies after they're dead and the worms have eaten them

You tell people they don't need any more money on payday and even if it's fierce to be out of a job, Jesus'll fix that up all right all and they gotta do is take Jesus the way you say.(C P 29)

This is perhaps one of the most explosive of Sandburg's poems against Bible-punching preacher class. He calls Billy Sunday- a tool of the Big Business interest, and "a bug house peddler of second-hand gospel" telling people that they can live in mansions in the skies even after they are dead and the worms have eaten them. A closer reading of the poem makes it clear that all this outrage and anger is not against Jesus, but against the bunkshooters. He hates not the Church or the religion but the religious hypocrites who

exploit people. His religion is thus the religion of the people. He identifies God with humanity. The frankness of a certain type of theology, as Johnson has pointed out, “is refreshing, the vehemence of it is appalling, the force of the invectives levelled at such an interpreter of Jesus is worthy of an inspired messenger from the true fields of faith, hope and love”.(5)

As a true humanist, Sandburg also voiced the people’s cry for the millions of lost lives in the war. To Sandburg “War is when two nations go to it killing as many as you can for the government” (C P 531) The poem *Jaws* recalls not only the beginning of the World War I in 1914, but also the Biblical Verses of St. John’s Gospel which promises eternal life to those who believe in the Biblical promise of Jesus Christ. Everyone knew the promise of God. But when the first World War began, it was certain that all were doomed to hell. The thousands of soldiers who were killed in war, were certainly in Hell, as the war was suicidal.

Seven nations stood with their hands on the jaws of death,
It was the first week in August, Nineteen Hundred Fourteen.
I was listening, you were listening, the whole world was listening
And all of us heard a Voice murmuring
“I am the way and the light
He that believeth on me
Shall not perish

But shall have everlasting life”

Seven nations listening, heard the voice and answered:

“ O Hell!”

The jaws of death began clicking and they go on clicking:

“ O Hell!”

(C P 41)

The poem *Buttons* describes the ugliness of war which abuses its God- like method of destruction.

Ten thousand men and boys twist on their bodies in a red soak along a river edge,
Gasping of wounds, calling for water, some rattling death in their throats. (C P 40)

The human blood that is split on the soil manifests itself in various forms in the poem *Fight*

Red drips from my chin where I have been eating

Not all the blood, nowhere near all, is wiped off my mouth

Clots of red mess my hair

And the tiger, the buffalo, know how

I was a killer Yes, I am a killer

Yes I

I come from killing

I go to more (C P 39)

To Sandburg “ red ” symbolizes war and killing. Anything killed whether animal or man spills blood. Killing is the impact and use of force of the strong against the weak.

Man is continuously trained to be in a mode of killing. He disregards the value and joy of life on earth. Only a dying soldier who lies in a hospital can understand the touch of “beautiful useless things” rather than cold guns and machines “real to hand”. The poem is *Murmurings in a Field Hospital* which describes the hallucinations of a dying soldier. (C P 38)

Conclusion

Sandburg is fundamentally a humanist. It is no exaggeration to say that Sandburg almost approximates Wordsworth’s ideal poet to whom humanity is always central. He has interpreted the thoughts and feeling of the common man, pitying his ignorance and sympathizing with his stumbling search for better ways of living. Sandburg’s concern for the people is generic or social rather than individual. That is why, he does not individualize his labouring men and women. Occasionally he individualizes. But the purpose of isolation is to generalize his specific cause and situation. Sandburg’s target was the welfare of the total society.

.References

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