

Aesthetic Ideology — An Interpretation of Carl Sandburg's Nature Poems

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Abstract: Carl Sandburg was an outstanding modern American poet, many of his poems voice the development of the American society and express and deliver his concern towards the civilians and those poems received a warm welcome from the populace as well as the academic world. However, his nature poems which convey considerable aesthetic thought and which portray grand beauty do not gain much attention from the public. Through the analysis of fourteen of Carl Sandburg's most artistically designed nature poems, aims at revealing his aesthetic ideas in nature poetry and meanwhile, to a certain degree, exposing to the readers the charm of it.

Keywords: Carl Sandburg; Aesthetic Ideology; Nature Poems; Beauty

1. Introduction

Carl Sandburg was born in Galesburg on January 6, 1878, and passed away at his North Carolina home on July 22, 1967. His ashes, as he had requested, were sent back to his birthplace. He was an writer, editor and biographer, best known for his poetry. He won three Pulitzer Prizes, two for his poetry and another for a biography of Abraham Lincoln. Carl was the second child of his poor family, he had six siblings, and his parents were immigrants from Sweden. And this background explains well of Carl's labyrinthine life. He never received formal education and started working from the time when he was a young boy. Carl left school following his graduation from grade eight in 1891 and spent ten years working a variety of jobs. "He delivered milk, harvested rice, laid bricks, threshed wheat in Kansas, and shined shoes in Galesburg's Union Hotel before traveling as a hobo in 1897".

Sandburg came from the working people, and his familiarity with their emotions and folk literature made him a people's poet. He said that the purpose of his poetry is to sing, shout and laugh freely like the people, so the power, grand momentum, noise and chaos of the people constitute the temperament and form of his poetry. His humble origin and his working experiences at the bottom of the society provided him with a good deal of writing materials and led him to show lifelong concern for the ordinary people and greatly influenced his writing style and political views. As a socialist and a poet with democratic spirit, Carl's poetic aim was simple, and it is to write "simple poems for simple folks". The highest ideal of his life was to become "the voice of the people". It is then understandable that a large numbers of his poems had devoted themselves to this theme, I Am the People, the Mob, The People, Yes, Chicago, and Grass and so on and so forth are examples of this kind. Sandburg was close to the people through his lifetime and he was one of the most popular poets in the first three decades of the 20th century.

2. Literature Review

As a figure that is of great importance to American literary world, Sandburg attracted much attention of the Chinese, and which, indeed, is quite impressive.

Early in January, 1981 Shen Ao introduced Carl Sandburg to Chinese people including several pieces of he Chinese version of Sandburg's most famous poems^[1]. Shen spoke highly of this poet and noted with democratic enthusiasm about some of his works which dedicated his deep care and consideration to the working class and which voiced the rock-firm faith he had in the people, for instance, The People, Yes. Sandburg was held in high esteem by Shen, and Shen was not singing solo^[2]. Meng Xianzhong(1996) stated that Sandburg was an extraordinary persona of the 20th century, that he was a great writer who made a brilliant contribution to American literature, that his writings touched on

various of fields that stretch from poetry, biography and children's literature to novels and prose, which won him a worldwide reputation, and that he was a giant in the worldly men of letters^[3]. To justify the greatness of Carl Sandburg, Meng mentioned his accomplishments in poetries and prose and brought many other influential remarks on Sandburg's famous biography of Abraham Lincoln.

By comparison, the following studies are more specific, and in order to have a better capture of the specificity, a summary article is first presented here. According to Fang Wenjun(2009) A Review on Current Study of Sandburg's Poems in China, from 1990 to 2008, 25 essays published are relevant to this poet, and on average, there are three pieces of Sandburg paper have being printed annually ever since 2000^[4]. All these papers, through their specific angles presented the readers a comprehensive picture of Carl Sandburg—his life and his works. Their interest and perspectives may differ, and the viewpoints may vary, but they can be roughly classified into three groups: the first set are papers that deal with his life, the second, styles and features of his writings and appreciation of his masterpieces, and the third, which focused on numerous different subjects, have studied topics that range from translation and culture to comparison with other poets and his international influence.

All the above mentioned studies indicate that Carl Sandburg is a great poet, though the greatness that each researcher and writer perceived comes from different light. From brief introduction of his life to detailed interpretation and appreciation of his masterpieces and further to his cross-cultural influence, Sandburg has won a place in the readers' heart. But beyond all the zeal and excitement of the pop, there lies an undisturbed island that hardly anyone takes notes of, and it is Carl Sandburg's nature poems. Those artistically designed works are so beautiful and yet were so long shadowed by the poet's mainstream poetries which are considered as the "voices of the people"^[5]. But such a remarkable poet as Sandburg is and such a singer of his people as he determined to be, his nature pieces certainly bear certain voices that worth to have an ear on. Then why no one ever found it out? Wasn't there anything that he wanted to deliver to the simple folks through his nature poems? Could it be that those verses fail to convey the voices of the people that they are inclined to ignore them? Or, the poet's aesthetic ideology behind the nature poems make them lose their voices? Is it really a question of aesthetics thought, or rather a question of a second thought of these poems?

3. The Aesthetics Thought in Sandburg's Nature Poems

3.1. The Intrinsic Connection of Noumenon

Sandburg's aesthetic noted the authentic beauty, which is formulated by the intrinsic relations of an item itself, and that could be also put as the secret essence of beauty. For he sensed beauty first and penetrated into relation later and headed back to beauty again. To him, anything which in some way is considered as the beautiful bears the nature of beauty within itself, and this nature is shaped by its own intrinsic rules and it beautifies the matter to a more breathtaking realm.

In the poem *Autumn Movement*, Sandburg observed the gorgeousness of fall and discovered the nature of its beauty lies in its momentariness, the predestined fate of it. This destiny is inevitable, and thus it makes beauty even more lovable.

Autumn Movement shows the change in leaves and flowers and reflects the changes of the late autumn and the early winter. All these changes vanish in a second and none of them last. And "I", the beholder of these changes, thinking of their old fairness which now is nowhere to be seen, could not help crying. Changes take the old things away, and away with all the old beautiful memories. A first glance of the poem might give the readers the following impression: for the cornflowers, they will have another season to spring their beauty again although now the northwest wind has torn their charming looks. However, the new things will not be the same as that of the old. The old has gone, and the new will be another old stuff. They all have their loveliness, and loveliness will not last long. Therefore, no beautiful thing really "lasts". The moment a flower is at its fullest blossom; its final time will be around the corner. And it is due to this nature that beauty itself is so touching and impressive.

This pathetic character is inborn, and beauty is thus destined to be the non-lasting type, and "I" could do nothing about it. That's why "I cried over beautiful things", because "I" knew "no beautiful thing lasts".

The poet Sandburg catches beauty first and looks into the connection as a second step and sublimates the initial fairness to its sublime.

3.2. *The External Connection of Object*

Previously, Autumn Movement and Nocturne in a Deserted Brickyard unveiled that the beautiful itself does inhere some attractive nature and present the eyes a feast, like a flash of splendor, a rain of petals, the autumn movement, or, the moonlight. But, when beauty brings up connections which further link to something that are more tempting than the beautiful itself, the whole realm of the view will be extended. It is in some way like the old Chinese saying, "Blue comes from the indigo plant but is bluer than the plant itself—the pupil surpasses the master"^[6]. Here, the "master" is the beautiful itself, and the pupil, the contact. Sandburg touched and painted connections of this kind in the four poems below.

The first piece of this group, Under the Harvest Moon

This poem moves around death and love, but the latter far outweighs the former. By the very first line of the first stanza, Sandburg draws the reader into the poetic view. It is night, the harvest moon is in the sky and the garden showers in the moonlight. Whoever is personally on the scene, he or she is inclined to be affected by its serenity. And here as the narrator of the moonlit night, the poet himself was touched and translated his feelings into a dynamic drawing to the reader—"Death, the gray mocker, / Comes and whispers to you / As a beautiful friend / Who remembers." Sandburg associates the quiet peaceful night with death, and death in this situation appears to be gentle and tender like an old beautiful friend. The mind is then as still as a lake and all the links that death has drawn out turn to fine memories.

The second stanza, as a balance, brings forth "love". The symbol of love, rose, could it be a link of the stanza ahead? Is it the recollection of the past? Or, the second stanza as a whole is a link of the former? No one can tell. Maybe Sandburg himself was not sure about that. But since he made it clear that his verses were simple and they were for simple folks, here it is acceptable to take the "summer roses" as another ordinary natural scene and give these puzzles a break and save them for the later discussion. So, the second stanza exposes the reader to another painting: the summer roses as a whole is a pretty maid in her bright red dress. And at dusk, this young lady hides herself among the wild red leaves (of the roses), waiting for her lover ("you"). As you settle yourself under the roses, the petals meet your head and shoulders, which remind you of your love, who use to hide behind you as the roses and who touches you when you arrive and asks you beautiful, unanswerable questions. At this point, the summer roses here is the second image love who no longer exists.

The moonlight scene puts a branch to death, and death stirs up the memory of love and life, and the summer roses recall love as a response. One links to another, the whole picture is displayed. Love and death then become the highlight of the night. And the riddles all have their solutions now.

This poem conveys certain praises for the beauty of simple life, as the music and love and dream listed in the verse are simple happiness for the common folks. He did voice for the people. And as a nature lover himself, he was always ready to share the beauty he perceived.

3.3. *The Other Beauty*

Sandburg sang for the humble folks who live a simple life, beauty in his sense means also the simplicity of life. And to capture it, one needs to rest his mind in ease.

To Sandburg, beauty is captured in ease, and any little thing that pleases the eyes or the mind deserves the name "beautiful". In the following four poems, Sandburg introduced to the readers the simple yet impressive beauty of the most ordinary things through the lighthearted moods of different kind.

The first piece to be appreciated is, Wind Song

With a nostalgic mood and a retrospection of childhood memories, this simple poem exposes the readers to the beauteousness of the wind both visually and aurally. Wind Song starts by the capitalized word "long" and within a second the reminiscent feelings aroused and visions of the past revealed. It was a summer afternoon, and "I" was in an old orchard, resting on the ground under the trees. The person "I" or the poet himself was then perhaps a little boy with wild imaginations, so that the wind could appear in such soft artistic conception in his eyes—"the wind swept by counting its money and throwing it away"^[7]. Hardly anyone would think leaves as the money of the wind, but a child or a person who bears childlike romance could, very possibly, do that. For the common majority, they may not even pay the least attention to the wind, let alone listening to the wind when it passes by the branches and causes the leaves rustle and fall. Simple and plain as the words seem, they were arranged

with aesthetic sense and thus the readers can feel the wind with their eyes as well as their ears. The wind passes through the branches and whistles with the sound hoo-hoo, and the trees seem to inquire the wind "who, who are you". A blast is then turned into a conversation between the wind and the trees, and the falling leaves thus wear poetic beauty. Sandburg, or, the person "I" admires and engraves the simple beauty of the wind and the beautiful view the wind creates, and he believes that he is not alone in this aesthetic appreciation, therefore, by the end of the poem, Sandburg asks his readers "who can ever forget listening to the wind go by, counting its money and throwing it away?".

Though the voice of the person "I", Sandburg shared a fine piece of memory of natural beauty which was perceived long time ago and dropped a hint that to listen to the wind and to capture its beauty requires a sensitive and relieved mind, and above all, a light mood.

Wind Song suggests that beauty is perceivable and reachable in people's everyday life and it asks nothing more than a piece of "loafing" mind.

A bright mood finds spark even from the most prosaic things and apart from that it has the power to light the grey sky and assists one to regain confidence as well as dreams. As a great poet who made the determination to speak for the broad masses of the people, Sandburg did not forget to bring hope for the public, and he brought it to them in a breezy way.

4. Conclusion

As a poet who voiced for the common folks, Sandburg did write about the life of the humble, and his free verse writing style just run into daily speeches. And doubtlessly, his poems convey certain moral ideas. With the help of the study above, to unveil the moral concept behind Sandburg's nature poems shall now be an undemanding matter.

Since Sandburg decided to speak for the ordinary people, it is then of necessity to take their needs into proper consideration. In general, a man wants to live a happy life, to retain a young spirit, and to keep a good health.

John Keats said that "a thing of beauty is a joy forever" and it is true that beauty does bring joy. To experience a piece of beauty is a comfort to one's soul, like the amber color of autumn, the silver view of the moonlight, the tranquility of a beautiful valley and two petals of a flower. And comfort gives rise to joy, which is a must of a happy life. And Sandburg implied in his nature poems that, as it is covered earlier in this article, life is not in short of beautiful things and beauty is there beneath the eye. Sandburg found beauty in the simplicity of life and nature, and he shared his feelings with his people, and he made a suggestion through his simple words that life is beautiful as long as one is willing to appreciate it. He was appealing for life, and for the people! No one can remain young forever, but one is capable of retaining a young spirit which provides energy and passion for life. Sandburg praised for the spirit of infancy and the innocence of the child because of the goodness he saw in them, and he reminded people of the truth they had in their childhood through his poems. Once again, he was speaking for the people. To rest one's mind in ease, is another way to discover beauty, and besides, it is an efficient way to keep fit. Worry kills man and leisure doesn't. In his nature poems, Sandburg presented many peaceful views and brought to the people simple enjoyment. He was writing for the people! His nature poems do not fail in conveying the voice of the people, and the aesthetic ideas behind those nature poems do not disappoint the public either. Quite on the contrary, they are supportive to the voice. Those poems need more attention and patience to unfold their beauty. To a certain degree, Sandburg's nature poems are like a white lotus which is in the shower of the moonlight, simple and quiet and beautiful, and which takes the mind of a child to ponder and wonder at it.

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