

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

December 2025

John W. Quinley

Hi all,

The Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock, North Carolina decorates the Sandburg's home for the Holiday Season in an event called Christmas at Connemara. But due to governmental cutbacks this year, there is no celebration. I am sure in later years the love shown by the Sandburg family for this season will be back on display.

Love is the central theme of the Holiday Season, and human connection and romance is the subject of this month's letter, "Facets of Love." Sandburg writes that love:

Comes and touches you
With a thousand memories,
And asks you beautiful,
Unanswerable questions.

I wish everyone a joyous Holiday Season.

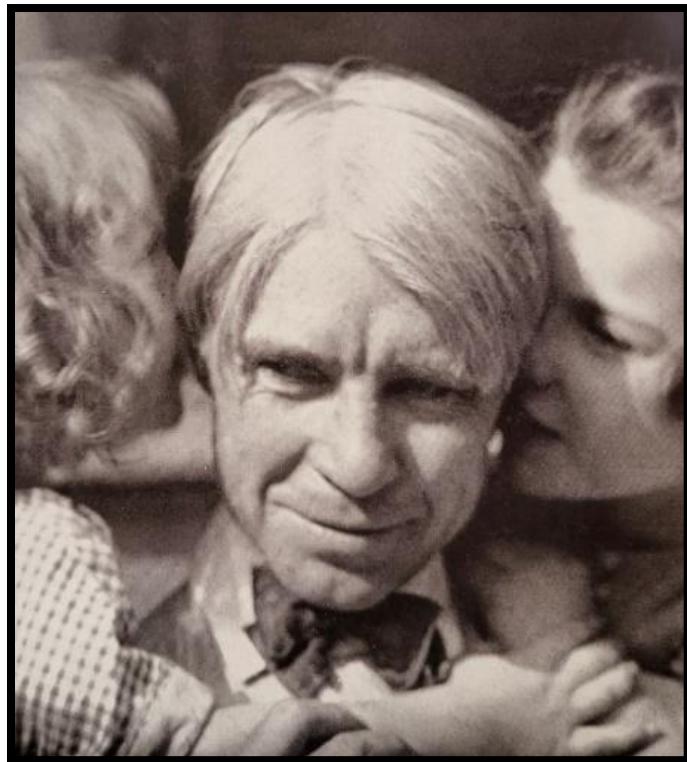
Thanks for reading,

John

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Sandburg with his daughters

Margaret and Janet

Facets of Love

Love is a little white bird and the flight of it so fast you can't see it, and you know it's there only by the faint whirr of its wings and the hush song it sings.

The World of Carl Sandburg

Dear Readers,

Love is the most explored theme in poetry, and it was a common focus in poems written by Carl Sandburg. He gave voice to all aspects of love—for children, friends, romantic partners, and humanity.

In “Love, with Little Hands,” he said that love:

Comes and touches you
With a thousand memories,
And asks you beautiful,
Unanswerable questions.

And writing about his eldest daughter Margaret growing up, he muses: “In your blue eyes, O reckless child, / I saw today many little wild wishes, / Eager as the great morning.” In “Helga,” he writes about the choices she will make and the futures she may realize.

The wishes on this child’s mouth
Came like snow on marsh cranberries;
The tamarack kept something for her;
The wind is ready to help her shoes.
The north has loved her; she will be
A grandmother feeding geese on frosty
Mornings; she will understand
Early snow on the cranberries
Better and better then.

And in “I Love You” he declares, “The most beautiful rose is one hardly more than a bud where in the pangs and ecstasies of desire are working for a larger finer growth.”

Most of all, Sandburg drafted poems to his wife. In “Paula” he professes:

Your hands are sweeter than nut-brown bread when you touch me.
Your shoulder brushes my arm—a south-west wind crosses the pier.
I forget your hands and your shoulder and I say again:

Nothing else in this song—only your face.
Nothing else here—only your drinking, night-gray eyes.

Other love poems explore the many facets of the love between man and a woman. In “First Love,” he sketches the first signs of love; the flirting and light-hearted teasing in early stages before the seriousness starts. He says that love comes “In a chill, in a personal sweat, / in a you-and-me, us, us two.”

pink doors closing one by one
to sunset nightsongs along the west,
shafts and handles of stars,
folds of moonmist curtains,
winding and unwinding wisps of fogmist.

And that “The first kiss came with flame/ She gave him a flame wine / From her scarlet lips a flame wine.” And that “You and a ring of stars/ may mention my name / and then forget me. / Love is a fool star.

In the poem “How Much,” Sandburg describes love that is fleeting.

How much do you love me, a million bushels?
Oh, a lot more than that, Oh, a lot more.

And tomorrow maybe only half a bushel?
Tomorrow maybe not even a half a bushel/

Several of his most sensual poems about love's passion and desire were only published after his death. In "She Held Herself a Deep Pool for Him, he writes:

she coiled herself around him
with a ribbon of glass
and a rope of gold
the coils of her cunning held him
with rings of golden glass
with a moon of melting gold
with a mist of sunset ribbons

Other poems underscore the enduring nature of love that is built on commitment, duty, understanding. Love that has matured and developed over time. Love that cannot be measured.

Is there any way of measuring love?
Yes but not till long afterward
when the beat of your heart has gone
many miles, far into the big numbers.

Is the key to love in passion, knowledge, affection?
All three—along with moonlight, roses, groceries,
givings and forgivings, gettings and forgettings,
keepsakes and room rent,
pearls of memory along with ham and eggs

Sandburg also describes universal love as selfless, unconditional concern for the welfare of others. In “Timesweep” the last poem in his last book of poetry, *Honey and Salt*, he declares:

There is only one man in the world

And his name is All Men.

There is only one woman in the world

And her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world

And the child’s name is All Children.

There is only one Maker in the world

And his Children cover the earth

And they are named All God’s Children.

Sandburg, “the poet of the street,” was also a poet of the heart.

Thanks for reading,

Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg*, and play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*, and the print series *Letters from a Docent*. He is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com.