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THE MOTIF OF THE PRAIRIE IN CARL SANDBURG'S POETRY

Abstract**:** *In spite of devoting most of his poems to the city life, Carl Sandburg's nostalgia for his native prairie permeates his literary creation. In the longer poem* The Prairie *as well as in some shorter poems, such as* Grass, *this spatial element acquires symbolical and mythical dimensions in strong opposition with the "corrupted" urban world. The principles of fertility and motherhood, eternity and vastity complete the image of the prairie as seen by Carl Sandburg.*
Key-words: *prairie, symbol, myth, urban world, natural world*

Born of two Swedish immigrants, Carl Sandburg belongs to the first generation of his family born on the American continent. Nevertheless his poems show an ardent Americanism which can be justified rather metaphorically through a historical fact, namely that the first Europeans who reached the American land were the Vikings. Although considered a minor poet, his place in the evolution of American poetry should not be ignored. Like Whitman, Sandburg was "a poet of the common people, celebrating the spaciousness of the American continent and the vitality of American men an women in vigorous language, free verse, and open forms." [1] But he has an original way of handling his ideas, of moving his verses from cities to mountains and prairie, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic world. He is a man of the prairie and this vast space of his birth becomes mythical marking the development of his entire personality.

Sandburg was one of the poets who testified the Chicago "renaissance", a cultural expansion of the city at the beginning of the 20th century. Known as *The Chicago Poets*, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters published most of their poems in *Poetry*, the magazine founded by Harriet Monroe.

Carl Sandburg wrote a lot and published tens of volumes. The six books of poems we shall use for the purpose of this paper were published in the first decades of our century: *Chicago Poems* (1916), *Cornhuskers* (1918), *Smoke and Steel* (1920), *Slubs of the Sunburnt West* (1922), *Good Morning, America* (1928), *The People, Yes* (1936). The space in Sandburg's poems can be described through the dichotomy urban vs. prairie. As seen in *Chicago*, the poem opening the first volume, *Chicago Poems*, the city is an ambivalent place; its two-faced progress appears both as man's triumph against wilderness but, at the same time, as man's tendency to become a machine. Chicago is "Hog Butcher for the World / Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, / Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler / Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders."[2]

The people of the city embody the wonderful creators of civilization, but on the other hand, it is civilization that increased their selfishness, drove them to a materialistic view of life and finally gave birth to oppression. Sanburg talks about the children who are

[1] Gray, R., *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Longman Literature in English Series, London and New York, 1990, p. 162.
[2] All the poems in this paper are quoted from *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, revised and expanded edition, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, New York, 1970.

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"tortured", of the "millions of the Poor patient and toiling […], innumerable, patient as the darkness of night – and all broken, humble ruins of nations." (*Chicago*)

In opposition to the city world, the prairie offers solitude and peace to the worried human. "On the prairie heart" any man can find a shelter from the noise and pollution of the cities and a place for purification. One of Sandburg's longest poems is devoted to this element of nature, *Prairie*, and it opens the second volume *Cornhuskers*. Its nineteen parts present the symbols of the prairie and suggest some of their significations. This poem synthesizes all Sandburg's ideas on prairie that appear separately in other poems included in the other five volumes.

In spite of its length, *Prairie* "holds together through a symmetry that shows consciousness of the problem of structure on Sandburg's part without yielding to mathematical and mechanical exactitude"[1]. Crowder divides the poem, function of the point of view which is shifted along the poem, into five sections: "the first six lines belong to the poet as a son of the prairie; the next ten lines are ambiguous, could belong to Sandburg, to the prairie, or to neither; the great middle section (ninety-three lines) is the prairie speaking, the fourth part (nineteen lines) is again ambiguous as to persona; and finally nine lines again in Sandburg's own voice bring the poem to a close." [2]

This change of persona is possible because of the coherence of subject matter. "A definite progression of thought helps build tension."[3] Starting with the poet's expression of his belonging to the prairie, the tension grows in the presentation of a farm worker's day and pleasant evening and reaches its climax in the long central section devoted to the prairie itself. The fourth section is one of atmosphere and the last one is written on a conclusive tone.

In Gaston Bachelard's terms, the prairie could be included in the larger category of spatial immensity which is connected to "reverie". The reverie contemplates hugeness and places the dreamer outside the world close to him and within a world which pertains to the infinite [4]. The same reverie makes Sandburg, who is otherwise a poet tightly connected to the real world, present the prairie as a many-folded symbol thus placing this natural element in a world of abstract significations. The prairie is thus conceived as the Mother of everything, the original egg of America itself, *alma mater* of the American people. Sandburg speaks as one of the numerous sons of the prairie because the prairie cast him into the wilderness of life and calls him back whenever he needs to recover from the agitated life of the city: "I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover / the eyes of its women, gave me a song and slogan" (*Prairie*); "I am the prairie, mother of men, waiting" (*Prairie*).

A basic principle of everything in this region, the prairie represents fertility at its highest degree. The multitude of sons and daughters of the prairie, regarded not only as people but also as each and every piece of nature or man-made object belonging to it, testify for the never-ending resourcefulness that hides the very secret of life on earth. From here rises a favourite topic for Sandburg: nature's permanence in contrast with the transience of the cities which rise and fall. The prairie subsequently becomes not only the mother of civilization created by her sons, but also its tomb, thus acquiring a mythical dimension which makes the prairie equal to a god of nature.

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[1] Crowder, R., *Carl Sandburg*, Twayne Publisher Inc., New York, 1964, p. 69.
[2] idem.
[3] idem.
[4] Bachelard, G. *Poetica spațiului*, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2003, p. 211.

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The eternal ever-dominance of nature over the cities and civilization appears not only in the poem *Prairie* ("I am here when the cities are gone / I am here before the cities come"). So directly expressed in *Prairie* by the voice of the prairie herself, this idea is hidden behind metaphors in *The Windy City* (from the volume *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*): "The wind of the lake shore waits and wanders / The heave of the shore wind hunches the sand-piles / The winkers of the morning stars count out cities / And forget the numbers."

The same approach is found in a short poem from *Cornhuskers* devoted to an element of the prairie, grass, which also presented interest for other American writers such as Walt Whitman (with his *Leaves of Grass*) or Emily Dickinson (in a poem like *The Grass so Little Has to Do*). Despite its apparent insignificance, grass is eternal: "Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo / Shovel them under and let me work - / I am the grass: I cover all / And pile them high at Gettysburg / And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun / Shovel them under and let me work. / Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor / 'What place is this? / Where are we now?' / I am the grass / Let me work." (*Grass*)

The two personifying attitudes characterizing the prairie can be defined by two verbs, "wait" and "work". Both of them correspond to a certain state of peace, patience, which is not due to resignation, but to a superior understanding of the universal cycle of life and death, to a superior way of viewing time and a natural participation in this never-ending cyclic movement.

Sandburg's concept of time is rooted deeply in present seen as the only palpable division of time, the only certitude above any illusion. Through his optimistic way of viewing time, Sandburg places himself in opposition to other Americans (T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound) who feel a certain pressure of the past upon the present.[1] America, unlike Europe, has no tradition, no long past, but this is a reason to be proud, says Sandburg, and he is proud of the youth, freshness of this new continent. The lack of past, the lack of history, of ruins and of dead heroes causes the absence of the fear of death. That is why for Sandburg death should be accepted by man as something natural, for, as he says in his testament, "Non omnis moriar", something will remain that they can not bury.

When only present is important, then there is hope, so there is tomorrow. This is the conclusion of *Prairie*: "I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes / I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down, / a sun dropped in the west. / I tell you there is nothing in the world / only an ocean of tomorrows, / a sky of tomorrows. / I am a brother of the cornhuskers who say / at sundown: / Tomorrow is a day." The clause "the past is a bucket of ashes" is used as epigraph for *Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind* (vol. *Smoke and Steel*). "The idea, here, as usual, was that nothing is permanent except change itself. The greatest civilization in the world is doomed to eventual extinction, so why worry about either the past or the future? The best scheme is to live unthinkingly in the present. This, of course, is the way of the working classes, who are without a profound knowledge or sense of history and have no mind for or inclination towards the consolations of philosophy."[2]

In the prayer for peace *For You* included in the same volume, the poet concludes that future belongs to the presently playful young: "The peace of great changes be for you. / Whisper, oh beginners in the hills. / Tumble, Oh cubs – tomorrow belongs to you." The natural acceptance of death becomes one with silence in *At the Gates of Tombs* (vol. *Slabs*

[1] see Gray, R., *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Longman Literature in English Series, London and New York, p. 165

[2] Crowder, R., *Carl Sandburg*, Twayne Publisher Inc., New York, 1964, p. 80.

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of the Sunburnt West): "And since at the gates of tombs silence is a gift / be silent about it, yes, be silent / forget it."

In *Good Morning, America* the ever-present imminence of death is exorcized through a joy of living typical for the Americans: "Time may pass, evanescence may be a fact, but in America there is always the joy of renewal". The joy of living is offered partly by the prairie: "Let us have summer roses. / Let us have tawny harvest haze in pumpkin time. / Let us have springtime faces to toil for and play for. / Let us have the fun of booming winds on long waters. / Give us dreamy blue twilights / of winter evenings / to wrap us / in a coat of dreaminess. / Moonlight, come down – shine down, moonlight / meet every bird / cry and every song calling to a hard old earth, a sweet young earth."

The very image of Sandburg's point of view about time, prairie incarnates both eternity and perpetual present. Her elements symbolise either the destructive power of time, its power of wiping out any sign of human acts and activities (through the grass) or the history that ruins its richest castles turning them into nothingness (the wind, the rain).[1] For the prairie time means almost nothing: "To a mass across a thousand years I offer a hand shake? I say to him: Brother, make the story short, for the stretch of a thousand years is short." (*Prairie*)

The prairie invites man to come to her and this invitation equals a return to innocence. As part of nature, the prairie integrates within its mystery, she knows that sun and wind bring rain as she also knows "what rainbow writes across the east or west in a half-circle: A love-letter pledge to come again." (*Prairie*) For the man living in an industrial town among machines and skyscrapers, the return to nature acquires a higher significance than that of a rediscovery of simple and pure things: nature, through pairie, is the place of myth. Here a drop of water, a rock of the mountains, a valley, a gray goose have a motivation to exist due to a mythical pattern in which everyone plays a well-defined part. When man interferes with nature, it is not only through contemplation that he comes to know it, but also through meditation out of which rises the understanding of nature as a whole and in its tiniest parts. Next comes man's integration into the natural rhythm of existence, into the universal life and the final revelation that he is part of the myth too. Only now can we visualise the merest gesture or act like a ritual always renewed. This is the image that appears in *More Country People*. Here, Sandburg describes "six pigs at the breast of their mother", in a poetic equivalent of a primitive, abstract portrait […] The creatures of the farm can be seen […] in terms of a ritual which, although quite familiar and simple, seems fresh and new every day." [2]

Even man's acts, his interference with nature, become a ritual. On the prairie the people who harvest accomplish an ancient ritual, just like the farmer who goes on a summer morning with a wagonload of radishes, together with his daughter dreaming of a new hat to wear to the country fair.

The cornhuskers are, more than anyone else, part of nature: "The frost loosens cornhusks. / The sun, the rain, the wind / loosen cornhusks. / The men and women are helpers / They are all cornhuskers together." (*Prairie*)

An important role in all human rituals is played by music, dance, or poetry. The poet's sensitive ear catches every sound: "you came in wagons […] / Singing *Yankee Doodle, Old Dan Tucker, Turkey in the Straw*" (*Prairie*) or "There is a song deep as the

[1] see Baconski, A.E, "Prefață" la Carl Sandburg, *Versuri*, Tineretului, București, 1966, p. 10.
[2] Gray, R., *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Longman Literature in English Series, London and New York, p. 165.

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falltime redhaws long as the layer of / black loam we go to, the shine of the morning star over the / cornbelt, the wave line of dawn up a wheat valley." (*Prairie*)

The prairie identifies herself with any person belonging to her. So Sandburg piles up details in order to create a huge mass of people all equal in one point: they were born, brought up and will end up on the prairie. "I am the prairie, mother of men, waiting. / They are mine, the threshing crews eating beefsteaks, the farmboys driving steers to the railroad cattle pens. / They are mine, the crowds of people at a Fourth of July basket picnic, listening to a lawyer read the / Declaration of Independence, watching the pinwheels and Roman candles at night, the young men and / women two by two hunting the bypaths and kissing bridges." (*Prairie*)

Sandburg deeply hopes that people will be equal in all ways in spite of the oppression and materialism of the world. He believes in democracy, sympathises with the Socialists, that is why it is not strange that he devotes an entire volume, *The People, Yes,* to the mob, to the mass of people which can be compared in hugeness not only to the prairie, but also to the sea. "The thesis on which this poem is based is that the people do the chores of the world: the people sometimes rise in revolt but soon quiet down again." [1] They forget too soon their grievances and their only solution is to "learn to use the misery of the past to spur them on to action for a better future." [2] Just like the sea or the prairie, "man will always be going somewhere, but he will never actually attain his goal." [3]

Prairie is seen as a powerful mother, a fertility principle, an eternal ever-renewing force that outlives any civilization. Although situated on a spatial axis, prairie becomes the symbol of an eternal present from which a tomorrow is to rise forever, Prairie is a symbol of hugeness, vastity, immensity and it confounds to this point to the large masses of people, to the mob which hides the force to rebel against injustice, but still is doomed to resignation.

Sandburg is commited to his native prairie which offers him a large perspective and a palpable ever-dominating present. Besides all the significations presented above, open fields and smaller cities can also be seen as "the symbols of his faith, the populist-democratic credo of a fair chance for all" [4].

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[1] Crowder, R., *Carl Sandburg*, Twayne Publisher Inc., New York, 1964, p. 118.
[2] idem.
[3] Crowder, R., *Carl Sandburg*, Twayne Publisher Inc., New York, 1964, p. 121.
[4] Crowder, R., *Carl Sandburg*, Twayne Publisher Inc., New York, 1964, p. 66.

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