



My Chicago Poetry



INSTRUCTOR NOTE

Have students refer to the white stripes on their Chicago flag that represent the neighborhoods of the North, South, and West Sides of the city. Many people have written about life in Chicago. This narrative describes life in Chicago through the work of two authors: Sandra Cisneros and Carl Sandburg. After listening to the narrative, students will have the opportunity to write their own poetry about life in Chicago. Review the following vocabulary words prior to reading the narrative.

Vocabulary

harvester—someone who helps to gather a crop that is used for food

husky—big and strong

brawling—large

freight—goods that are moved in a train or truck

commercial—having to do with the buying and selling of goods

Narrative

Author Sandra Cisneros grew up in Chicago; her book, *The House on Mango Street*, is about her life in the city when she was a little girl. She starts the book by saying, “We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can’t remember.” **1 Have you ever moved? What is the name of the street you live on?**



Sandra Cisneros with her mother, Elvira Cisneros. ©Diana Solis, courtesy of the photographer



Narrative

Sandra Cisneros also describes what she sees on a bike ride through her neighborhood. “We ride faster and faster. Past my house, sad and red and crumbly in places, past Mr. Benny’s grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which is dangerous. Laundromat, junk store, drugstore, windows and cars and more cars, and around the block back to Mango.” **2 If you rode a bike or walked down your street, what would you see?**

Poet Carl Sandburg also wrote about Chicago. He wrote his poems almost one hundred years



Carl Sandburg

ago. Carl Sandburg was born in Illinois in 1878. He began to work when he was eleven years old. He worked in a barbershop, as a milk truck driver, and as a wheat harvester. He was even a soldier in the Spanish-American War. In 1913 he moved to a

suburb of Chicago called Elmhurst, where he became known as a successful poet.

His poems give us an idea about what Chicago was like many years ago. In his poem “Chicago,” he says that Chicago is:

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroad and the Nation’s
Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders

If you go downtown you can see many railroads east of Michigan Avenue. **3 Do you think those railroads have been there a long time? What do you think Sandburg meant by calling Chicago the “Nation’s Freight Handler?”** The poem tells us that a long time ago Chicago was a commercial center of the United States and

that many products like meat and wheat went through Chicago on trains. **4 If someone has “big shoulders” what does that mean? Is it a good thing? What do you think Sandburg meant when he said Chicago was the “City of Big Shoulders?”**

Besides the poem “Chicago,” Sandburg also wrote “Clark Street Bridge.” The first part of the poem says,

Dust of the feet
And dust of the wheels,
Wagons and people going,
All day feet and wheels

Clark Street is still a Chicago street today. You can walk down it, take the 22 Clark Street bus, or ride your bike on it. The poem tells us Clark Street was as busy a long time ago as it is today. **5 What**

kind of transportation did people use on Clark Street when the poem was written? How is that different from the type of transportation people use today in Chicago?



Clark Street

Poems and stories that are about Chicago can inspire you to write about your own home and neighborhood. **6 How would you describe Chicago? If you wrote a poem today that you knew people would read in the future, what would you want them to know about Chicago?**



Activity

Explain to students that they are going to write a poem about Chicago.

- 1 Ask students to think about what Sandra Cisneros and Carl Sandburg said about Chicago. **What are some of the things you learned about Chicago from what those authors wrote?**
- 2 As an example, write the following on the board or chart paper:

MATERIALS

- *My Poetry* activity sheet (one for each student)
- pencils

(for neighborhood focus)

Old brick buildings standing in a row
Lots of people
Downtown's tall buildings are not far
or
Towering trees
On the way to the lake is Lincoln Park
Walking in and out of shops
Night is quiet except on Wells Street

(for Chicago focus)

Climbing towards the sky are skyscrapers
Homes are made of brick or wood and glass
Inching along Lake Shore Drive in rush hour
Cold in the winter and hot in the summer
Along the lake are parks and the beach
Go Chicago Bears!
Oh, the snow can stop the streets

- 3 Point out to the students the first letter of each line. Show them that it is the name of the neighborhood called Old Town or Chicago.
- 4 What is the name of your neighborhood? What would you like people to know about how you see your neighborhood or Chicago?
- 5 Instruct students to turn to the *My Poetry* page in their scrapbooks and write a poem about their neighborhood or Chicago. Students can use either one word or phrase per letter to describe their neighborhood or Chicago.
- 6 Ask students to share their poems.



My Poetry

Write the name of your neighborhood or the word “Chicago” length-wise. Next to each letter write a word or phrase that describes your neighborhood or Chicago.

Bind your scrapbook here.

Neighborhood or Chicago	Poem