

**CHAPTER – II**  
**SOCIAL AND LITERARY**  
**MILIEU**

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The twentieth century in America was fraught with the excesses of industrialism and capitalism most remarkably noted by the economic boom and doom before the Second World War. The first half of the twentieth century was characterized by the advent of new technologies and mechanization. The twenties experienced a remarkable shift from Victorian dominance to a cultural transcendence that gave America an exuberant modern identity. In the 1930s the US underwent the collapse of the economic system. The decades 1900-1930, cover three important phases in history—the Progressive era, the Roaring twenties and the Great Depression. These were facilitated by the great industrial expansion of the late nineteenth century and the political and economic situations reeling under significant stages of its immediate history. After the country was embroiled in the Civil War, it was soon able to recover from the colossal ruin through rapid industrialisation. Towards the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century generally regarded as the Gilded Age, there was a large scale experiment with manufacturing, trade, transportation and technology. Monopolies arose with the

emergence of modern industries like steel, railroad, standard oil and banking companies. It paved the way for a new set of capitalist entrepreneurs like Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan etc. In the political arena, a farmer's alliance known as the Populist Party came to the forefront to oppose the unregulated system of capitalist business culture. During this, a severe economic crisis, the Panic of 1893 occurred due to the collapse of the New York stock market when the price of gold fell. In 1896, the Democrats contested the election with populist support. The party's nominee William Jennings Bryan condemned the gold standard and "became nationally famous following his "Cross of Gold" speech" (Svejda 11). However, the populist movement eventually died with the victory of the Republicans in the election. Political concern for the working class and agrarian farmers remained insignificant as the nation was engulfed in a modernization process to achieve economic supremacy. It resulted in increased urbanization, upward mobility, and an expanding economy. Thus, the foregoing accounts reveal the underlying causal forces of the twentieth century.

At the turn of the century, the nation's economy moved onto a dynamic trajectory that resulted in a sharp increase in economic inequality, overpopulation, unemployment and agrarian distress. The Progressive movement in the first two decades of the twentieth century was carried out as a political reaction against the corporate abuses and political corruption of the day. Samuel P. Hays states:

"Progressivism," so the argument goes, consisted of a public reaction in the early twentieth century against the domination of public affairs by an alliance of greedy businessmen and selfish politicians. In many facets of

public life, the coalition of politicians and businessmen had distorted public values, thwarted public impulses, and created an arena of politics that was removed from public control. The reaction against this state of affairs came on an equally broad variety of fronts: reforms in municipal government, federal regulation of private business, laws to improve the conditions of workingmen. . . .

The exploitation of natural resources was a major example of the misdeeds of private enterprise (233).

The movement was concerned with the socioeconomic pattern that relied heavily on the top hierarchy of economic groups. The socialist joined forces with the progressives and pushed for radical changes.

Amidst the progressive call for reform, there was a rise in muckraking journalism and radical novels. Most writers were socialist intellectuals who wrote against the corrupt governance and egotistic business practices. The surly indifference of the capitalist society and rising corporate greed in the absence of government intervention led to social and economic disadvantages for the working class. Some of its literature validates this fact:

These were the years when the great muckrakers were at work. Ida M. Tarbell was laying bare the sins of rampant capitalism in such works as *History of the Standard Oil Company*, and Lincoln Steffens was describing the miserable life of the poor in *The Shame of the Cities*. Supported by a \$500 grant from the Socialist weekly *Appeal to Reason*, Upton Sinclair lived in the Chicago stockyards district and witnessed the brute existence of the slaughterhouse workers. The result was his

sensational novel *The Jungle*, which shocked Americans who were willing to have their eyes pried open. Frank Norris was telling the truth about big business. Jack London was shouting angrily about the wrongs done to labor, and journalists—among them Charles Edward Russel, Ray Stannard Baker, and Tom Lawson—were turning the society inside out in order to flaunt its soiled linen (Haaz and Lovitz 71).

These were writers who heightened American socialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their hard-line approach goes along with the progressive ideas and socialist campaign against the tyranny of capitalism.

Literature during the Progressive era thus experimented with radicalism and social information. It was an integrated period for literature rich in its amalgamation of naturalism and socialist trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Naturalism is regarded as a form of extreme realism. Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane and Jack London were naturalist writers who viewed individuals as victims of social and economic forces. Westbrook writes:

According to the naturalists, the individual is caught in the trap exactly as is history. The individual with some special endowment, by heredity or mutation, will prosper; but just as inevitably, the commonplace person will remain undistinguished, gaining no power and leaving no mark on his or her times. The strong and the weak, the stupid and the brilliant are both natural phenomena, and no more, their lives governed by laws not of their own making and certainly not to be abrogated by them (Westbrook 115-6).

Naturalism rests upon the scientific conception of determinism and Darwinism thus implying mankind's natural allegiance to the law of the universe just as the rest of all kinds of life forms. Its focal point in art is the literary interpretation of the scientific discourse of the working class ideology trapped in the economic chain of capitalist functions. Jack London's anti capitalist novel *Iron Heel* (1908) traced the life of socialist champion Ernest Everhard. Upton Sinclair presented scornful indictment of capitalist industrial culture in *The Jungle* and *Oil*. Frank Norris *The Octopus* (1901) is metaphor for the railroad trust corporation and its sequel *The Pit* (1902) is centred around the Chicago wheat trading. Naturalist writers presented a practical and rational view of socio-economic and political realities that ran contrary to the spirit of Romanticism.

Apart from the novel, popular socialist publications that appealed to the working class made headway:

In journalism indeed the American Socialists were remarkably prolific, and some of their journals reached a very wide public. Outstanding in this respect was Julius A. Weyland (1854-1912), with his *Appeal to Reason*, published, from 1895 in Kansas, which reached a circulation of more than a quarter of a million round about 1910. Another popular success was Wilshire's Magazine, edited by Gaylord Wilshire (1861-1927) from Canada but circulating mainly in the United States, with a reputed monthly sale of 100,000 (Cole 817).

Newspapers and magazines served as the political channel for organizing unions and challenging the public consciousness. These papers informed the public of the working class grievances and their issues. The *International Socialist Review*

edited by noted socialist and publisher Charles H. Kerr had Carl Sandburg and other noted names as contributors such as “Jack London, Eugene V. Debs, William D. Haywood, and Mary Harris Jones, known as “Mother Jones” (Golden 122). Progressive reforms led to economic stability in the 1920s replacing the radical mood of the first two decades with the boom enthusiasm of the twenties. However, the radical course of working class politics did not totally lose substance. There were still ongoing labor issues of socialist concern.

The famed spirit of the *Roaring Twenties* identified with the coming of age modernity in America was an era of enormous affluence and prospects accessible to middle and upper classes. Its popular culture filtered throughout much of the American scene. The era resonated with significant breakthroughs in Hollywood motion pictures, the radio, fashion, music, art and architecture that enriched the contemporary cultural trends of mass appeal. These were the years when the war gave American industry the enormous advantage of capital expansion due to Europe’s declining industry in the First World War. Advertising too promoted mass consumerism. Even the average American was able to afford popular consumer goods. Industrial production increased as sales and profit rose to unprecedented levels. Labor was extensive but the wage of industrial workers rose as profits increased. The First World War brought economic supremacy but immediately after the twenties, the nation was hit by a long period of economic crisis.

America’s flourishing consumer culture and overall economic high of the twenties was exclusive yet startling in its misleading prosperity. The economic system was flawed with its excessive *laissez-faire* economics. The Republican government had failed to invoke the policy measures of the Progressive

reformers. Unbridled corporate freedom and greed led to surplus production. It became apparent only after the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 when unsold goods accumulated in bulk. The financial slump led to the Great Depression of the thirties during which the nation experienced a total collapse of the economy leaving the working class inactive. Massive unemployment figures persisted throughout the decade. Under President Roosevelt's New Deal, policy reforms and banking regulations slowly helped stabilize the economy starting from the mid-thirties. Government reform policies and relief measures were directed almost exclusively to salvage the big business. While it rendered no permanent relief for the masses, the capitalist class continued to make more profits. The suffering and outcry of the working class lasted a decade. During these years, trade unions and socialists mobilised the workers into riots and protest all over the nation. An important feature of these struggles is the rallies organized by the Communist Party. Though the New Deal did not end the depression, its federal approach brought some economic and political equilibrium. The depression too ended with the US entry into World War II. Once again, the war effort fuelled industrial operation.

So far, the Progressive era, the Roaring twenties and the Great Depression have been analyzed in lieu of the first three decades. For an understanding of the socialist trending in literature, the political and social scenario has been observed. Again, Modernism which accounts for the literature of these decades reveals a cultural literary situation characterized by a mechanical complexity of art.

Modernism had its precedence first in the European soil after it suffered devastating effects of the war. In England and America, it emerged as a counter

response to previously cherished Victorian models and Romantic conventions. Modernism is indicated by scepticism that pertains not only to doubts and apprehensions of conventional practices and narratives but also to a sense of fragmentation in the diminishing identity wrought by increased civilization. Central to it is the modernist inception of the contextually relevant resources found in the scientific, psychoanalytic and politically sanctioned understandings. Singh gives an overall view:

With the growth of Marxism in politics, Darwinism in Science and Freudian in psychology and advances in various aspects of social studies and science there was the inability to arrive at the commonly acceptable metaphysical picture of man and society. All have shown a large variety of different ways of organizing a society. And again, at the root of all these cross currents of purposes there was the collapse of belief in the common sense. Bertrand Russel has added to the confusion with his pessimistic scientific humanism which described man's hopes and aspirations as 'but the outcome of chance collocations of atoms.' Against the backdrop of such a social and intellectual background the individual has started to depend increasingly upon his own evaluation of experience as the only meaningful source for a standard of values rather than the externally imposed tradition (239).

Thus, Modernism evolved out of the avant-garde 20th century as the individual's automatic response to cultural encounters. It was propelled by an acquired homogeneity of the modernist minds through shared epistemic and social space. Significant global occurrences like the First World War sparked the movement at various levels of the art forms. The *avant-garde* movements comprise of many

artistic and literary trends with philosophical allegiance to some form of revolting art and often opposed to their precursors. Post Impressionist paintings had artistic variations with impressionism, its French derivative Cubism developed collage art; Dada art or Dadaism is sort of an artistic anarchy that protested against war and bourgeois culture; Surrealism rebelled against established codes and conventions with overemphasis on artistic liberty; Expressionism revolted against realism by means of distorted depictions. In literature, imagism was a profound break from Romanticism and the *stream of consciousness* novel was improvised from the science of psychology. Modernism, is thus, characterized by a revolting trend of experimentation, exploration and new technical innovations. The modernist tendency is towards highly innovative, creative and technical outputs in music, literature, art, architecture and other forms of artistic expression.

Like its non literary forms, modernist literature yielded to the mechanisms of the cultural implications to interpret the essence of the times and the writer's experience in literary art. The evolving advances in modern science, and civilization conditioned by a series of phenomenal episodes since the early twentieth century and the new social and political contexts gave way to new literary practices. The *avant-garde* literature became more apparent with the chaos and destruction of World War I. The modernist literary work is characterized by experimentation with form, style, content and genre. Not only are the classical literary parameters and traditional strictures rejected but it brought fragmentation and alienation as deliberate principles to violate established literary norms and practices. For instance, T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* which depicts a thought provoking reference to the collapse of modern cities is in the form of fragmented verses that thematically and structurally alienates it from

the traditional system of poetry while it fully exhibits the characteristics of Modernism.

Modernism in literature most profoundly prevailed over poetry. During the first few years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writers began to isolate themselves from the artistic patronage preceding their age. A new kind of poetry developed which became formally categorized as 'Imagism' and largely governed by the rules of "Hardness of outline, clarity of image, brevity, suggestiveness, freedom from metrical laws" (Hughes 4). It developed from the ideas of T.E. Hulme but Ezra Pound pioneered the movement by organizing young imagist poets for publication in anthologies and magazines. In the January 1913 issue of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, he supplied some literary notes regarding imagism. Hughes states:

In this same article Pound refers to the "Image," and defines it as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." He continues: "It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." And finally, there is his concentrated affirmation that: "It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works" (29).

It was a poetic revolution ignited by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. In their respective works *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land*, they revolutionized a modern metrical system of the free verse juxtaposed with meaningful images and universal message to the modern dilemma. The imagist rhetoric itself involved

the complete autonomy of the poet's liberal take on language. A direct view of reference is to the modernist tradition of dissent that places the traditional verse under scrutiny.

Though modernism was largely felt in England with the well known expatriate Ezra Pound and the likes of Richard Aldington, D.H. Lawrence, and F.S. Flint leading the movement, the swift changes of Western civilization widened the impact far greater in America. American poetry saw the rise of two important modernist poets, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost. However, a significant development in American poetry was the arrival of the new poetry. The publication of an anthology, *The Lyric year* by Mitchell Kennerley in 1912, *Poetry* magazine founded in 1912 and the *Little Review* of 1914 introduced a new breed of writers who were highly receptive of the new poetical trends like Imagism and the free verse. Particularly, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Harriet Monroe uplifted the imagist trend and included important contributions:

The first issue, of September 23, had verse by Ezra Pound and Arthur Davidson Ficke ; the third number introduced Tagore to American readers. Vachel Lindsay's "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven" was first published in *Poetry*, and in 1914 it released the fury of Carl Sandburg to the waiting world. William Butler Yeats contributed his dreams, Robert Frost and D. H. Lawrence made their first American appearances, Edgar Lee Masters was discovered. Amy Lowell was blessed in *Poetry* perhaps more enthusiastically than she deserved, and years later Hart Crane and Glenway Wescott and other young Mid-Westerners were proudly brought forth (Parry 196-7).

Their forms helped break the old strictures and played out the free verse trend which was a significant change in modern American poetry. American Modernism became particularly pronounced with the upsurge of this generation of poets who made no pretence of the complexities and drawbacks of modern evolution.

In the twenties, American modernism broadened its impact in the field of fiction. F. Scott Fitzgerald explored the post war disillusionment and its impact on the morals in *This Side of Paradise* (1920). His most famous *The Great Gatsby* (1925) depicts the destruction of the belief system in the crushing of the American Dream through the character of Jay Gatsby. Fitzgerald is one of *The Lost Generation* group of the Modernist genre. The term *Lost Generation* is ascribed to a group of American expatriates:

First it is remarkable that the term “Lost Generation” was first coined by author and poet Gertrude Stein which characterizes disillusionment, a general motif of American literary notables who lived in Paris and other parts of Europe, some after military service in the First World War. Figures identified with the “Lost Generation” include authors and poets Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Pierce, John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck (Matthew 88).

Notable among the group is Ernest Hemingway who wrote about the post war disillusionment in his novels. His novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) features an American World War I veteran Jake Barnes whose impotence is a consequence of his combat wounds. Another novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) has

autobiographical elements set against the backdrop of WWI. Another writer, Dos Passos also drew his own reflections of war in *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (1920). While his novel, *In Three Soldiers* (1921) accounts for the psychological impact of war through the post war experience of three soldiers.

Other renowned writers follow closely in the introspect of the modern American experience. Theodore Dreiser in the novel *An American Tragedy* (1925) gives a picture of America's fixation with class ascendance in a world defined by social prestige. The story revolves around a boy baffled between a lower class girl and a girl of high pedigree. Sherwood Anderson uses the psychoanalytic to study the struggle of his characters in novels such as *A Story Teller's Story* (1924) and *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Sinclair Lewis's is another writer who assessed critically the invasion of materialism and the American ambition in his works *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922) and *Arrowsmith* (1925). American writers were truly the product of their age with the accuracy to view modernism as the new vista for literary experimentation. Their centrality of experience and rationality of the modern complexes furnish an essential precondition for these writers.

The Harlem Renaissance and Jazz are part of the modernist experimentation in American cultural history. The Harlem Renaissance refers to the black cultural and artistic drive that began in the Harlem district of Manhattan, New York throughout the twenties and thirties. There was a creative energy flow among African American writers and artists as they experienced a new vitality and growth in their creative explorations. Matthew adds:

In fact, the Renaissance was more than a literary or artistic movement, it possessed a certain sociological

development—particularly through a new racial consciousness—through racial integration, as seen the Back to Africa movement led by Marcus Garvey. W.E.B. Dubois' notion of "twoness", introduced in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), explored a divided awareness of one's identity that was a unique critique of the social ramifications of racial consciousness (256).

The movement also known as the Black Literary Renaissance and New Negro movement was initiated by *The New Negro* (1925) edited by Alain Locke. The anthology featuring a number of African American writers was a collective pursuit to organize their spirit and black identity in the artistic domain. Claude McKay's *If We Must Die* (1919) advocated a violent retaliation to the Chicago race riots, Walter White's *Rope and Faggot: The Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929) examined the course of lynching and Langston Hughes' essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (1926) explored the freedom of black art. The economic opportunities that led to the Great migration from the South into the North urban centres, was a major turning point for the revival of black culture. While it gave them new opportunities, they were soon caught up in racial tensions. Their experiences provided them the stimulus to present their views and ideological tensions through literature.

Harlem was where an explosion of all the modern creative fields took place and made way for cultural exchanges. Jazz music made its home here. It was a ground breaking musical innovation that conquered the American scene so much such that the *Roaring Twenties* is also called the *Jazz Age*. It appealed to the American modernists because of its authentic and original innovation. The fusion of the traditional and the modern rhythmic beat of Jazz endorsed the

primeval instinct of man clamouring to break out from the clutches of the conventions. Apart from the music, its rebellious features included the ‘flapper’ as the new modern woman identity and the varied sensual ballroom dance forms as against the conservative model of women and traditional dances. Jazz thus holds the modernist penchant for breaking the barriers. The *Smoke and Steel* volume of Carl Sandburg features a poem “Jazz Fantasia”:

Drum on your drums, batter on your banjos,  
sob on the long cool winding saxophones.  
Go to it O jazzmen (CP 179).

The modernist articulation of the decades found expression in Midwestern literature too. It was an important literary output in the 1920s and 1930s that emerged as a literature of protest and revolt mainly because of a sense of modern revulsion. The rich history and strong tradition of the Midwest region was invaded by a growing materialistic spirit and the modern predicament of loss and confusion. Its radical background attributed to a strong undercurrent of socialist progressives and organized labor unions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Minneapolis etc. Writers found their source in the radical ideas of the region to examine the cultural shift and the impact of modernization. They were seeking a national identity through the region’s past in order to reconcile the polarities between their roots and the modern surroundings. The following is said of Sandburg who belonged to this group of Midwest writers:

The America Sandburg knew and wrote about – at least until after World War II – was “mid-America,” life on the prairies of Illinois and the shores of Lake Michigan from Milwaukee to Chicago and Harbert, Michigan. . . . his formative years were spent in the Midwest of his

contemporaries Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Edgar Lee Masters, and Ernest Hemingway. . . . It can hardly be accidental that these men who were some of the most innovative and influential authors in America from World War I to the beginning of World War II all had a similar background (Allen 6-7).

They were rebellious in their prose and poetry and dictated their writings against the war, capitalism and the impact of modernization upon the ordinary man. Carl Sandburg's *Cornhuskers* (1918), Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1925) and Sinclair Lewis' novel *Main Street* (1920) highlighted the region's radical aspects. Allen further informs:

These Midwestern writers were acutely conscious of social inequalities, and several were professed Socialists, including Sandburg. . . . Their life-style was stubbornly individualistic self-expression (8).

They explored the inner dynamics of modern existence in the various facets of America's economic system and social structure. But they were mainstream writers whose works did not focus on the Midwest alone and their radicalism was more subdued compared to writers based on the region. For instance, Carl Sandburg was a radical poet of the urban milieu and the only novel by Ernest Hemingway that comes closest to radicalism is *To Have and Have Not* (1937). Proletarian literature was the forte of the regional writers whose works were not only radically explicit but directly related to the working class problems of the region particularly during the Depression era. To mention a few, Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* written in the 1930s, Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933),

Josephine Herbst's *Pity Is Not Enough* (1933) and Dawn Powell's *The Story of a Country Boy* (1934) explored in detail the working class issues and struggles.

The *Chicago Renaissance* is an important aspect of modernism in American literature. Bernard Duffey defines the *Chicago Renaissance*:

By an inevitable if inexact usage, the continuous wave of literary activity in Chicago, beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century and continuing through the first two decades of the twentieth, has come to be known as the Chicago Renaissance. It was, of course, not a re-birth but the working out within the city of creative forces common to the nation at that time. The Chicago writers worked from diverse impulses, and with some mutually felt hostilities, but they also shared a common awareness which bound them up in a common group and gave to their efforts a common stamp. The Chicago renaissance spanned precisely those decades during which serious American literature was shifting from its native romantic moorings to a berth somewhere on the periphery of American culture (6).

The Chicago midland of America was essentially the national character for the advancing economic and cultural tide of America. The literary interpretation of the city did not actually fit into the artistic realm owing to reasons of its overwhelming concrete industrial evidence. As in Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago," it was the "City of the Big Shoulders" (CP 3) which was "alive and coarse and strong and cunning" (CP 3). It made it crucial for writers to articulate the physical facts with the grace and finesse of refined art. Smith says:

“Chicago writers located on three indisputably major “facts” in particular: the city’s railroads, its large buildings, and its stockyards. These were not the only facts that were observed and depicted, of course, but they were the most important and expressive. In their handling of these features Chicago writers came as close as they ever did to a mastery of the city as subject” (9).

Upton Sinclair wrote a disturbing exposé of the Chicago meatpacking factories in *The Jungle* and the same was voiced in Carl Sandburg’s famous line “Hog-Butcher for the world” (CP 3) which remains so far the greatest exposition of the city’s industrial culture. The native born Henry Blake Fuller gave a sharp critique on the Chicago city’s skyscrapers in *The Cliff Dwellers* (1893) mainly to denounce America’s corporate economy. And Waldo Frank in *Our America* (1919) observed the city from the Chicago train as “the brutality of the industrial technology” (Smith 112). The literary execution of the city sparked some satisfying outcomes as writers boldly crafted their art upon the very characteristics of the city’s materialistic spirit. This they did by making aesthetic representations of the factories, stockyards, railways, buildings etc for their subject of art. They adopted technical narratives that associated their art with the modern realities. What united Chicago writers is in their symbolic regard for the city as shaping the force of modern American values.

Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg belong to the Chicago school of writers. They were witness to the swift changes of the Midwest towns and the radical movements that accompanied the transformation. Considering this fact, the radicalism and the tendency to investigate the social and cultural paradoxes came naturally to

them. And since the renaissance was incited by the growth of materialism and modernization, these writers were fully aware of the failure of the American values of hard work. Consequently, they were disdainful of the corrupt politics and businesses that suppressed the development of the average man. The most productive year of the Chicago Renaissance was in 1912 when *Poetry* magazine initiated a creative outburst of radicalism in poetry. Free verse and imagism dominated the poetical techniques. Most notable works of the renaissance are Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Vachel Lindsay's *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* (1913) and Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* (1916). The Renaissance has thus come to be mostly identified with Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg. The trio revolutionized Chicago literature by being "regionally rooted," (Wilcox 190) and in true modernist form, "they made use of the free verse in responding to the poignancy of human situations" (Wilcox 190).

Carl Sandburg came to prominence in the first half of the twentieth century. He belonged to a generation of writers and artists who witnessed the turn of the century from its late nineteenth to twentieth century. As A.V. Suryanarayana states:

Carl Sandburg, the Poet Laureate of Industrial America, was born in 1878. His life spreads almost over a century, during which the country has seen many changes, radical changes indeed, growing from an infant, to a youth of gigantic size. Hence Sandburg's poetry naturally treats of the several moods and features that mark the changing America. A poet mirrors his age and hence his poetry reflects all the changes and moods of the country. So a

study of the history of America is required to understand the poet properly (15).

His life and career encompasses all the major events taking place in the nation. Since as a child, he derived the American spirit and knowledge of true democracy from Lincoln and the Civil War. In his teens, he was influenced by a number of political thoughts particularly, populism of the People's party. And by the time he left college, he was already a committed socialist due to the influence of Professor Wright in Lombard. During the Progressive era, he entered socialist politics by working as party organizer for the Social Democrats. Then he joined the newspaper and continued penning his socialism. When socialism briefly permeated through the political ideologies of intellectuals, leaders and writers, Sandburg too was caught up in the flare of socialism. Expectedly, so much of his socialist philosophy is reflected in his poetry. Rosenthal examines:

Sandburg at his most effective is a movingly 'poetic' socialist (or populist) orator, a political dreamer whose *mystique* is centred on Lincoln, The People, the anonymous and carefree or pathetic poor. One can imagine Upton Sinclair's heading each section of his protest anthology *The Cry for Justice* with a quotation from Sandburg. Sandburg has real, if secondary power. For one thing, he has a delighted ear for the common speech, so that his poetry is a great repository of idiomatic folk-wisdom. (One can read his books, especially *The People, Yes*, with pleasure for hours just for this particular richness.) For another, it is full of 'shocking' portraits and home-truths, though by now much of the charge has gone out of its proletarian and muckraking features, which seem largely derivative from Whitman and Masters and

Sherwood Anderson, and from the general atmosphere of the radical movements and the 'new' spirit of the second and third decades of this century (152).

Thus, Sandburg's place and role in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature emanates from the rational impulses underlying the socio-political and cultural milieu.

Like the naturalist, his writings were focussed on the working class unlike realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which mostly dealt with the middle class. Moreover, the eponymous advent of modernism introduced revolutionary ideas and concepts appropriating the highly advanced state of the nation's progress. This seem to direct the way in which the avant-garde writers and artists expressed their art with an attitude to validate their misgivings. It holds true for Sandburg for in his poetry, his socialism acts as the catalyst to expose the diminishing quality of human life brought on by acute materialism. Again, he adopted his own poetic form which is highly rhetoric with slangs and anecdotes representative of modernist revolt against conventional practices. He was a modernist poet in his own right by exercising authority over his own matter and employing free verse like any other modernist poet; yet, he was a liberal in his delivery of an un-poetical verse form, hyperbolic and implicit with a lyrical imbalance unlike any other. Rebecca West in the preface to *Selected Poems of Carl Sandburg* writes:

His is not a talent that is too easily accepted in this age, which is inclined to regard poetry as necessarily lyric and to demand that the poet shall write brief and perfect verse; but the reason he cannot satisfy such standards is that his art is dominated by an image so vast that it

requires as house-room not one but a thousand poems  
(qtd. in Marowski 343).

In his poetry, he evoked a series of images in the imagist form. Yet it was a condensed form of poetical prose. Richard Crowder adds:

Though Sandburg claimed not to have had any connection with the Imagists, many of his early poems came from a head and heart that subscribed to an identical creed (29).

Also in his poetic experimentation and brutal realism, he falls under the modernist clause mainly through his verse exploration.

Again, he is a product of Midwestern literary dissent whose personality and perception is shaped by the radical outlook of the region. And as a popular writer of the Chicago Renaissance, he invested his poetic aptitude towards the animated city of Chicago. While he is united with other writers of the era in their American experience, his literary occupation solely with the nation's working class population sets his literary efforts apart from the rest. The six volumes of his poetry, *Chicago Poems* (1916), *Cornhuskers* (1918), *Smoke and Steel* (1920), *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* (1922), *Good Morning America* (1928) and *The People, Yes* (1936) accommodate the social, economic, and the political in literary art. It is true that he has built his reputation based on some of the most radical poetry, but he has democratized American literature as a voice of the people collecting their faith and struggles.

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