

Abe Lincoln Grows Up Short Guide

Abe Lincoln Grows Up by Carl Sandburg

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Overview

Based on the first twenty-seven chapters of *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*, Sandburg's *Abe Lincoln Grows Up* presents the first twenty years of Lincoln's life, from his birth in a log cabin, through the migrations of the Lincoln family in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, until the time that Abe gathers his few belongings and leaves home for New Salem, in search of an education and a better life. This is a classic example of the American success story: a boy born and raised in poverty, with many hardships and very little formal education, struggles to make something of himself. Although the story ends just as Lincoln leaves home, all readers know that he is destined to become one of the best known and most loved presidents of the United States.

This biography offers an outstanding depiction of American frontier living, describing the wilderness, the farms, and the settlements; Sandburg shows how the settlers built their houses, grew their crops, and battled Native Americans. He faithfully recounts their joys, such as a wedding feast with "bearmeat, venison, wild turkey and ducks," and their sorrows, such as the epidemics of strange illnesses that took the lives of many people, including Lincoln's mother.

Following Lincoln down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers on a flatboat to New Orleans, the reader also glimpses the world beyond the frontier. Sandburg includes many interesting sidelights, such as Andrew Jackson's presidential campaign, that place Lincoln's early life in historical context.

About the Author

Carl Sandburg was born to Swedish-American parents on January 6, 1878, in Galesburg, Illinois, a prairie town that attracted large numbers of immigrants because of job opportunities at the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad shops. His father worked in the railroad yards and never earned more than nine dollars a week, barely enough to feed, house, and clothe a young family and certainly not enough to send the children to high school. At the age of thirteen, Carl left school and began a succession of odd jobs. When he was nineteen, he left Galesburg in a boxcar, working his way to Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado. Shortly after his return to Illinois in 1898, he enlisted in the state militia and fought in Cuba and Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War. He sent long letters about his experiences in Latin America to the Galesburg Evening Mail.

After young Sandburg's discharge from the service, he enrolled at Lombard College, where as a veteran he was entitled to a year's free tuition. Admitted as a special student because he had not gone to high school, he spent four years at the college but left shortly before receiving his degree and resumed his roaming, this time to the East Coast.

Back in Galesburg after a number of adventures, including ten days in jail for riding the rails without a ticket, Sandburg worked as a fireman and a salesman.

Although he first published his poems in 1904, he did not gain recognition as a poet until 1914, when he published "Chicago." By this time, he had left Galesburg permanently and had worked as an organizer for the Social-Democratic party, as a newspaperman in Wisconsin, and as secretary to the mayor of Milwaukee. In 1908 he married Lillian Steichen, whose brother Edward later became a famous photographer. In 1912 Sandburg moved to Chicago, where he worked on various newspapers. He wrote editorials for the Chicago Daily News from 1918 to 1932 and began his work on Abraham Lincoln. The several volumes of poetry he published during this period gained a wide reputation for their informal style.

His two-volume Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years appeared in 1927, and his four-volume, Pulitzer Prize-winning Abraham Lincoln: The War Years followed in 1939. Describing previous biographies of Lincoln as too idealistic, Sandburg offered his versions as more realistic. Historians note that Sandburg's interpretations add little new information and no insights to the study of Lincoln but that his work's value lies in its emotional and poetic intensity.

Sandburg wrote versions of his works on Lincoln and his autobiography that are geared toward younger audiences.

Abe Lincoln Grows Up is taken from Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years; Storm Over the Land derives from Abraham Lincoln: The War Years; and Prairie Town Boy is based on the autobiographical Always the Young Strangers (1952).

His other writings include a novel and some children's fantasies. Sandburg is also widely known as a collector of folk songs. In recognition of his achievements, Sandburg was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

He died on July 22, 1967, in Flat Rock, North Carolina.

Setting

Abe Lincoln Grows Up begins in 1776, in Rockingham County, Virginia, where Lincoln's paternal grandparents live. In 1782 Lincoln's grandfather moves his family to the Kentucky wilderness. This wonderful new land teems with fertile black earth and blue grass, but settlers face great dangers as well, particularly from Native Americans who try to protect their land from the newcomers.

Brutal encounters are common; in fact, some towns offer rewards for Native American scalps.

When the future president is born in Kentucky in 1809, the frontier is still full of hardships. His family moves to Indiana, where they live in a pole shed, open on one side, for over a year while they accumulate the resources to build a cabin. Abe's mother soon dies of a mysterious disease known as "milk sickness." The settlers lack simple material goods, such as comfortable beds, and they also lack education. Abe and his sister hike nine miles to school and nine miles home. The long journey makes it impossible to attend regularly. All told, Abe receives only about four months of formal education.

With little entertainment to occupy sparse leisure time, the frontier can also be very monotonous. Recreational activities often involve some form of violence; for instance, the sports in which young Abe engages often involve scuffling, knocking off hats, and wrestling.

Drinking, gambling, and fighting abound, but religion plays an important role in frontier life as well. Families attend long services in log cabin churches and pray together twice a day, sustained by their faith that they will enjoy a better afterlife.

Sandburg's biography follows the tremendous hardships and simple joys of Lincoln's childhood adventures in this challenging environment that produced one of America's most famous presidents.

Social Sensitivity

The attitudes toward violence, Native Americans, and blacks depicted in *Abe Lincoln Grows Up* may concern parents and teachers. Sandburg frequently makes violence sound attractive: "Three boys teased him one day...they would not be satisfied till he had punched their noses." Some descriptions of Mike Fink's and Andrew Jackson's escapades may be viewed as glorifications of physical violence. When Sandburg writes about social injustice, such as the treatment of Native Americans and slaves, he never offers any comment of his own. Some critics defend him on the grounds that the irony implicit in the situations amounts to a form of recrimination, but young readers may not recognize the irony as such and may instead interpret the lack of comment as moral neutrality or, worse yet, as approval. Most of these problems occur because the work was written over sixty years ago, when the collective social conscience was not as well-developed as it is now. The realization that moral standards change rapidly in American society is an important part of education today.

The old-fashioned virtues of hard work, family values, and love for God and one's country are certainly prominent in the biography, but Sandburg's streak of realism tempers any overoptimism about the advantages of living in accordance with these standards. The author points out more than once, "The wilderness is careless," and he quotes the folk proverb, "The cowards never started and the weak ones died by the way."

Literary Qualities

The most outstanding literary characteristic of this work is the language.

Sandburg's prose often flows like his free verse poetry. A figurative device that Sandburg frequently uses in both poetry and prose is personification—that is, the endowment of an inanimate object with human qualities. For example, in chapter 10, Sandburg hypothesizes: "He [Abe] might have asked the moon, 'What do you see?' And the moon might have told him many things." The extensive description of all that the moon might have witnessed in the past few years helps the reader to see and feel the current of life in those times.

Similes and metaphors appear in virtually every chapter. Chapter 16 includes particularly powerful examples, for instance: "The footsteps of death, silent as the moving sundial of a tall sycamore, were a presence. Time and death, the partners who operate leaving no more track than mist, had to be reckoned in the theme of life. A day is a shooting star." This style, tending toward long but clear sentences, provides an interesting model for aspiring writers.

Themes and Characters

Because *Abe Lincoln Grows Up* is biographical rather than fictional, it lacks a true plot. There is no rising action leading to a climax that changes the lives of the people involved. Instead, Sandburg creates a realistic background—the frontier wilderness of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois—and then populates it with historical figures.

The major characters are Abe Lincoln; his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln; and his stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln.

Sandburg characterizes the young Abe Lincoln as mischievous with his friends and serious in his work and studies.

Lincoln's developing sense of responsibility and his growing interest in the law, government, and the world beyond the wilderness receive a good deal of attention from his biographer. His work ferrying passengers out to steamboats on the Ohio River and his trip to New Orleans on a flatboat demonstrate the future president's independence and his resourcefulness. Sandburg's emphasis on Lincoln's positive personality traits develops one of the biography's major themes: success is often the result of perseverance in the face of obstacles.

The biography covers Lincoln's relationships with family members as well. A colorful and interesting character, Lincoln's father, Tom, is devoted to his family and does not drink much or curse. But he clings to the old ways, as reflected in his impatience with education, which he believes should be limited to "readin', writin', and cipherin'." He does not understand his son's need for more knowledge, but when Abe's stepmother interferes, Tom yields to her.

Thus Sandburg presents the timehonored theme of the old giving way to the new.

Abe's mother and stepmother are depicted with warmth and sympathy.

Both love and nurture their children, although Nancy Hanks's origins are somewhat mysterious, and she is described as a bit "strange." Sarah Bush Johnston, on the other hand, is outgoing, drawing the two motherless Lincoln children to her as if they were her own. When she holds him to her, Abe feels "like a cold chick warming under the soft feathers of a big wing." She embodies the theme of overcoming hardships with love.

The many rather vague and sketchy minor characters are generally developed as much as necessary in the context of the biography. Sandburg introduces characters who actually play no direct role in the Lincoln story but who add depth and richness. Information about the activities of Napoleon Bonaparte and Andrew Jackson lends historical perspective to the work, while the description of Mike Fink, a character of tall tales, provides a glimpse of the myths inspired by the frontier.

Topics for Discussion

1. In this biography, Sandburg does more than merely recount the facts about the first twenty years of Abe Lincoln's life. He tells about such assorted characters as Daniel Boone, Mike Fink, and Napoleon Bonaparte. What is the value of such digressions?
2. Sandburg said that he wrote his biography of Lincoln because other biographies were too idealistic and he wanted to contribute a realistic portrayal. Do you think that Sandburg accomplished this goal?
3. What was the attitude of the settlers toward Native Americans? Why did they feel that way? Are our attitudes different today? If so, why?
4. Examine the text to find similes and metaphors. Do you think they are effective in this nonfiction work? Why or why not?
5. How was it possible for Abe Lincoln to achieve so much with so little formal education? Did his success result from the quality of his scant education or from his own motivation?
6. Examine the text for Sandburg's allusions to slavery. Is the attitude revealed that of the author or of his characters? What is that attitude? Be sure to consider the description of the New Orleans slave markets in the last chapter.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Sandburg mentions several games played at parties on the frontier, such as "Skip to My Lou." How were these games played? What kind of musical instruments might have been used? (A valuable source here might be Sandburg's own collection of folk songs, *The New American Songbag*. New York: Broadcast Music, 1950.)

2. One of the digressions from the main story of Abe Lincoln concerns the presidential campaign and administration of Andrew Jackson. How do these events resemble or differ from presentday campaigns and administrations?

3. The Mike Fink stories that were popular in Lincoln's time belong to a tradition known as "frontier humor."

What other examples of this kind of humor can you find? How are they similar to or different from the Mike Fink stories?

4. Read some of Sandburg's poetry.

Which literary devices does he use in both his poetry and prose? Is his use of these devices more effective in some instances than in others? Give examples.

5. Look through the story for references to violence, such as Abe's fight with William Grigsby. Are violent confrontations like these still common in our society? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

Callahan, North. Carl Sandburg: Lincoln of Our Literature. New York: New York University Press, 1970. A very readable biography of Sandburg, this volume contains excellent chapters on the Lincoln biographies.

Crowder, Richard. Carl Sandburg. New Haven: College and University Press, 1964. Although somewhat more difficult to read and less informative about the Lincoln books than Callahan's work, this study contains a good brief chronology of Sandburg's life and an annotated bibliography.

Related Titles

Abe Lincoln Grows Up is adapted from the first part of Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, Sandburg's biography of Lincoln. Storm Over the Land: A Profile of the Civil War is a similar volume taken from Abraham Lincoln: The War Years. On a somewhat higher reading level than Abe Lincoln Grows Up, Storm Over the Land is much longer, covering all the years of the Civil War.

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