

“Skyscraper” Poem

How did Carl Sandburg capture the spirit of a skyscraper in a poem?

Theme

This lesson explores how language can bring an object to life. The lesson assumes that students have a basic working knowledge of poems and poetry terminology. It can be used within teaching units on architectural vocabulary, poetry, writing, reading, or dramatic interpretation.

Student Objectives

- retell the story of Sandburg’s poem
- describe the author and his connections to Chicago
- recognize literary devices found in the poem

Activities

- illustrate the story that the poem tells
- identify Sandburg’s use of literary devices

Type

indoor, desktop activities

Timeframe

three class sessions of 30 minutes each

Materials

- **Handout A** - copy of Carl Sandburg’s poem “Skyscraper”
- **Handout B** - worksheet for identifying poetry terms in “Skyscraper”
- **Handouts C and D** - five photographs of historic Chicago skyscrapers and a photo of Sandburg
- large sheets of drawing paper, pencils, crayons, markers
- old magazines for cutting up
- scissors
- dictionaries

Teacher Prep

- photocopy **Handouts A and B** (*one per student*)
- photocopy or scan **Handouts C and D** for display or projection
- practice reading “Skyscraper” out loud



Vocabulary

caissons watertight chambers used in construction work under water or as a foundation

girders main horizontal structural members that carry a vertical load; similar to a beam, but usually more structurally important

mortar the building material made from cement, sand, and water that is applied between bricks and hardens to form a strong connection

pilings long slender columns (usually of timber, steel, or reinforced concrete) driven into the ground to carry a vertical load

architect a person who designs and oversees the construction of buildings

mason a skilled laborer who builds with stone or bricks

hod carrier a laborer hired to carry supplies to bricklayers, stonemasons, cement finishers, or plasterers on the job

tier a floor or a story of a building

See **Handout B** for poetry vocabulary.

Background Information for Teacher

Carl Sandburg, the second child of August and Clara Anderson Sandburg, was born on January 6, 1878, in Galesburg, Illinois. In 1891, Sandburg left school after the eighth grade. He spent the next several years doing odd jobs throughout the Midwest. He volunteered for service in the Spanish-American War in 1898 and was sent to Puerto Rico. After the war, he returned to Illinois, entered Lombard College, and began writing extensively. As a result of his increasing concern with politics and the treatment of workers in America, he became active in the Social Democratic Party. He married Lillian Steichen in Milwaukee in 1908. By 1912, the couple and their children had moved to 4646 North Hermitage Avenue in Chicago.

For several years, he worked for the *Chicago Daily News* reporting primarily on labor issues. His first collection of poetry, *Chicago Poems*, was published in 1916. It included the poem “Chicago” that described the metropolis as “the city of big shoulders.” He wrote many more books of poetry for adults and children as well as other fiction and non-fiction works. In 1926, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* was completed, which established Sandburg as one of the foremost literary figures of the 20th Century. Four additional volumes about Lincoln followed. In 1940, Sandburg won the Pulitzer Prize in history for *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. In 1951, he earned a second Pulitzer Prize in poetry for *Complete Poems*. In 1964, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Sandburg family moved to North Carolina where he lived until his death in July of 1967. At his request, his ashes were returned to his birthplace of Galesburg, Illinois.

Suggested Answers to Day Three Exercise

simile a comparison between two different concepts using “like” or “as”

8 “Hour by hour the girders play as ribs and reach out and hold together the stone walls and floors.”

metaphor using words about one kind of object in place of another object to create an analogy

22 “Spelled in electric fire on the roof are words telling miles of houses and people where to buy a thing for money. The sign speaks till midnight.”

allusion a reference to another time, place, work, or person

14 “(One man fell from a girder and broke his neck at the end of a straight plunge—he is here—his soul has gone into the stones of the building.)”

hyperbole an extreme exaggeration

7 “Hour by hour the caissons reach down to the rock of the earth and hold the building to a turning planet.”

personification describing or giving human characteristics to a non-human object

1 “By day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and has a soul.”

8 “Hour by hour the girders play as ribs and reach out and hold together the stone walls and floors.”



Discussion Points

- Sandburg says the skyscraper has a soul. What do you think he means? Have you ever thought of a building having a soul? Why or why not? How could you apply that idea to your school building?
- What images did you see in your head when the poem was read out loud?
- Does the poem have a regular rhyme or metrical pattern? (No, it is in free verse.)
- What are some of the most surprising words used by Sandburg?
- What are some of the most powerful words used by Sandburg?
- Several jobs are mentioned in the poem. How have the roles, salaries, and job descriptions for women and men changed since 1916 when the poem was written? (Particularly note stanza 18.)
- Some objects, devices, and jobs in the skyscraper are no longer common. What are they?
- What is a skyscraper? How did it get its name? What kinds of inventions or technologies allow a tall building to be tall? (elevators, electric lighting, heating and air conditioning, telephones, plumbing systems, and building materials such as steel, concrete, and glass)
- Sandburg describes the “skyscraper” in his poem as a twenty-story building. Does 20 stories seem very tall? How would you describe a skyscraper today?

alliteration (also called initial rhyme) repeating consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words

11 “Men who sunk the pilings and mixed the mortar are laid in graves where the wind whistles a wild song without words.”

assonance repeating a vowel sound within a line

2 “Prairie and valley, streets of the city, pour people into it and they mingle among its twenty floors and are poured out again back to the streets, prairies and valleys.”

consonance repeating a consonant sound within a line, but not necessarily at the beginning of words

2 “Prairie and valley, streets of the city, pour people into it and they mingle among its twenty floors and are poured out again back to the streets, prairies and valleys.”

internal rhyme a rhyme contained within a line, rather than at the end of a line

23 “Darkness on the hallways. Voices echo. Silence holds... Watchmen walk slow from floor to floor and try the doors.”

image a mental picture created after reading words

6 “Wires climb with secrets, carry light and carry words, and tell terrors and profits and loves—curses of men grappling plans of business and questions of women in plots of love.”

repetition using the same words or phrases again

7 “Hour by hour the caissons reach down...”

8 “Hour by hour the girders play as ribs...”

9 “Hour by hour the hand of the mason...”

10 “Hour by hour the sun and the rain...”

1 “By day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and has a soul.”

25 “By night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the stars and has a soul.”

rhetorical question a question asked that doesn't need or expect an answer

4 “(Dumped in the sea or fixed in a desert, who would care for the building or speak its name or ask a policeman the way to it?)”

onomatopoeia naming a thing or action by a voice imitation of the sound

24 “splashed”



Interdisciplinary Connections

Fine Arts / Design

Have students draw a cross-section of the 20-story skyscraper in Carl Sandburg's poem. A section drawing shows what the building would look like if a huge saw cut through the entire building from top to bottom, removing the outside walls and allowing us to see the inside. Include specific illustrations from the stanzas. What do students think happens on the first floor, the 15th floor, etc.? See the Social Sciences lesson for Seventh Grade for an example of a cross-section drawing of a tall building.

Music

Help your class get a better understanding of American life around the time that Sandburg wrote this poem. Listen to some popular music composed around 1916: “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” (1910, Beth Slater Whitson and Leo Freidman); “Hail! Hail! The Gang's All Here” (1917, Theodore Morse and Arthur Sullivan); “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” (1919, Irving Berlin); “Over There” (1917, George M. Cohan).



Resources

Carl Sandburg: A Biography, Penelope Niven. New York: C. Scribners Sons, 1991.

Carl Sandburg: A Pictorial Biography, Joseph Haas and Gene Lovitz. New York: Putnam, 1967.

Chicago Poems, Carl Sandburg. New York: Dover Publications, [1916] 1994. Originally published in 1916, it includes famous works such as “Skyscraper” and “Chicago” that originated the ‘City of Big Shoulders’ phrase.

Poems for Children: Nowhere Near Old Enough to Vote, Carl Sandburg. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. A collection of previously unpublished poems for children about such familiar objects and ideas as the moon, manners, eyes, necks, pencils, and clouds.

Activity Procedures

DAY ONE and DAY TWO

- 1** Give each student the copy of “Skyscraper” on **Handout A**. Then read the poem out loud so students can hear the words and the rhythms.
- 2** Point out, discuss, look up in the dictionary, and explain unfamiliar vocabulary words. Invite students to comment on anything that seems unclear, perplexing, unexpected, or wonderful.
- 3** Use the Discussion Points to talk about how Sandburg describes the building as having a soul. Together, explore how this idea works throughout the poem. Then re-read the poem out loud.
- 4** Assign one of the twenty-five stanzas to each class member. Have students write their stanza on a large piece of drawing paper and then create an illustration to explain the text using either pictures from old magazines or hand drawings.

DAY THREE

- 5** Give each student a copy of **Handout B**. Write or project these terms on the board. Discuss those terms that may be unfamiliar.
- 6** Divide the students into pairs. Have each pair write out the stanzas that contain an example of each of the poetic terms on **Handout B**. Underline specific words in the stanzas as needed to call attention to the poetry term. (See the Suggested Answers.)

Extensions

- Write the first and last stanzas of “Skyscraper” on the board. What is similar? What is different? The word “skyscraper” is mentioned only in the first and last stanzas. If these two stanzas were taken out of the poem, would students still be able to understand what Sandburg is describing? Why? Why not?
- As a class, create a written or illustrated timeline for the life (or the day) of the skyscraper depicted in Sandburg’s poem. Record the milestones of the building’s construction or the way it is used during the day.
- Divide students into small groups to research one of the early Chicago skyscrapers shown on **Handouts C and D**. In 1916, Sandburg would have had late 19th Century skyscrapers in mind when writing this poem. Several can still be seen in Chicago, including: Monadnock Building (1891, 16 stories); Reliance Building (1896, 15 stories); Marquette Building (1894, 16 stories); Old Colony Building (1894, 17 stories); Fisher Building (1896, 18 stories). As a group or as individuals, create a free verse poem about one of these buildings. Students can hand letter (or type) the poem on a sheet of drawing paper and illustrate the images, allusions, personifications, or similes they used.

- Take your class to see the exterior of the Carl Sandburg home at 4646 North Hermitage in Chicago. (This historic site is a private residence, not open to the public.) While Sandburg lived there with his wife Lillian and their children, he wrote “Skyscraper” as part of his *Chicago Poems* collection. Read the historical marker posted on the lawn outside the house. See the Language Arts lesson for Fourth Grade for more information about buildings associated with other famous Chicagoans.
- After students research Carl Sandburg’s life and work, have them present their findings in first-person form. Classmates can ask questions, but the presenter must stay “in character.”
- What if buildings could talk and did have souls? If you could ask one of these tall buildings any five questions, what would they be? Write an interview with the building that includes your questions and the building’s answers. Then, exchange papers with another student and read each paper as it would be heard on a radio or television interview program.
- As a class, watch the short portion of the movie *Dead Poets Society* in which actor Robin Williams passionately explains the wonders of poetry to his writing class.
- Assign a stanza of “Skyscraper” to each student and have them read or dramatize it.
- Your students can bring a modern Chicago skyscraper to life with an original poem after a visit to the building. Before writing, have students carefully observe how people use the building. How does the building look at different times of the day? How do the building materials feel?
- The Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) offers The Student Loop Walking tour for students in grades 5–8. This 90-minute tour pairs ten significant buildings with ten universal themes in architecture to help students explore and understand the development of the city’s world-renowned architecture. The ten buildings, both historic and modern, teach themes such as: architectural design, building technology, urban history, historic preservation, architecture for the people, Chicago School, materials and ornamentation, structure, International Style, and art in architecture. Each group receives a Student Loop Prep Pack (including instructions for pre- and post-visit activities, and color images of the tour buildings) plus student booklets on the day of the tour. The activities incorporate Illinois Learning Standards for Social Sciences. Contact CAF’s education department at 312.922.3432 or education@architecture.org for more information.

www.architecture.org



Illinois Learning Standards and Benchmarks

1A Apply word analysis and vocabulary skills to comprehend selections.

1.A.3b Analyze the meaning of words and phrases in their context.

1B Apply reading strategies to improve understanding and fluency.

1.B.3c Continuously check and clarify for understanding (e.g., in addition to previous skills, draw comparisons to other readings.)

1.B.3d Read age-appropriate material with fluency and accuracy.

1C Comprehend a board range of reading materials.

1.C.3c Compare, contrast and evaluate ideas and information from various sources and genres.

2A Understand how literary elements and techniques are used to convey meaning.

2.A.3a Identify and analyze a variety of literary techniques within classical and contemporary works representing a variety of genres.

2B Read and interpret a variety of literary works.

2.B.3a Respond to literary material from personal, creative and critical points of view.

3A Use correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization and structure.

3.A.3 Write compositions that contain complete sentences and effective paragraphs using English conventions.

3B Compose well-organized and coherent writing for specific purposes and audiences.

3.B.3a Produce documents that convey a clear understanding and interpretation of ideas and information and display focus, organization, elaboration and coherence.

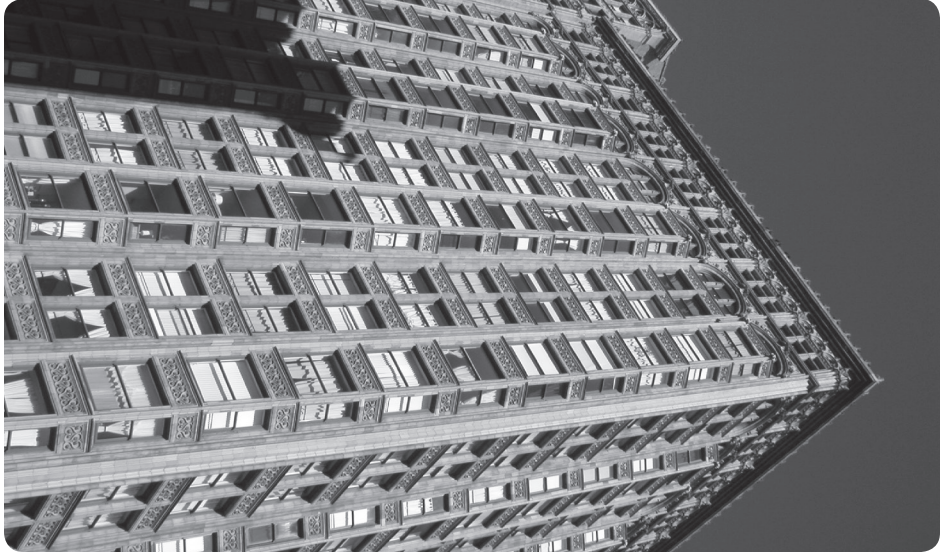
“Skyscraper” - Carl Sandburg, 1916

- 1 By day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and has a soul.
- 2 Prairie and valley, streets of the city, pour people into it and they mingle among its twenty floors and are poured out again back to the streets, prairies and valleys.
- 3 It is the men and women, boys and girls so poured in and out all day that give the building a soul of dreams and thoughts and memories.
- 4 (Dumped in the sea or fixed in a desert, who would care for the building or speak its name or ask a policeman the way to it?)
- 5 Elevators slide on their cables and tubes catch letters and parcels and iron pipes carry gas and water in and sewage out.
- 6 Wires climb with secrets, carry light and carry words, and tell terrors and profits and loves—curses of men grappling plans of business and questions of women in plots of love.
- 7 Hour by hour the caissons reach down to the rock of the earth and hold the building to a turning planet.
- 8 Hour by hour the girders play as ribs and reach out and hold together the stone walls and floors.
- 9 Hour by hour the hand of the mason and the stuff of the mortar clinch the pieces and parts to the shape an architect voted.
- 10 Hour by hour the sun and the rain, the air and the rust, and the press of time running into centuries, play on the building inside and out and use it.
- 11 Men who sunk the pilings and mixed the mortar are laid in graves where the wind whistles a wild song without words.
- 12 And so are men who strung the wires and fixed the pipes and tubes and those who saw it rise floor by floor.
- 13 Souls of them all are here, even the hod carrier begging at back doors hundreds of miles away and the brick-layer who went to state’s prison for shooting another man while drunk.
- 14 (One man fell from a girder and broke his neck at the end of a straight plunge—he is here—his soul has gone into the stones of the building.)
- 15 On the office doors from tier to tier—hundreds of names and each name standing for a face written across with a dead child, a passionate lover, a driving ambition for a million dollar business or a lobster’s ease of life.
- 16 Behind the signs on the doors they work and the walls tell nothing from room to room.
- 17 Ten-dollar-a-week stenographers take letters from corporation officers, lawyers, efficiency engineers, and tons of letters go bundled from the building to all ends of the earth.
- 18 Smiles and tears of each office girl go into the soul of the building just the same as the master-men who rule the building.
- 19 Hands of clocks turn to noon hours and each floor empties its men and women who go away and eat and come back to work.
- 20 Toward the end of the afternoon all work slackens and all jobs go slower as the people feel day closing on them.
- 21 One by one the floors are emptied... The uniformed elevator men are gone. Pails clang... Scrubbers work, talking in foreign tongues. Broom and water and mop clean from the floors human dust and spit, and machine grime of the day.
- 22 Spelled in electric fire on the roof are words telling miles of houses and people where to buy a thing for money. The sign speaks till midnight.
- 23 Darkness on the hallways. Voices echo. Silence holds... Watchmen walk slow from floor to floor and try the doors. Revolvers bulge from their hip pockets... Steel safes stand in corners. Money is stacked in them.
- 24 A young watchman leans at a window and sees the lights of barges butting their way across a harbor, nets of red and white lanterns in a railroad yard, and a span of glooms splashed with lines of white and blurs of crosses and clusters over the sleeping city.
- 25 By night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the stars and has a soul.

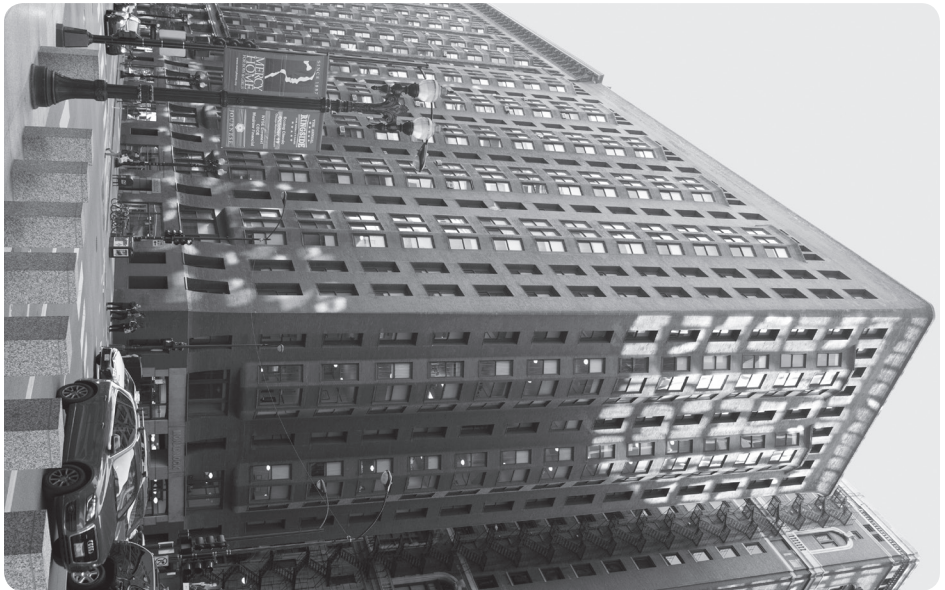
Poetry terms found in “Skyscraper”

1. **simile** - a comparison between two different concepts using the word “like” or “as”
2. **metaphor** - using words about one kind of object in place of another object to create an analogy
3. **allusion** - a reference to another time, place, work, or person
4. **hyperbole** - an extreme exaggeration
5. **personification** - giving human characteristics to a non-human object
6. **alliteration** - (also called initial rhyme) repeating consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words
7. **assonance** - repeating a vowel sound within a line
8. **consonance** - repeating a consonant sound within a line but not necessarily at the beginning of words
9. **internal rhyme** - a rhyme contained within a line rather than at the end of a line
10. **image** - a mental picture created after reading words
11. **repetition** - using the same words or phrases again
12. **rhetorical question** - a question asked that does not expect an answer
13. **onomatopoeia** - naming a thing or action by a voice imitation of the sound

Handout C



LEFT The Fisher Building, 1896, Chicago. (CAF: 2009)



MIDDLE The Monadnock Building, 1891, Chicago. (CAF: 2013)



RIGHT The Old Colony Building, 1894, Chicago. (CAF: 2013)

Handout D



LEFT The Marquette Building, 1894, Chicago. (CAF COLLECTION, CIRCA 1895)

MIDDLE The Reliance Building, 1896, Chicago. (CAF, 2013)

RIGHT Carl Sandburg. (© NPS PHOTOGRAPH, CARL SANDBURG HOME NHS. USED WITH PERMISSION.)

