

A Brief Life Sketch of Vachel Lindsay and Formative Influences

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Abstract

The poetic renaissance saw Nicholes Vachel Lindsay at the head of the group of poets better known as New poets or exponents of New Poetry of Spokesmen of the plain people Lindsay's description of himself as the Casey at the Bat of American poetry sums up his reputation during his lifetime (1879-1931) as well as today. Lindsay was his mother's son but born under a moon of magic that turned his horoscope the other way around. Somehow her aggressive missionary spirit, was glinted with romance in his ugly duckling of a son, making him a mediaeval crusader in a world forgetful of chivalry.

Keywords: Renaissance

Introduction

With amazing distinctness one can see in Lindsay's childhood the forces that moulded him as a man and the origins of his manhood's questions. Family inheritance, parental interests and training, his religion the social and political background of his time, even the very geography of his birth place all these contributed to the making of Vachel Lindsay, the man and the poet. There was a mixed inheritance in him: Scotch through his father; and through his mother, Scotch, English, Welsh, "Spanish, and according to Frazee tradition.

"There's just one drop of Indian blood in me."

There was the mixed cultural background, too, of the old south and the new middle west the former predominating in his father, the latter in his mother. "I am a Virginian, born in Springfield", the poet paradoxically but aptly described himself. Within him he felt the two forces never completely fused, "the inexplicable Mason and Dixon line deep-dyed and awful ran straight through our hearts". But the home in which young Lindsay grew up was a unified one in its strict adherence to the social and religious ideals in which it believed even though it did show some diversity of opinions. Dr. Lindsay on one hand was, a thorough gentleman completely devoted to his profession a prohibitionist unalterably opposed to liquor, tobacco dancing and card playing on the other hand Mrs. Lindsay was an ardent temperance worker, a Sunday School teacher and the founder and first president of the Union of Woman Missionary Societies of all the churches of Springfield. Both of them were members of the compbelli8te

church sometimes known as “Disciples of Christ”. A church founded on the simple fundamental elements of evangelical Christianity.

Along with religious ones there were other influences working over Vachel. Mrs. Lindsay had never given up her interest in art, instead she frequently gave lectures on European artists and writers. ‘She herself wrote and produced two pageant plays, in one of which, “Olympus”, the poet, then a boy of six or seven, played the part of Cupid.’¹

There was a great devotion to books and to learning Vachel Lindsay being a week child, physically, was taught, by his mother, at home instead of being sent early to school, he started learning first to read in Grimm’s ‘Fairy Tales’. There were other books that soon presented their treasures to him: ‘Tom Sawyer’ and ‘Huckleberry Finn’, ‘Heroes of Chivalry’, a volume of Poet’s Poems that came all the way from Kentucky, Rawlison’s History of Egypt, and a History of Japan in Monosyllables, Stanley’s ‘Darkest Africa’ its cover design a map of Africa with the Congo traced in Gold-Dante’s Divine Comedy illustrated by Dore, ‘Paradise Lost’ by Milton of whom Lindsay was later to say, “It was Milton made me a poet and blessed me and cursed me at nine years of age”.²

During those days Lindsay’s home was one of education and culture, but certainly not of the New England culture that coloured no much of American Literature. Lindsay himself wrote “In infancy I never heard of New England,” Instead of course, “I heard of Europe everyday”.³ the study of these books in his infancy leaves its mark and there appear in his poetry at the later stage certain remarked and developed characters like, the fantasy of Poet and the faerie of the Grimm brothers, the romance, colour light of far places the religious idiom of Dante and of Milton and the fundamental biblical training of his own religion. But all these were not enough and hence they alone cannot explain the traits of Lindsay; to these the potent influence of his birth place must be added. He himself states at one place that he is attached to his home land or birth place heart and soul. “The mystic Springfield in which I always live, wherever I may happen to be” was basic in Lindsay’s soul. “Every thing begins and ends there for me”, he says. This feeling entered into the early and formative years of his boyhood. It was the nucleus of his life’s philosophy and it was there and there alone that he found peace in his later years.

The very house in which Lindsay was born in Springfield was rich in tradition being owned by one of Abraham Lincoln’s sister in law so to say his wife’s sister. Besides the night before Lincoln left for Washington to be inaugurated or sworn in President of United States he had been given a reception in this particular house. It is also said that he had slept that last night in that very room in which Lindsay was born hence no wonder Lincoln came to be one of the boys’ earliest heroes. Lincoln’s own house with its collection of Lincoln memorabilia was near by and next to the house of uncle of Lindsay, here Vachel and a cousin constantly played, hence Vachel became interested particularly in the collection of Lincoln’s cartoons, gathered by the custodian, Mr. Oldroyd, who being delighted by the interest of the young visitors, explained to them the treasures in his care. Through this familiar contact, though secondary, Lincoln became a real and living presence to the boy Vachel.

History for him was not something short within the covers of school text books rather it was in the making about him as the Illinois Executive Mansion was situated near Lindsay home where Vachel could see politicians entering and departing hence Political and Economic repercussions struck him and left their mark on him. The result was that something of the national energy, the interests and vitality of

America of the 1880's the early decade after the Civil War, is suggested in the poem, "John L. Sullivan, The Strong Boy of Boston".

The year 1890 was important for Vachel as he formally joined the church of his parents this very year. He expressed his religious feelings, possibly more ardently than poetically, in verses which are quoted by Edgar Lee Masters in his biography of the poet.

"He that is weary come refreshed,
He that is thirsty come and drink,
'I' says the Saviour, I am he
I am that fountain clear and free,
Come sinner Come, Why longer delay?
Hear what the Master has to say;
I have been crucified for thee.
Why not come? Now come to me.

You may not live through the coming night,
Why do you waver this battle to fight?
The Master calls you with pitying voice.
You'll choose Heaven, or Hell, which is your Choice?
If you obey his voice and follow him today.
Then with a joyful heart he will say;
Come blessed servant, come to me,
Inherit the kingdom prepared for thee."⁴

It was the same year in which he began his formal schooling, at the Stuart Grammar School of Springfield. Here he won two prizes for essays, one on the subject of "Labour and Learning", and the other on "Advantages of Farms and City Life". In 1893 he entered Springfield High School where Miss Susan E. Wilcox, one of his teachers became his staunch and life long friend, she criticized the poetry which he at that time had started to write and encouraged him always in his work. However, even at that time his ambition was divided; in addition to his poetry he began to show a great interest in drawing, there was no definite purpose. Nor with his matriculation in college did there come any more clearly defined purpose. He, with the intention of studying medicine entered Hiram Christian College, a Cambellite college in Hiram Ohio. But he had no interest in medicine and so could not fulfill his father's ambition as his medical courses were failures though he did well in his other work.

"He enjoyed thoroughly the life at Hiram. He helped illustrate the college annuals. He was reading widely in Kipling Ruskin, Emerson, Lowell, Poe. He was indulging in introspection, in self-analysis, of which he kept a record in a series of notebooks each one inscribed "This book belongs to Christ".⁵ Here we find humanitarianism developing steadily and a desire growing stronger in him to devote himself to his fellowmen. He was finally able to write "At last I am attending my choice of a college. It is organized within myself the college of the love of the people.....Tolstoy after my 31st year shall find me his literal follower. As he has consecrated the novel, so may I consecrate art".⁶ He thus convinced himself that he should be allowed the "Privilege of self education" and of leaving college.

He did not go without some struggle while making this decision. His father's wishes were being disregarded and his mother though sympathized with Vachel's desire to become an artist saw her husband's point of view, and his fear that "You are throwing away a certainty of a very useful vocation for a very uncertain dream".⁷ Further more she felt, that any training he might get at Hiram, every contact with his fellow students there would help him, in the practice of the work he had chosen, "Christian art" which he saw as made up of literature, speaking, and illustration, with particular emphasis on the last. In spite of all these pleas and parental objections he left college in the spring of 1900 and never returned to it.

It was from this point that his greater struggle started specially for nine years i.e. from 1901 to 1905 in Chicago and from there until 1909 in New York, he struggled for his recognition in an art for which he had no talent. During this period, most of the time he was ill fed and penniless, hence he could not have survived without the aid of his father. The jobs he got he could not hold long-not even the work which he should have found most congenial such as giving drawing lessons and lecturing on painters at a YMCA in New York. "The restlessness which was to hound him so desperately later was already upon him. From 1901 on he was submitting poem to magazines, but none was accepted until 1904 when "The Critic" bought "The Queen of Bubbles".⁸ Thereafter the poet getting a little inspiration, on his arrival in New York tried peddling his poems on the streets offering them at two cents each yet poetry was simply a past time a diversion painting being his main occupation. In 1906 he sailed off to Florida spending all his money on steamer passage, with the planning to tramp back and "Trade his rimes for bread and preach the gospel of beauty".⁹ He in fact walked from Jacksonville to Richmond Kentucky. Here his mother and father came to his rescue and took him on a tour to Europe a trip which had really no meaning for him. In 1908 he went on a tramping tour of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, thinking himself to be a Johnny Appleseed sowing food for man's world instead of for men's bodies'¹⁰. Then it was the thirtieth year i.e. 1909 when he was to begin his work, he returned to Springfield to live. Back in Springfield he lectured at the YMCA and attempted to organize local literary groups. At this time he considered himself a failure. Always an enthusiastic reformer, he lectured during 1909-10 in central Illinois for the Antisaloon League. "Mr. Lindsay's development from a YMCA lecturer and a lecturer for the Antil Saloon League to a career in poetry was logical. It is this spirit which led him to tramp the countryside, now farming, now earning his meals by reciting or by giving away printed pamphlets of his rhymes, His ambitions would make him a poet of his people; but his tendencies place him of tender at the feet of the great mystics where the people can not follow".¹¹

While living in Springfield Lindsay started feeling restless. He came up with the idea of building an ideal Springfield of his dreams and was filled with diverse ideas and plots for his poetry about which Louis Untermeyer in his essay on Vachel Lindsay in "The New Era in American Poetry" writes "It is in the homely fantasy this natural extravagance that Lindsay excels. It runs through things as delicate as the moon poems and as burly as "Simon Legree" its fallacious moral and its rollicking high spirits. And it is this last quality which will keep Lindsay from accumulating too fat a churchliness. It is the whimsical buoyancy, the side spring, the gay appraisal of beauty as he finds it in people, places and art (as he hopes to find it even in politics) that will keep Lindsay the missionary from superseding Lindsay the minstrel. A careless singer of democracy he goes adventuring with one hand on his lyre and the other on his sword. And the tune that he whistles is "Gaily the Taubabour".¹²

Vachel Lindsay after spending an unprofitable period of approximately four years of his stay in Springfield during which he worked as a lecturer in YMCA and Anti Saloon League, decided to go on a tramping tour. In the summer of 1912 he tramped through the Middle-West and South-West distributing 'Rhymes to be Traded for Bread' and attempting to make converts to "The gospel of beauty," but when he got as far as New Mexico, he gave up.

His fortunes were changed magically by the success of his poetry "General William Booth Enters into Heaven". Which he sent to Harriet Monroe when she asked to see his work, was printed in "Poetry" in January 1913. This poem won him an audience, and "The Congo and other poems" (1914) enjoyed wide popularity acclaim. The author further more soon became much in demand as a lecturer and a chanter of his own verse. It was new poetry, and powerful poetry, 'The Congo' published in 1914 was a more complex poem, as compared to any of his poems even 'General William Booth Enters Into Heaven', but with the same characteristics of beat, colour and original material originally expressed, as in 'General Booth'. Lindsay seemed to strike out a fresh trail for American verse, Eunice Tiethens article on Lindsay in the Little review October 1914 typified critical enthusiasm. She described 'The Congo' as 'perilously near great poetry' and went on: "It is not too much to say that many of us are watching Vachel Lindsay with the undisguised hope in our hearts that he may yet prove to be the "Great American Poet".¹³

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