In 1919, when Harriet Monroe reviewed a new stage hit *Abraham Lincoln*, by British playwright John Drinkwater, it was already a Broadway smash and would run continuously for five years in nearly every major American city.¹ Although audiences were clearly thrilled, Monroe resented the play and found it completely unconvincing:

Mr. Drinkwater picks [Lincoln] up out of his own place, and sets him down in a manufactured milieu, where the people do not think his thoughts nor speak his tongue, and even the chairs don’t look natural.²

Her last observation is so withering it deserves a permanent place in theater history.³ What could have so upset Monroe about a portrayal of Lincoln? And how did she come to be so invested in the representation of Illinois’ most famous son? What was her relationship to Lincoln’s memory, and how did it influence her editorial entrepreneurship?

Monroe was instrumental in shaping the modern literary treatment of Abraham Lincoln (fig. 1). She revered his memory and advanced the careers of authors who engaged Lincoln as a subject in their work.

3. Monroe apparently did not read Drinkwater’s introduction to the published version of the play in which the author graciously confesses his limitations: “I am an Englishman, and not a citizen of the great country that gave Lincoln birth. I have, therefore, written as an Englishman, making no attempt to achieve a ‘local colour’ of which I have no experience, or to speak in an idiom to which I have not been bred. To have done otherwise . . . would have been to treat a great subject with levity.” *Abraham Lincoln: A Play* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), viii.
Monroe expressed this effort principally in the pages of her *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, which she founded in Chicago in 1912. There she introduced and promoted the work of the so-called prairie poets—Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters—whose writing frequently dealt with Lincoln. These authors, Monroe believed, embodied his origins and qualities. Her interest in Lincoln’s memory can also be seen in her own innovative verse, and in her essays and

4. As it refers to these three Chicago poets, the term “prairie poets” did not enter the lexicon until the mid-1930s. Monroe did not refer to them this way, nor did she necessarily regard them as a cohesive group.

reviews in *Poetry*. In the latter, Monroe became a passionate steward of Lincoln portrayals. Finally, echoing the support she gave to contemporary poets, she helped elevate Lincoln's own literary reputation. Altogether, Monroe’s engagement with Lincoln’s memory illustrates how it became both inspiration and subject for American literature in the Progressive Era.

“Lincoln! How he haunteth us!”

The Progressive Era, roughly the 1890s through the 1920s, coincided with the greatest period of commemoration in American history. Michael Kammen has called it “the age of memory,” a time when social, cultural, and industrial conditions enabled the realization of ambitious commemorative aspirations. Monroe’s Chicago was especially suited for such goals, with its many organizations, publishing firms, and rail lines. Additionally, a multitude of publications, artworks, and souvenirs dedicated to Lincoln were produced there. On some level, all this activity was related. Sociologist Barry Schwartz draws attention to the relationship between literary efforts like Monroe’s *Poetry* and the Progressive Era’s lionization of Lincoln. “In a very real sense,” he observes, “progressivism, the printed materials of the day, reader’s attitudes, and their preferred images of the past were [all] produced in the same shop.”

In the years leading up to the appearance of Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine, writing of all kinds on Lincoln was rapidly expanding. Of the six anthologies of poetry about Lincoln published before 1919, five appeared after 1905. The number of nonanthologized Lincoln poems spiked from six between 1900 and 1904 to twenty-eight between 1905 and 1909. The number of additions to the Lincoln bibliography in general—books and articles—jumped from 168 to 452. Clearly, Monroe’s publication of Lincoln-related verse not only shaped taste but reflected it as well. A penchant for a certain subject, however, does not guarantee high literary quality. Monroe’s editorial judgment concerning the direction of contemporary literature would be critical in this enterprise.

Lincoln had been dead for only two decades when Monroe began her career as a writer in the 1880s, and many who had known and

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8. Ibid., 111–12.
worked with him were still alive. In Monroe’s Chicago alone, they included the publisher Joseph Medill (d. 1899), Judge Ebenezer Peck (d. 1881), and fellow lawyers Leonard Swett (d. 1889) and Isaac Arnold (d. 1884). And an entire generation of northern Civil War veterans and their families possessed living memories of his administration. It was still very much the era of Lincoln. Indeed, Monroe and the prairie poets were, as William W. Betts observed, “reared in . . . an atmosphere electric with Lincoln lore.”

Lindsay spoke for Monroe, for poetry, and for his generation when he exclaimed in verse, “Yea, Lincoln! How he haunteth us!”

Monroe came into firsthand contact with several of Lincoln’s former intimates in Washington, D.C., where in the 1870s she attended a Catholic girls’ boarding school. While in the capital, she met famous Civil War generals, including Ulysses S. Grant (who she said gave her a “thrill . . . though our encounter was brief and casual”), William Tecumseh Sherman (“[he] was in a merry mood when I met him”), and Philip Sheridan. The last, she said, “was scarcely taller than I, [and] was often my solemn dance partner.” During trips to New York in the 1880s, Monroe was also befriended by Edmund C. Stedman. This poet, lawyer, critic, and anthologist had been an assistant to attorney general Edward Bates during Lincoln’s administration, and had penned several well-known poems about the sixteenth president. Given their mutual interest in Lincoln, it is difficult to imagine them not broaching the subject during Monroe’s regular Sunday evening visits to Stedman’s salons.

10. From the poem, “The Heroes of Time,” in “Banquet given on the one hundred and first anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln: by the Lincoln Centennial Association, February the twelfth, nineteen hundred and ten, the St. Nicholas Hotel, Springfield” (Springfield, 1910).
13. As Lincoln’s generals were proving inadequate in the first years of the war, Stedman penned “Wanted—a Man” (1862). Lincoln took it so much to heart that he read it to his cabinet. Robert J. Scholnick, *Edmund Clarence Stedman* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 28–29. Monroe printed two stanzas of it in *Poetry* in her tribute “Stedman’s Centenary,” 43 (February 1934), 273, in which she also describes Stedman’s salons.
Monroe’s original and most profound connection to Lincoln, however, occurred in her own childhood home. Her father, Henry Stanton Monroe, a book-loving lawyer like Lincoln, had been on hand just as Stephen A. Douglas was about to enter the now famous series of debates. As Harriet herself recounted the story, Douglas’s cronies scornfully predicted an easy victory: “Suddenly the great man [Douglas] stopped the contemptuous laughter with a slow and serious word: ‘You don’t know Abraham Lincoln. I do. And I tell you I’ve got the hardest job on my hands that I ever undertook.’”\(^{15}\) For young Harriet, the moral of the story was not to underestimate talented native voices. It would shape her commitment to local expression and lead her to consider the work of new, underappreciated authors like the future prairie poets.

A poem titled “The Master” (1917), by Edward Arlington Robinson, a poet Monroe supported, is in effect a verse retelling of Monroe’s father’s anecdote about Lincoln and Douglas. It concerns the shift in attitude toward Lincoln, who was at first “reviled and then revered.” In the poem, sneering condescension gives way to contrite reverence. Monroe thought it a masterpiece and later anthologized it.\(^{16}\) For great poetry to be created, she believed, opportunities (as her Poetry afforded) had to be provided to promising poets. Monroe worried that “a Milton might be living in Chicago today and be unable to find an outlet for his verse.”\(^{17}\) She may as well have said “a Lincoln,” whose own meteoric ascent justified Monroe’s search for talented novice authors for Poetry magazine. And she regarded many of the poets she published therein, including the prairie poets, in just these terms.

Monroe was not the only dynamic Chicago woman influenced by Lincoln. The social activist Jane Addams also grew up with a father who had known Lincoln and in whose house he was revered. “I always tend to associate Lincoln with the tenderest thoughts of my father,” she reflected in her memoir, Twenty Years at Hull House.\(^{18}\) Addams dedicated an entire chapter to the influence of Lincoln, a set of galvanizing memories, reveries, and impressions about her hero. Like Monroe,

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15. Monroe, A Poet’s Life, 5–6. This story is told by others elsewhere in the Lincoln literature but not as succinctly and credibly as the Monroe family’s version.


18. Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 32. John H. Addams was a long-term Illinois senator beginning in the 1850s and was, with his good friend Lincoln, a founder of the Republican Party.
Addams was personally “constructing a Lincoln . . . made up of scraps of history, memories of her father, and her own needs.” Monroe and Addams became friends; Monroe stayed at Addams’s Hull House for three months and came to regard her as “a great woman.” In addition, Monroe sent Addams copies of her work and of Poetry, and donated money and furniture to Hull House. Lincoln’s moral stature was perhaps even more powerful for Addams than it was for Monroe, if such a thing were possible. At her Hull House, where Lincoln’s birthday was the second most important holiday of the year, Addams gave neighborhood boys copies of Appreciation of Abraham Lincoln, by German immigrant Carl Schurz. “I held up Lincoln for their admiration as the greatest American,” she claimed.

Monroe was also acquainted with the one writer who more than any other defined Lincoln as a Progressive Era icon, the muckraking journalist and historian Ida Tarbell. Tarbell worked from a deep fascination with the self-made hero. In 1895 the first of her twenty-part series on Lincoln’s life appeared in McClure’s Magazine. These in turn later became the basis for her 1900 two-volume biography. Tarbell’s writing on Lincoln was wildly popular—responsible for skyrocketing sales and subscriptions at McClure’s—and based on extensive research. In it she emphasized Lincoln’s common rather than degraded origins, his idealism, and his successful navigation through the real world. Where other biographers had downplayed or excoriated his frontier origins, Tarbell celebrated them as a contributing factor in his greatness.

19. Hurt, Writing Illinois, 68.
21. Addams to Monroe, letters of May 23, 1908; December 31, 1909; and June 27, 1905, respectively. Harriet Monroe Papers, Special Collections, University of Chicago, box 1, folder 1.
23. Ibid.
Lincoln’s rural beginnings, as others had done, was to belittle something elemental in the nation itself.” Over time she produced several more books and articles about Lincoln and was the most conspicuous Lincoln historian before Carl Sandburg. Monroe would have admired Tarbell not only for being a journalist like herself but also for having been, like Lincoln, raised in a log cabin. And she would have lauded Tarbell’s insistence that Lincoln’s greatness was determined not by Washington, D.C., but by his regional, midwestern roots. Finally, Monroe doubtless valued the fact that this historian, whose relentless field research into Lincoln’s biography made her the “pioneer scientific investigator” of Lincoln’s life, was also a woman.

Besides having family and professional connections to Lincoln, Monroe frequently attended memorials and events in his honor. In the early twentieth century, the nation expressed its devotion to Lincoln’s memory in spectacular ways. The 1909 centennial of his birth was a grandly public national demonstration of affirmation. Chicago, with its usual competitive, think-big mentality, dedicated itself entirely to its celebration of Lincoln. Nowhere else, it seemed, did so many people so ecstatically revere his memory. The city organized a committee of a hundred citizens to sponsor a weeklong celebration “to outdo the efforts of any [other] city in the United States as an example of patriotism.” Monroe’s own future brother-in-law (he later married her sister Lucy), the distinguished lawyer and statesman William J. Calhoun, was the chairman of this group.

27. Ferguson, *Land of Lincoln*, 207.
28. This opinion of Tarbell’s stature was held by Benjamin P. Thomas. Thomas, *Portrait for Posterity*, 201.
30. For a vivid description of the various ways the country celebrated the centennial of Lincoln’s birth see Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 175–94.
32. Nathan William MacChesney, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: The Tribute of a Century, 1809–1909* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1910). Calhoun, Monroe might have known, had many parallels to Lincoln. He had been a farm boy, had practiced law in Illinois, had served as a one-term (Republican) congressman, was for a time a corporate railroad lawyer, and eventually served the federal government (as special envoy to China, 1909–13). “Obituary, William J. Calhoun,” *Chicago Legal News: A Journal of Legal Intelligence* 49, no. 8 (September 21, 1916), 61.
Figure 2. The Carson, Pirie, Scott department store in Chicago decorated for Lincoln’s centennial, February 1909. *Chicago Daily News*, December 31, 1908.

February 12, 1909, the centenary of Lincoln’s birth, was a day of grand events and ceremonies in Chicago. At one of them, a speaker, Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones, thundered, “He is not dead.

. . . Chicago is today under the spell of a living force, of an immortal Lincoln” (fig. 3). Calling attention to the city’s reverent attitude, the Chicago Daily Tribune observed, “The nation hasn’t felt this deeply since Lincoln’s death.” A subsequent issue trumpeted, “Spell of Lincoln over Whole City.”

“Wilding Lady”: Monroe’s Lincoln poetry

By virtue of her background, then, and the women she admired, Monroe had a deep personal connection to Lincoln. As a creative writer, too, she frequently turned to her hero for inspiration. She composed important poems referencing Lincoln; one of them launched her professional career. Monroe famously approached the organizers of Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition, urging them to commission a dedicatory poem for the event. They did, and she was asked to write it. At the fair’s dedication in October 1892, her “Columbian Ode,” which had been set to music, was performed by a chorus of five thousand voices. Decades later it was described as “the most significant literary event of the Fair.” A passage that explicitly references Lincoln is the high point:

And, lo! leading a blessed host comes one
Who held a warring nation in his heart;
Who knew love’s agony, but had no part
In love’s delight; whose mighty task was done
Through blood and tears that we might walk in joy,
And this day’s rapture own no sad alloy.

35. Ibid., February 10, 1909, 1.
36. Monroe’s own poetry has not yet received adequate critical attention. See Daniel J. Cahill, Harriet Monroe, particularly the chapter “Harriet Monroe as Poet.”
37. In fact, only two sections—not apparently the one that referenced Lincoln—were actually performed at the fair. The poem was, however, printed in its entirety in the published pamphlet, in the histories of the fair, and in later anthologies. The poem is also called “The Commemoration Ode,” the title under which it was first published by Rand, McNally in 1892. A year later, it was published by W. I. Way as The Columbian Ode.
Here Monroe treats Lincoln as a Romantic hero (one who “held a warring nation in his heart”). She also articulates a very early iteration—most likely the very first in verse—of the Lincoln-Rutledge romance (he “knew love’s agony”).  Monroe becomes Romeo to Rutledge’s doomed Juliet, Monroe daringly showing sympathy for their unconsummated love. Scandalously introduced by William H. Herndon in an 1866 lecture he delivered in Springfield, the Lincoln-Rutledge romance became a popular legend during the Progressive Era. One of Monroe’s own poets, Edgar Lee Masters, would take up the theme of Anne Rutledge in his well-known Spoon River Anthology, the best-known treatment of her in literature.

I am Anne Rutledge who sleep beneath these weeds,
Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union,
But through separation.

His own reference to the couple’s unconsummated love is more modern but derives, in spirit at least, from Monroe’s first formulation in the “Columbian Ode.”

In 1909, as Chicago and the country were celebrating the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, Monroe was thinking of the woman who had borne him. Her poem “Nancy” appeared in Century Magazine in an issue dedicated to Lincoln. It is the first widely read verse on Lincoln’s mother. It had been Monroe’s friend and colleague Ida


42. The first poem about Hanks of any kind was by William Q. Corbin, a Civil War veteran. Visiting Hanks’s gravesite, he was dismayed to see no marker. His poem, published in a local Indiana paper, generated enough interest to have one erected. http://www.nps.gov/libo/historyculture/gravesite.htm. Jacob Hoke Beidler’s 1903 self-published poem, “Nancy Hanks,” mostly praises Hanks’s birthplace in Berks County, Pennsylvania, as key to her special quality as Lincoln’s mother. In Poems (Lincoln, Ill.: Beidler & Co., 1903), 98–99.
Tarbell who renewed interest in Nancy Hanks, having boldly challenged Herndon’s accusations about her illegitimacy and promiscuity. Monroe’s Hanks is a product of nature, tragic for not being able to experience her son’s future greatness; she died when Abraham was just nine years old. Monroe addresses her in sparkling Imagist lines:

Prairie child,
   Brief as dew,
What winds of wonder
   Nourished you?

... Wilding lady,
   Still and true,
Who gave us Lincoln
   And never knew.

The last two lines repeat the theme of early death that Monroe had voiced in references to the Lincoln-Rutledge romance in her “Columbian Ode.” Rosemary Carr Benét and Stephen Vincent Benét took up this theme fifteen years later in their own well-known poem “Nancy Hanks.” Its familiar first stanza ponders, “If Nancy Hanks / Came back as a ghost, / Seeking news / Of what she loved most, / She’d ask first / ‘Where’s my son? / What’s happened to Abe? / What’s he done?’”43 It appears that the Benéts took as their starting point the last two haunting lines of Monroe’s poem. In any case, Monroe continued to believe Lincoln’s mother a worthy subject for American verse. When she reviewed a book by Katherine Garrison Chapin, she singled out the poem “Nancy Hanks” (1928) for special praise.44 And her example may have inspired her authors as well. Two of the prairie poets would later treat Nancy Hanks in verse. Carl Sandburg’s brief “Fire-Logs,” of 1918, portrays a dreamy, prescient frontier mother. Vachel Lindsay’s “Nancy Hanks, Mother of Abraham Lincoln” (1925) speaks of the girlish beauty of the mothers of the great, including Hanks, “the girl who slept in dust and sorrow, . . . in a lost log cabin.”45 For Monroe

and the Poetry circle, women were certainly not to be left out of considerations of Lincoln’s memory.

Monroe and the prairie poets

A common subject of the poets Monroe printed in Poetry was Abraham Lincoln, who, though he towered historically over Illinois and midwestern culture, had yet to find a place in early twentieth-century literature. In providing space for their verse in her publications and in supporting them in their early careers, Monroe created the conditions for their now-canonical treatments of the sixteenth president. It is not possible here to outline each of the prairie poets’ career-long engagement with the subject of Lincoln. Instead, we shall examine Monroe’s involvement in the publication, promotion, and criticism of their Lincoln-related works.

For Monroe and her circle, treating Lincoln did not necessarily produce irredeemably folksy literature. Nor was it an impediment to avant-garde experimentation. Ezra Pound’s poem “To Whistler, American” appeared in the very first issue of Poetry (October 1912). In it the poet memorably paired the slick, expatriate painter J. A. M. Whistler with Lincoln. After expressing admiration for Whistler, Pound writes, in the poem’s last two rather anti-American lines, “You and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts / Show us there’s chance at least of winning through.” This startling juxtaposition accurately expresses the creative poles and editorial aspirations of Poetry, in which Monroe published local American poets as well as European avant-gardists. Pairing Whistler with Lincoln was meant to establish the painter’s American-ness beyond question. More important, placing this poem in the first number proclaimed that Lincoln would be a suitable subject for even the most innovative verse.

For Monroe, Lincoln’s memory was changing how one was supposed to be an American poet, especially a midwestern poet. Accordingly, she came to regard each of the prairie poets as a unique reflection of Lincoln himself. Lindsay represented the young, love-lost, tragic Lincoln. Sandburg was the magnanimous, public Lincoln, “the common man among the common people,” she said. Masters embodied

46. See chapter 2 in Hurt, Writing Illinois, 47–96. Hurt’s remains the most comprehensive treatment to date.
47. To read the poem in its entirety, see http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/1788. Also see Rebecca Beasley, “Ezra Pound’s Whistler,” American Literature 74, no. 3 (2002), 485–516.
the side of Lincoln that was skeptical, pragmatic, and profoundly secular. Monroe compared one with another according to their varying relation to the Midwest.

Vachel Lindsay loves the Middle West like a big brother, pleads with it, sings of and to it, glorifies it with troubadour poems. . . . And Carl Sandburg loves Chicago and its sea-hearted lake, knows it intimately, as a cosmopolis. But perhaps none of these has got this particular region into his blood and bones so deeply as Mr. Masters, who was “raised” in one of its typical villages and who lives in its typical great city.49

Although she was enamored of these poets, her relationship to the Lincoln-related writing of each was nuanced and varied.

**Edgar Lee Masters**

The poetry and prose of this Chicago lawyer included both Lincoln and Lincoln-era figures. His meteoric rise to fame after the publication of his *Spoon River Anthology* is well known. Masters’s volume of imaginary epitaphs of the small-town dead went through countless printings—eleven in its first year alone—and became the best-selling book of poetry in the history of American literature up to that time. Several of those epitaphs referred to friends, family, and associates of Lincoln, including Anne Rutledge, William H. Herndon, Hannah Armstrong, and Fiddler Jones, and Monroe was especially sensitive to them. While Masters was publishing the separate epitaphs of his future anthology in the *St. Louis Mirror* under the pseudonym “Webster Ford,” three of them were printed in *Poetry*.50 These—“Ollie M’Gee,” “Doc Hill,” and “The Hill”—would together become the introduction for Masters’s subsequent book. The last stanza of “The Hill” deals with “Old Fiddler Jones,” someone Lincoln actually knew.

Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,
Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary’s Grove,
Of what Abe Lincoln said
One time at Springfield.

What Lincoln said “one time” recalls the period when he was a familiar presence in his region and in popular memory.

Monroe had hoped to be the first publisher of $\textit{Spoon River Anthology}$; Macmillan, however, was quick to publish it as a book.\footnote{Herbert K. Russell, \textit{Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 75.} Undaunted, Monroe insisted on being involved somehow, and proofread the galleys.\footnote{Ibid., 148.} She remained deeply impressed by the book. In \textit{Poetry}, Monroe described the Anne Rutledge epitaph as “a splendid burning candle-flame of beauty.”\footnote{Harriet Monroe, “Edgar Lee Masters,” \textit{Poetry} 24 (July 1924), 208.} She reprinted it a few years later, in \textit{Poets and Their Art}, calling attention to “its flashing side-light on Lincoln.”\footnote{Monroe, \textit{Poets and Their Art}, 53.} It included the famous lines “spoken” by Rutledge:

\begin{quote}
Out of me unworthy and unknown  
The vibrations of deathless music!
“With malice toward none, with charity for all.”
Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,
\ldots
Bloom forever, O Republic,
From the dust of my bosom!
\end{quote}

The poem’s insistence that it was Rutledge who accounted for Lincoln’s best qualities may have stirred Monroe’s quietly feminist outlook.\footnote{For a discussion of Monroe’s feminism, particularly as it was expressed in a community of Progressive Chicago women, see Sidney H. Bremer, “Willa Cather’s Lost Chicago Sisters,” in Susan Squier, ed., \textit{Women Writers in the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 224–26.}

Other references to Lincoln sometimes appeared in Masters’s published verse, as in “Silence.”\footnote{\textit{Poetry} 5 (February 1915), 177.} Amidst Masters’s list of “silences”—those that occur in nature, from the dead, from defeat, in the relationships between husbands and wives, and the like—“There is the silence of Lincoln / Thinking of the poverty of his youth.” Masters is referring here to Lincoln’s well-known reticence in speaking of his background. When asked to provide details for an 1860 campaign biography, Lincoln declined to recount his childhood. Instead, the poetry-minded Lincoln tersely described this period of his life as “The short and simple annals of the poor,” quoting Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard.”\footnote{Thomas A. Horrocks, \textit{Lincoln’s Campaign Biographies} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), 54.}
In the course of his career, Masters struggled with Lincoln’s memory, vacillating sharply between praise and demonization. In 1931 he penned a notorious biography, *Lincoln, the Man*, which dwelt on character deficits and wrong-headed political convictions.\(^5\) It was reviled by Lincoln’s admirers and threatened Masters’s career and reputation.\(^5\) Accordingly, Monroe’s essay on Masters in her *Poets and Their Art*, which appeared the next year, begins with the candid qualification “Edgar Lee Masters, whatever else one may say of him.” She does not directly refer to the book by its title, perhaps out of a desire to avoid further embarrassment for him. She insisted that over time, history would focus more on Masters’s overall achievement: “The world will sift out and throw away . . . much of his prose [some of which]—not all—will go into the discard.”\(^6\) Monroe concludes with an apology for Masters: “And to a poet who believes, who feels to the utmost, much may be forgiven.”\(^6\) If she could forgive him for his mistreatment of Lincoln, she implies, anyone could.

**Vachel Lindsay**

Monroe published some two dozen of Carl Sandburg’s poems in the pages of *Poetry* and often reviewed his work herself. She did the same for Masters, who saw his verse printed in *Poetry* even more frequently. But more so than either of them, Vachel Lindsay owed much of his public career to Monroe and *Poetry*. She was clearly more enamored of his identity as a poet than she was of the others. He had after all come from Lincoln’s own hometown—indeed had been born in a house and in a room where Lincoln was known to have sat.\(^6\) Like Lincoln, Lindsay was an inveterate traveler and an underdog buffeted


\(^{59}\) In 1931 a bill was introduced in Congress to ban the book from the mails, the only such censure of a biography in American history. Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters*, 278.

\(^{60}\) Monroe, *Poets and Their Art*, 46.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{62}\) Conversation with docent Jennifer Battle, the Lindsay Home, Springfield, Illinois, September 27, 1913. Lindsay’s best-known poem of all, “Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight” (1914), cemented his reputation to Springfield and palpably situated Lincoln’s ghostly memory in the Illinois capital.
by the world. Perhaps his vagabonding and energetic performances were linked in Monroe’s mind to Lincoln’s own incessant travel on Illinois’ Eighth Judicial Circuit. Like Lincoln, too, Lindsay’s life was tragically short. And like the rail-splitter president, he expressed outsized ambition with impetuous uncouthness.

This is how Monroe introduced Lindsay to readers of Poetry: “And now, as the spring grows warm, comes from Lincoln’s own country a poet of Lincoln’s own breed, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. A big breezy cheerful troubadour is this young man.”63 The title of Monroe’s piece was “Incarnations,” which is meant to describe Lindsay as a new discovery (she calls him “the real thing”). But in this context it also implies that he is a re-incarnation of Lincoln.64 Monroe was not the only editor who likened Lindsay to Lincoln. Her African American counterpart, the author and critic William Stanley Braithwaite, wrote an article for a Boston newspaper titled “Vachel Lindsay, a Lincoln Turned Poet,” which likewise dwelt on the poet’s colorful life and poetry.65

**Carl Sandburg**

Ironically, the prairie poet most identified with Lincoln had the fewest Lincoln poems in Poetry.66 Yet Monroe was intensely aware of Sandburg’s writing on Lincoln and carefully reviewed it. *Cornhuskers* (1918) was Sandburg’s second book of verse, after his debut *Chicago Poems* (1916), and established his new interest in Americana and in Lincoln; it won a Pulitzer Prize the following year. Two of its poems referenced Lincoln—“Knucks” and “Cool Tombs”—but they were not exactly brimming with hero worship. The former, a poem about the unlikely appearance of murderous brass knuckles in a store in Lincoln’s Springfield juxtaposes senseless violence with Lincoln’s quasi-divine memory. The implied strife of “Knucks” may be a reference to the Springfield race riots of 1908, in which dozens of black people were killed and many

64. Even more literally, in his biography of Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters demonstrated how Lindsay was actually related to Abraham Lincoln. Vachel Lindsay, A Poet in America (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 4–5.
66. Monroe published nine of Sandburg’s Chicago-themed poems in Poetry 3 (March 1914); his career-launching *Chicago Poems* was published as a book two years later.
homes and businesses destroyed. When Monroe reviewed it in Poetry, she chose to see it as an example of Sandburg’s “rich and whimsical humor, a humor rising with a grim smile out of dark fundamental incongruities.” But Sandburg’s other poem, “Cool Tombs,” is almost as frightful. Monroe may have winced at the fatalism of its first few words: “When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs.” In print, however, she optimistically claimed that the poem was “no prophecy of death, but of immortality.” Afterward, she enthused that “if nothing else of [Sandburg’s] should survive, [“Cool Tombs”] is too beautiful to perish when the tides of time sweep away our pyramids and towers.” Accordingly, Monroe included it in her anthologies, Poets and Their Art and the late, popularizing A Book of Poems for Every Mood (1933).

Sandburg’s Lincoln-themed poems were of course a prelude to his monumental six-volume biography of Lincoln. Unique in the writing about Lincoln, and one of the most impressive achievements of literature in the twentieth century, The Prairie Years (1926) was followed by The War Years (1939), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. Sandburg’s brand of history was lyrical, deeply subjective, and as historians like to recount, often uninhibited by the historical record. As such it has been taken to task by historians and critics. Even Monroe, nothing if not Sandburg’s admirer, described it as more of a “‘dramatic poem’ in essence.”

Just as significant as any writing Sandburg produced about Lincoln was his likeness to his subject. “The author is quietly akin [to Lincoln],” Monroe asserted in Poetry, because

he rose from the same soil, and met in his youth some of the same problems. One feels that he knows his man, that he has a fist big

67. Sandburg would be a close observer of the Chicago race riots during the infamous Red Summer. His articles were published in book form as The Chicago Race Riots: July, 1919 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1919). A factor that exacerbated the riots, Sandburg claimed, was “the blind lawless government failing to function through policemen ignorant of Lincoln, the Civil War, [and] the Emancipation Proclamation” (2).

68. Poetry 24 (September 1924), 326.

69. Ibid.

70. Monroe, Poets and Their Art, 38.

71. Harriet Monroe and Morton Dauwel Zabel, A Book of Poems for Every Mood (Racine, Wis.: Whitman, 1933), 80–81.

72. Edmund Wilson famously quipped that Sandburg’s treatment was “the cruelest thing that has happened to Lincoln since he was shot by Booth.” Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York: Norton, 1994), 115.

enough to shake Lincoln’s hand, a figure tall enough to look him in the eye, and a style strong enough to give us the whole story, without exaggeration or eloquence.\textsuperscript{74}

The tendency to equate Sandburg with Lincoln—Monroe was the first to do so in print—occurred often in succeeding years, and Sandburg never resisted the comparison (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{Lincoln “unachieved”}

Although Monroe supported her prairie poets and even identified them with her hero, she was a fierce guardian of authors’ representations of Lincoln. Absolutely no one was allowed to take liberties in treatment of him. Monroe was skeptical even of the possibility of adequately representing the man. For instance, she was deeply unsatisfied with Masters’s \textit{Jack Kelso: A Dramatic Poem} (1920). The title of her review, “Unachieved: Review of \textit{Jack Kelso},” foreshadows her verdict. “The early episodes, which bring Lincoln and Douglas together in their youth,” she opines, “are neither adequate as symbol

\textsuperscript{74} Harriet Monroe, “Poets as Proser,” \textit{Poetry} 28 (September 1926), 330.

nor convincing as factual invention.” 76 Similarly, in Stephen Vincent Benét’s *John Brown’s Body* (1928), an epic, book-length poem for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, Monroe found something lacking in the portrayal of Lincoln. Although she believed the author had accurately rendered Jefferson Davis and Generals Grant and Lee, Lincoln’s portrait was “less authoritative—for who can put into print or paint that strange and somber figure, piteous, humorous and confoundingly wise!” 77 Sandburg would have agreed. He had tried mightily to capture Lincoln’s complexity in his own vast biography of Lincoln. But even he acknowledged, in his poem “The Long Shadow of Lincoln: A Litany” (1944), the challenge of limning great figures: “what they did being past words, / beyond all smooth and easy telling.” And among Sandburg’s heroes, Abraham Lincoln was even more elusive, perhaps because the man had been obscured by his memory. In *The People, Yes* (1936), Sandburg memorably described him as “a mystery in smoke and flags.” 78

As we saw in the case of John Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln*, Monroe voiced her objections to what she saw as an inaccurate representation of her hero and his era. Though she had published Drinkwater’s poems in *Poetry* in December 1915, September 1916, and November 1917, 79 she had a different estimation of his drama. Drinkwater’s play might be satisfactory for Britons, she claimed, but not for Americans, who have a special kinship with Lincoln.

In England, where little is known of Lincoln, [the play] may have served quite effectively to introduce him. But . . . the precedent of English praise, English success, should not impose it on the American people, in whose heart that rich, humorous, melancholy, profoundly impassioned tragic figure is a most special spiritual inheritance. 80


78. In Sandburg’s aforementioned “Knucks” (1918) appear the repeated lines “Wrapped in battle flags, / Wrapped in the smoke of memories,” referring to Lincoln’s body when it returned to Springfield. It may have inspired his sentiments about the difficulty of adequately portraying Lincoln.

79. “Sunrise on Rydal Water” (vol. 7, no. 3, p. 122), “Invocation” (vol. 8, no. 6, p. 297), and “Reciprocity,” (vol. 9, no. 2, p. 68). None make reference to Lincoln.

To truly understand Lincoln, Monroe believed, one had to be intimate with the place of his origin:

Artistically he belongs deep in his own country, and probably only a fellow-countryman poet, certainly only a vividly localizing imagination, can place him where he belongs.81

How could a play, she wondered, written by someone from distant England and based on the biography of one “Lord Charnwood,” rather than, say, a Tarbell, or a Nicolay or Hay, accurately portray either Lincoln’s time or place?82 To do so would take an author like her prairie poets, with their deep roots in Lincoln’s own Illinois. Her criticism of Drinkwater’s play surely has nationalistic, even chauvinistic, overtones. In any case, Monroe’s phrase “vividly localizing imagination” is unique in American letters. It strikingly describes the sense of place that was both an influence and a subject in the writing of Masters, Lindsay, and Sandburg.

Lincoln: “our greatest poet”

By 1912 Lincoln already belonged to a variety of canons—greatest lawyer, statesman, president, and the like (fig. 5)—but it was Monroe and her generation that situated him in the canon of great authors.83 During her lifetime Lincoln’s words—in speeches, documents, letters, and poems—were taking on more authority and generating more interest as literature. In 1890 Lincoln’s former secretaries, John Hay and John G. Nicolay, published a ten-volume biography of Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln: A History, based on thousands of documents. Their subsequent twelve-volume Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln appeared in 1905, and gave readers unprecedented access to Lincoln’s speeches, writings, letters, and papers. Nicolay had even published Lincoln’s own virtually unknown poems in an 1894 issue of the Lincoln-loving Century Magazine.84 “Perhaps no point in the career

81. Ibid., 160–61.
82. Lord Charnwood was Godfrey Rathbone Benson, 1st Baron Charnwood, a philanthropist, author, politician, and academic. Besides his highly regarded biography of Lincoln (1916), he authored another on Theodore Roosevelt (1923).
83. As is well known, Lincoln himself revered Shakespeare, often reciting lines in conversation and to illustrate points. See Robert C. Bray, Reading with Lincoln (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), especially chapter 5, “Nothing Equals Macbeth.”
of Abraham Lincoln has excited more surprise or comment,” Nicollay enthused, “than his remarkable power of literary expression.” Engaging Lincoln’s words now allowed readers to comprehend the man and his moment more deeply than popular legend had. A rapidly expanding body of writing at the turn of the century regarding Lincoln’s oral and written language consolidated his identity as an inspired author. His speeches were now considered literature and

85. Ibid., 823.
began appearing in popular poetry collections alongside canonical authors like Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, and Longfellow.86

Indeed, in this period, Lincoln came to be regarded as America’s Shakespeare, which, though it may seem a bit absurd now, was at the time no idle comparison. “Whatever may be the antecedents of the great [Gettysburg] Address in Lincoln’s mind,” one of Monroe’s contemporaries wrote, “he gave the ideas a creation as literature as truly as Shakespeare created literature out of the originals of the ‘Merchant of Venice’ and ‘Hamlet.’”87 Others linked Lincoln with the Bard more creatively. An epilogue in John Drinkwater’s *Lincoln: The World Emancipator* is a fantastical scene that imagines Shakespeare and Lincoln conversing with one another.88 The two men speak about politics, letters, and reputation. Lincoln shyly confesses that he is “more than half a poet at heart.”89

For Monroe, the language Lincoln crafted comprised a literature even more enduring than his dramatic life.

The vitality of his influence in our hearts today and forever consists less in the things he did as leader and hero, less even in his sacrificial death, than in the perfect beauty, ascending often to grandeur, of the Gettysburg speech, the inaugural addresses, the [Bixby] letter to the mother who had lost five sons in battle, and other immortal words.90

This claim is astonishing but perhaps in line with Monroe’s admiration for Lincoln as an author, and the increasing literacy of the Progressive Era.91 Many others felt the same way, and in the next few years, his

86. An example is R. J. Cook, *One Hundred and One Famous Poems* (Chicago: R. J. Cook, 1920), which went through several editions and included Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” and his “Letter to Mrs. Bixby.”

87. Luther Emerson Robinson, *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Letters* (Chicago, 1918), 278. Elsewhere, the author refers to the Gettysburg Address as “our most perfect hymn in prose” and “Miltonic in conception and rhythm” (169).


89. Ibid, 115. When Lincoln offers to recite one of his own homespun poems, Shakespeare politely demurs, saying, “I have rather severe standards” (117).


words became even better known. In 1917 the Literary Digest reported that Lincoln had become “America’s most quoted man.”

Esteem for Lincoln the author grew steadily throughout the Progressive Era. In 1932 Monroe asserted unequivocally that “Lincoln, of course, was our greatest literary genius, in the truest and most profound sense of the word our greatest poet.”

He was the original prairie poet.

“A few sentences too beautiful to be forgotten”

Monroe was inspired by the author Lincoln while composing her “Columbian Ode.” She became convinced that “no speaker had made the day his own forever, as Lincoln did at Gettysburg, by shaping the world’s hope into a few sentences too beautiful to be forgotten.”

Indeed, the reputation of his short address at the Gettysburg National Cemetery had been steadily growing alongside Monroe’s own career. By the 1890s its ascent was well under way. The aforementioned Century Magazine article included John Nicolay’s then-exhaustive exegeesis, “Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address,” which discussed the contents, drafts, and first-hand accounts of the speech.

The speech’s popularity grew, and by 1909, the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, there was a growing awareness, especially in Monroe’s Chicago, that it was profound poetry. A remarkable examination of Lincoln as an author appeared in the previously mentioned proceedings of the Chicago commemoration of the Lincoln centennial. About the Gettysburg speech, Bernard J. Cigrand said in “The Literary Side of Lincoln” that “this one Address stamps Lincoln as a master of our language—makes him a part of the literary galaxy of our land.”

By the time of Poetry’s founding, the Gettysburg Address was not merely regarded as an important document of American statesmanship but also was being taught as high literature. School children memorized it far more often than the works of other renowned authors, including Scott, Wordsworth, Emerson, and even Shakespeare.

95. Century Magazine 47 (February 1894), 596–608.
Not just Monroe but the prairie poets admired it too. In his autobiography, Masters referred to the Gettysburg Address as “a miracle worker not to be stayed.”98 Because it spoke of national memory, of finding meaning in the war, and of individual sacrifice, Barry Schwartz referred to the Gettysburg Address as the veritable “manifesto” of the Progressive movement.99 When Max Eastman accused modern poetry of arbitrary line divisions, Monroe used the speech to rebut him. She insisted that it was essentially—not just syntactically—poetical. “Is Lincoln’s Gettysburg speech any the less essentially poetry, in rhythm, structure, and spiritual motive,” she countered, just “because it happens to be printed without line divisions?”100 For Monroe, the literary quality of Lincoln’s writing was neither debatable nor bound by convention. Its reputation continued to grow.

The memory of Lincoln was revitalized during America’s Great Depression when he was reimagined as a sage administrator, a calming leader who would, were he alive, restore people’s self-confidence and thus rescue them from poverty.101 In her 1932 Poetry article titled “The Great Poem,” Monroe responded to President Hoover’s call for a great national poem, one that would elevate the country’s mood. She insisted there was no need to search for a “great poem,” because one already existed:

In our own history, there is one supreme example of that kind of masterpiece, one which outranks any similar recorded utterance at any peak of a nation’s agony—the Gettysburg speech.

Monroe describes its transcendent quality:

Lincoln in that brief address achieved beyond limit or measure a great poem; he lifted the people’s suffering and hope, their bitter despair and baffled courage. . . . [It was] a spiritual conquest more powerful than a dozen battlefields.102

Lincoln’s carefully chosen words at Gettysburg, indeed his poetry, made sense of the conflicted emotions of the moment and elevated the struggle to a divine achievement.

101. For a discussion of Lincoln’s memory in the 1930s see Schwartz, Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era, chapter 1.
Monroe’s vision of the power of verse to affect the character of its nation’s audience was an aim of her Poetry magazine, of the poetry renaissance in general, and ultimately of the role of literature in the Progressive movement.

“Some memorable record”

Lincoln’s memory remained a vital part of the way Monroe imagined her region and her identity. During Chicago’s Depression-era Century of Progress International Exposition—which reminded her of the world’s fair of four decades earlier—she composed a poem referencing Lincoln. “Chicago 1933” appeared in Poetry’s June edition. Her lifelong hero is the only historical figure she evokes in this, her last published poem:

My city, keep the faith you found
When huts rose on the marshy bar!
Lift up your banners from the ground
Whence Lincoln marched, led by his star!

Monroe links the history of Chicago, indeed its very soil, to Lincoln. In her own writing and in the pages of Poetry she had championed him as a regional hero and as a literary genius. But her innovation lay not merely in her immense admiration. She shared that with the citizens of her city, state, and country, and with other “reputational entrepreneurs.” Rather, what distinguishes her is her recognition that Lincoln could serve as both subject and inspiration for a progressive literature, one based on and centered in the Midwest. Besides her own poems about Lincoln—highly original, as we have seen—she encouraged poets who took him up as a theme, all the while jealously guarding his portrayal. The Lincoln one finds in Poetry and its related anthologies is the embodiment of Progressive ideals associated with the land, with self-improvement, and with heroic civic virtue. Monroe elevated Lincoln’s stature by helping inscribe his words into the American literary canon. On the other hand, Monroe’s treatment of Lincoln—emphasizing his humanity and rhetorical gifts—ignored him as an agent in history, one who had affected momentous societal

103. Lincoln was represented in many ways at this world’s fair, most conspicuously in the “Lincoln Group,” a village of re-created buildings along the lakefront—birth and boyhood cabins, a store from New Salem, and a functioning “Rutledge Tavern.”

104. Schwartz aptly uses this term to describe those in the culture industry who promote Lincoln’s memory for various reasons. Forge of National Memory, 135.
change. Nowhere does Monroe explicitly celebrate his political accomplishments, such as emancipation or the preservation of the Union.\textsuperscript{105} Even so, Monroe helped transform the memory of the former commander in chief into a cultural figure, a man of letters and sensibility, a Progressive Era hero who was a fit subject for modern poetry.

Finally, on a personal level, Monroe shared something fundamental with her idol: an impulse toward distinguishing achievement. “I cannot remember,” she wrote in her memoir, “when to die without leaving some memorable record did not seem to me a calamity too terrible to be borne.”\textsuperscript{106} A similar sentiment was expressed by Lincoln who, a hundred years earlier, announced in his very first political speech, “I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.”\textsuperscript{107} Lincoln and Monroe needn’t have worried; they both got their wish.

\textsuperscript{105} In her aforementioned “Columbian Ode,” she spoke only of how Lincoln “held a warring nation in his heart,” an example of his divine compassion. Similarly, Masters, in his “Ann Rutledge” epitaph, speaks only to Lincoln’s capacity for forgiveness—modeled by Rutledge—as exemplified in his “With malice toward none, with charity for all.”

\textsuperscript{106} Monroe, \textit{A Poet’s Life}, 55.

\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Sangamo Journal}, March 9, 1832.