

# Texas Christian University

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## Carl Sandburg: A Workingman's Poet



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"Sandburg composed his poetry primarily in free verse. Concerning rhyme versus non-rhyme Sandburg once said airily: "If it jells into free verse, all right. If it jells into rhyme, all right." Some critics noted that the illusion of poetry in his works was based more on the arrangement of the lines than on the lines themselves. Sandburg, aware of the criticism, wrote in the preface to *Complete Poems*: "There is a formal poetry only in form, all dressed up and nowhere to go. The number of syllables, the designated and required stresses of accent, the rhymes if wanted—they all come off with the skill of a solved crossword puzzle.... The fact is ironic. A proficient and sometimes exquisite performer in rhymed verse goes out of his way to register the point that the more rhyme there is in poetry the more danger of its tricking the writer into something other than the urge in the beginning." ...In *Good Morning, America*, he published thirty-eight definitions of poetry..."

"Carl Sandburg." Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.

### **38 DEFINITIONS OF POETRY** by Carl Sandburg

1. Poetry is a projection across silence of cadences arranged to break that silence with definite intentions of echoes, syllables, wave lengths.
2. Poetry is an art practiced with the terribly plastic material of human language.
3. Poetry is the report of a nuance between two moments, when people say, 'Listen!' and 'Did you see it?' 'Did you hear it? What was it?'
4. Poetry is the tracing of the trajectories of a finite sound to the infinite points of its echoes.
5. Poetry is a sequence of dots and dashes, spelling depths, crypts, cross-lights, and moon wisps.
6. Poetry is a puppet-show, where riders of skyrockets and divers of sea fathoms gossip about the sixth sense and the fourth dimension.
7. Poetry is a plan for a slit in the face of a bronze fountain goat and the path of fresh drinking water.
8. Poetry is a slipknot tightened around a time-beat of one thought, two thoughts, and a last interweaving thought there is not yet a number for.
9. Poetry is an echo asking a shadow dancer to be a partner.
10. Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly the air.
11. Poetry is a series of explanations of life, fading off into horizons too swift for explanations.
12. Poetry is a fossil rock-print of a fin and a wing, with an illegible oath between.
13. Poetry is an exhibit of one pendulum connecting with other and unseen pendulums inside and outside the one seen.
14. Poetry is a sky dark with a wild-duck migration.
15. Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable.
16. Poetry is any page from a sketchbook of outlines of a doorknob with thumb-prints of dust, blood, dreams.
17. Poetry is a type-font design for an alphabet of fun, hate, love, death.
18. Poetry is the cipher key to the five mystic wishes packed in a hollow silver bullet fed to a flying fish.
19. Poetry is a theorem of a yellow-silk handkerchief knotted with riddles, sealed in a balloon tied to the tail of a kite flying in a white wind against a blue sky in spring.
20. Poetry is a dance music measuring buck-and-wing follies along with the gravest and stateliest dead-marches.
21. Poetry is a sliver of the moon lost in the belly of a golden frog.
22. Poetry is a mock of a cry at finding a million dollars and a mock of a laugh at losing it.
23. Poetry is the silence and speech between a wet struggling root of a flower and a sunlit blossom of that flower.

24. Poetry is the harnessing of the paradox of earth cradling life and then entombing it.
25. Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.
26. Poetry is a fresh morning spider-web telling a story of moonlit hours of weaving and waiting during a night.
27. Poetry is a statement of a series of equations, with numbers and symbols changing like the changes of mirrors, pools, skies, the only never-changing sign being the sign of infinity.
28. Poetry is a packsack of invisible keepsakes.
29. Poetry is a section of river-fog and moving boat-lights, delivered between bridges and whistles, so one says, 'Oh!' and another, 'How?'
30. Poetry is a kinetic arrangement of static syllables.
31. Poetry is the arithmetic of the easiest way and the primrose path, matched up with foam-flanked horses, bloody knuckles, and bones, on the hard ways to the stars.
32. Poetry is a shuffling of boxes of illusions buckled with a strap of facts.
33. Poetry is an enumeration of birds, bees, babies, butterflies, bugs, bambinos, babayagas, and bipeds, beating their way up bewildering bastions.
34. Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away.
35. Poetry is the establishment of a metaphorical link between white butterfly-wings and the scraps of torn-up love-letters.
36. Poetry is the achievement of the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits.
37. Poetry is a mystic, sensuous mathematics of fire, smoke-stacks, waffles, pansies, people, and purple sunsets.
38. Poetry is the capture of a picture, a song, or a flair, in a deliberate prism of words.

**“Numbers are the essential building blocks of mathematics, the essential tool of arithmetic, as described by Carl Sandburg”** Birken, Marcia, and Anne C. Coon. *Discovering Patterns in Mathematics and Poetry*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. Web.

1. How do you think the speaker feels about Arithmetic? Use quotations from the poem to prove your point.
2. The rhythm of a poem is often created by repetition of words or phrases. Find words that are repeated and explain why you think they were repeated.
3. Circle the alliterations in the poem and explain how they are used.
4. How does the quotation by Birken and Coon help to explain the poem?

### Arithmetic

Arithmetic is where numbers fly like pigeons in and out of your head.

Arithmetic tells you how many you lose or win if you know how many you had before you lost or won.

Arithmetic is seven eleven all good children go to heaven -- or five six bundle of sticks.

Arithmetic is numbers you squeeze from your head to your hand to your pencil to your paper till you get the answer.

Arithmetic is where the answer is right and everything is nice and you can look out of the window and see the blue sky -- or the answer is wrong and you have to start all over and try again and see how it comes out this time.

If you take a number and double it and double it again and then double it a few more times, the number gets bigger and bigger and goes higher and higher and only arithmetic can tell you what the number is when you decide to quit doubling.

Arithmetic is where you have to multiply -- and you carry the multiplication table in your head and hope you won't lose it.

If you have two animal crackers, one good and one bad, and you eat one and a striped zebra with streaks all over him eats the other, how many animal crackers will you have if somebody offers you five six seven and you say No no no and you say Nay nay nay and you say Nix nix nix?

If you ask your mother for one fried egg for breakfast and she gives you two fried eggs and you eat both of them, who is better in arithmetic, you or your mother?

Literal Meaning	Doors	Figurative Meaning
	<p>An open door says, "Come in." A shut door says, "Who are you?" Shadows and ghosts go through shut doors. If a door is shut and you want it shut, why open it? If a door is open and you want it open, why shut it? Doors forget but only doors know what it is doors forget.</p>	

In "Jazz Fantasia," Carl Sandburg uses several literary techniques, including alliteration, onomatopoeia, and assonance, to evoke sound imagery. These techniques not only reinforce the central idea of the poem (appreciating the wide range of emotions and sounds of jazz music) but also add a musical quality to the poem's language. The overall effect mimics a spontaneous musical composition, or fantasia.

### **Jazz Fantasia**

Drum on your drums, batter on your banjos,  
Sob on the long cool winding saxophones.  
Go to it, O jazzmen.

Sling your knuckles on the bottoms of the happy tin pans,  
Let your trombones ooze,  
And go hushahusha-hush with the slippery sand-paper.

Moan like an autumn wind high in the lonesome tree-tops,  
Moan soft like you wanted somebody terrible,  
Cry like a racing car slipping away from a motorcycle cop,  
Bang-bang! you jazzmen,  
Bang altogether drums, traps, banjos, horns, tin cans-  
Make two people fight on the top of a stairway  
And scratch each other's eyes in a clinch tumbling down the stairs.

Can the rough stuff ...  
Now a Mississippi steamboat pushes up the night river  
With a hoo-hoo-hoo-oo ...  
And the green lanterns calling to the high soft stars ...  
A red moon rides on the humps of the low river hills ...  
Go to it, O jazzmen.

### **Jazz Fantasia (Choral Reading)**

1. - Drum on your drums, batter on your banjos,
2. - Sob on the long cool winding saxophones.  
All - Go to it, O jazzmen.
  
3. - Sling your knuckles on the bottoms of the happy tin pans,
4. - Let your trombones ooze,
5. - And go hushahusha-hush with the slippery sand-paper.
  
6. - Moan like an autumn wind high in the lonesome tree-tops,
7. - Moan soft like you wanted somebody terrible,
8. - Cry like a racing car slipping away from a motorcycle cop,  
All -Bang-bang! you jazzmen,
9. - Bang altogether drums, traps, banjos, horns, tin cans-
- 10.-Make two people fight on the top of a stairway

And scratch each other's eyes in a clinch tumbling down the stairs.

- 11.-Can the rough stuff ...
  - 12.-Now a Mississippi steamboat pushes up the night river  
With a hoo-hoo-hoo-oo ...
  - 13.-And the green lanterns calling to the high soft stars ...  
A red moon rides on the humps of the low river hills ...
- All-Go to it, O jazzmen.

Choose one of the Carl Sandburg poems listed below. In your small group interpret, choreograph and act out one of the poems. Try to convey the meaning and tone of the poem to your audience. Think about literal, figurative, and connotative meanings of the words and/or phrases used in the text.

### **Stumbling**

Stumbling is where you walk and find you are not walking  
Stumbling is where you find yourself spread on the ground, instead of standing on your feet  
Stumbling is where your feet try to make a fool of you  
Stumbling is to go where you are not looking when you mean to go where you are looking  
Stumbling is to get your feet mixed so you go down  
Stumblers are two kinds, those who come up quick and those who say, "Where am I?"  
If you never want to stumble, be a fish or a bird.

### **MANNERS**

Manners is how to behave  
Manners is when you know how to eat without being bashful  
Manners is not afraid of what you are wearing  
Manners is like a man tips his hat when he meets a lady  
Manners is "EXUSE ME" OR "I BEG YOUR PARDON" instead of...  
"HOW DO YOU GET THERE?" OR "I'LL KNOCK YOUR BLOCK OFF."

### **PRIMER LESSON**

Look out how you use proud words.  
When you let proud words go, it is  
Not easy to call them back.  
They wear long boots, hard boots; they  
walk off proud; they can't hear you  
calling—  
Look out how you use proud words.

## **BRAINWASHING**

Repeat and repeat till they say what you  
are saying.  
Repeat and repeat till they are helpless  
before your repetitions.  
Say it over and over till their brains can  
hold only what you are saying.  
Speak it soft, yell it and yell it, change  
to a whisper, always in repeats.  
Come back to it day on day, hour after hour,  
till they say what you tell them to say.  
To wash A B C out of a brain and replace it  
with X Y Z—this is it.

## **BOXES AND BAGS**

The bigger the box the more it holds.  
Empty boxes hold the same as empty heads.  
Enough small empty boxes thrown into a big empty box fill it full.  
A half-empty box says, "Put more in."  
A big enough box could hold the world.  
Elephants need big boxes to hold a dozen elephant handkerchiefs.  
Fleas fold little handkerchiefs and fix them nice and neat in flea  
handkerchief boxes.  
Bags lean against each other and boxes stand independent.  
Boxes are square with corners unless round with circles.  
Box can be piled on box till the whole works comes tumbling.  
Pile box on box and the bottom box says, "If you will kindly take notice you  
will see it all rests on me."  
Pile box on box and the top says, "Who falls farthest if or when we fall? I ask  
you."  
Box people go looking for boxes and bag people go looking for bags.

## **We Must Be Polite**

*(Lessons for children on how to behave under peculiar circumstances)*

1

If we meet a gorilla  
what shall we do?  
Two things we may do  
if we so wish to do.

Speak to the gorilla,  
very, very respectfully,  
"How do you do, sir?"

Or, speak to him with less  
distinction of manner,  
“Hey, why don't you go back  
where you came from?”

2

If an elephant knocks on your door  
and asks for something to eat,  
there are two things to say:  
Tell him there are nothing but cold  
victuals in the house and he will do  
better next door.

Or say: We have nothing but six bushels  
of potatoes—will that be enough for  
your breakfast, sir?

Chicago, Illinois is a common topic of Carl Sandburg poetry, having been where he spent a lot of his life. This poem is not speaking out against a specific political issue, but it is instead doing the opposite. Chicago is known for the crime and corruption that is clearly present in the city, but in this poem, Sandburg speaks out for Chicago, saying that despite all of its flaws it is a beautiful city that he loves. It shows a different way poems can speak out politically. Instead of speaking against a political issue, this poem speaks for one. How does this poem counter all of the corrupt connotations of the city of Chicago, and show Sandburg's love for the city and his opinion that despite corruption, crime, and other wrongdoings of society, a city can still be beautiful? How does Sandburg use poetic techniques to express the beauty of the city?

*Special Focus Section - Carl Sandburg Poetry with a Political Theme - Justine Rose AP English Site. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.*  
<<https://sites.google.com/site/justineroseapenglishsite/home/poetry-anthology/special-focus-section---carl-sandburg-poetry-with-a-political-theme>>.

### "Chicago"

Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:  
They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women  
under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.  
And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman  
kill and go free to kill again.  
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I  
have seen the marks of wanton hunger.  
And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give  
them back the sneer and say to them:  
Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse  
and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set  
vivid against the little soft cities;  
Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the  
wilderness,  
Bareheaded,  
Shoveling,  
Wrecking,  
Planning,  
Building, breaking, rebuilding,  
Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,  
Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,  
Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,  
Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of  
the people,  
Laughing!  
Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to  
be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler  
to the Nation.

<p><b>Grass</b> Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo. Shovel them under and let me work— I am the grass; I cover all.</p> <p>And pile them high at Gettysburg And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun. Shovel them under and let me work. Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor: What place is this? Where are we now?</p> <p>I am the grass. Let me work.</p>	<p>What is the dominate figure of speech in the poem? Why is it effective?</p> <p>Why does Nature appear frustrated?</p> <p>Why do people seemed to forget the past so quickly? Does that cause us to repeat our tragic errors?</p> <p>What is the “work” of grass?</p>
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**Austerlitz:** Major battle of the Napoleonic wars, fought on December 2, 1805. Nearly 25,000 men died. Napoleon Bonaparte and his army of nearly 70,000 soldiers defeated a force of Russians and Austrians numbering about 90,000. Austerlitz is in the present-day Czech Republic.

**Waterloo:** The final battle of the Napoleonic wars, fought near Waterloo, Belgium, on June 18, 1815, and resulting in more than 60,000 casualties. British forces under the Duke of Wellington, General Arthur Wellesley, and Prussian forces under Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher combined to defeat Napoleon.

**Gettysburg:** Major battle of the U.S. Civil War in which Union forces of General George G. Meade defeated Confederate forces under General Robert E. Lee near the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 1-3, 1863, resulting in 45,000 to 50,000 casualties. The battle turned the tide of the war in favor of the Union.

**Ypres:** (pronounced E pruh): Town in Belgium that was the site of three major World War I battles (October-November 1914, April-May 1915, and July-November 1917) that resulted in more than 850,000 German and allied casualties.

**Verdun:** Indecisive World War I battle between the French and the Germans fought at Verdun, France, from February to December, 1916. Total casualties numbered more than 700,000.

### "Masses"

Among the mountains I wandered and saw blue haze and  
red crag and was amazed;  
On the beach where the long push under the endless tide  
maneuvers, I stood silent;  
Under the stars on the prairie watching the Dipper slant  
over the horizon's grass, I was full of thoughts.  
Great men, pageants of war and labor, soldiers and workers,  
mothers lifting their children--these all I  
touched, and felt the solemn thrill of them.  
And then one day I got a true look at the Poor, millions  
of the Poor, patient and toiling; more patient than  
crag, tides, and stars; innumerable, patient as the  
darkness of night--and all broken, humble ruins of nations.

In "Masses", Carl Sandburg poem speaks out against the treatment of the poor in our society, whom he labels as the masses. He recognizes that the poor are patient, they are the majority, and they are as much a part of this country as any other member of society. Sandburg uses "Masses" to speak out against poverty, calling for a change in the treatment of the poor and the way that we just push poverty aside as if it is not a pressing issue in our country. Sandburg describes the poor as people who are always present, who endure all of the suffering, and who should be given the opportunity to live at a higher standard of living because they are the masses. Discuss the poetic techniques that Sandburg uses to call our attention to the plight of the masses.

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"Trying to write briefly about Carl Sandburg," said a friend of the poet, "is like trying to picture the Grand Canyon in one black and white snapshot." His range of interests was enumerated by his close friend, Harry Golden, who, in his study of the poet, called Sandburg "the one American writer who distinguished himself in five fields—poetry, history, biography, fiction, and music." "Carl Sandburg." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation. Web. 04 Feb. 2016.  
<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/carl-sandburg>>.

Has the telephone lived up to the promise of technology that Sandburg celebrates here?

### Under A Telephone Pole

I am a copper wire slung in the air,  
Slim against the sun I make not even a clear line of shadow.  
Night and day I keep singing--humming and thrumming:  
It is love and war and money; it is the fighting and the  
tears, the work and want,  
Death and laughter of men and women passing through  
me, carrier of your speech,  
In the rain and the wet dripping, in the dawn and the  
shine drying,  
A copper wire.

*(Polonius's Advice to Laertes from Hamlet by William Shakespeare and A Father To His Son by Carl Sandburg)* The following two poems are examples of fatherly advice given to a son. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing how each poet uses literary devices to make his point.

***Polonius's Advice to Laertes***  
**(excerpted from Hamlet, Act I, scene iii)**  
William Shakespeare

Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame!  
The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,  
And you are stayed for. There - my blessing with thee,  
And these few precepts in thy memory  
Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,  
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.  
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.  
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,  
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment  
Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,  
Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee.  
Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.  
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy,  
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
And they in France of the best rank and station  
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.  
Neither a borrower nor a lender be,  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.  
This above all, to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow as the night the day  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
Farewell. My blessing season this in thee!

***A Father To His Son – Carl Sandburg***

A father sees his son nearing manhood.  
What shall he tell that son?

'Life is hard; be steel; be a rock.'

And this might stand him for the storms  
and serve him for humdrum monotony  
and guide him among sudden betrayals  
and tighten him for slack moments.

'Life is a soft loam; be gentle; go easy.'

And this too might serve him.

Brutes have been gentled where lashes failed.

The growth of a frail flower in a path up  
has sometimes shattered and split a rock.

A tough will counts. So does desire.

So does a rich soft wanting.

Without rich wanting nothing arrives.

Tell him too much money has killed men  
and left them dead years before burial:  
the quest of lucre beyond a few easy needs  
has twisted good enough men  
sometimes into dry thwarted worms.

Tell him time as a stuff can be wasted.

Tell him to be a fool every so often  
and to have no shame over having been a fool  
yet learning something out of every folly  
hoping to repeat none of the cheap follies  
thus arriving at intimate understanding  
of a world numbering many fools.

Tell him to be alone often and get at himself  
and above all tell himself no lies about himself  
whatever the white lies and protective fronts  
he may use against other people.

Tell him solitude is creative if he is strong  
and the final decisions are made in silent rooms.

Tell him to be different from other people  
if it comes natural and easy being different.

Let him have lazy days seeking his deeper motives.

Let him seek deep for where he is born natural.

Then he may understand Shakespeare  
and the Wright brothers, Pasteur, Pavlov,  
Michael Faraday and free imaginations  
Bringing changes into a world resenting change.

He will be lonely enough  
to have time for the work  
he knows as his own.

## Choices

They offer you many things,  
I a few.

Moonlight on the play of fountains at night  
With water sparkling a drowsy monotone,  
Bare-shouldered, smiling women and talk  
And a cross-play of loves and adulteries  
And a fear of death and a remembering of regrets:  
All this they offer you.

I come with:  
salt and bread  
a terrible job of work  
and tireless war;  
Come and have now:  
hunger.

danger  
and hate.

This next poem contains the typical message of political poetry and speaks out against an aspect of society. In "And They Obey", Carl Sandburg speaks out against war, describing its terrible effects and conveying his disgust towards it. Sandburg fought in the Spanish American War, which influenced many of his poems for a while afterwards. In this poem, Sandburg's negative attitude towards war and everything involved in it is made clear.

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### ***And They Obey***

Smash down the cities.  
Knock the walls to pieces.  
Break the factories and cathedrals, warehouses  
and homes  
Into loose piles of stone and lumber and black  
burnt wood:  
You are the soldiers and we command you.

Build up the cities.  
Set up the walls again.  
Put together once more the factories and cathedrals,  
warehouses and homes  
Into buildings for life and labor:  
You are workmen and citizens all: We  
command you.

When Sandburg turned 19, he left home to explore the American West, becoming one of the many hoboes who hopped freight trains in order to travel free. Sandburg was not only a poet but also a noted collector and performer of American folk music. His anthology, **American Songbag**, contains words and music to 290 songs that people have sung in the making of Americana. Even though this is not a poem by Sandburg, thought this was a fun way to end this collection of Sandburg materials. It fits him.

**Hallelujah, I'm a Bum**

**Sandburg:** "This old song heard at the water tanks of railroads in Kansas in 1897 and from harvest hands who worked in the wheat fields of Pawnee County, was picked up later by the I.W. W.'s, who made verses of their own for it, and gave it a wide fame. The migratory workers are familiar with the Salvation Army missions, and have adopted the Army custom of occasionally abandoning all polite formalities and striking deep into the common things and ways for their music and words. A "handout" is food handed out from a back door as distinguished from a "a sit down" which means an entrance into a house and a chair at a table."

**Lyrics:**

1. Oh, why don't you work  
Like other men do?  
How the hell can I work  
When there's no work to do?  
Hallelujah, I'm a bum,  
Hallelujah, bum again,  
Hallelujah, give us a handout,  
To revive us again!
2. Oh, I love my boss  
And my boss loves me,  
And that is the reason  
I'm so hungry,  
Hallelujah, etc.
3. Oh, the springtime has come  
And I'm just out of jail,  
Without any money,  
Without any bail.  
Hallelujah, etc.
4. I went to a house,  
And I knocked on the door;  
A lady came out, says,  
"You been here before."  
Hallelujah, etc.
5. I went to a house,  
And I asked for a piece of bread;  
A lady came out, says,  
"The baker is dead."  
Hallelujah, etc.
6. When springtime does come,  
O won't we have fun,  
We'll throw up our jobs  
And we'll go on the bum.  
Hallelujah, etc.