

Fog



POEM TEXT

- 1 The fog comes
- 2 on little cat feet.

- 3 It sits looking
- 4 over harbor and city
- 5 on silent haunches
- 6 and then moves on.

the poem, to possess those qualities as well. The comparison makes the fog, which readers might take for granted as an ordinary natural phenomenon, seem mysterious and unknowable. It also suggests a connection between the living and non-living features of the natural world, as well as nature's mysterious power to make lasting impressions on the imagination. The metaphor may even invite readers to view the natural world as truly alive and observant, rather than as a passive, unremarkable part of daily life.

Finally, the poem's comparison suggests the value of paying close attention to one's surroundings, especially nature. The mysterious grandeur of the fog's appearance and disappearance prompts the speaker to describe the moment in a vividly imaginative, metaphorical way. The memorable poem that results suggests the power of being immersed in, and open to, nature's mysteries.



SUMMARY

The speaker describes mist appearing as if it were a cat creeping along on its small paws.

This fog, which the speaker continues comparing to a cat, silently sits on its back legs as it looks down on the city and port. Then, the cat-like mist disappears.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6



THEMES



THE MYSTERY OF NATURE

"Fog" is a very short poem that vividly describes the appearance and disappearance of fog in an unnamed city. The speaker compares this fog to a cat that appears on "little cat feet," "sits looking" over the city on its "silent haunches," then finally "moves on" in the poem's last line. It's not entirely clear how the speaker feels about the fog, which could be seen as beautiful, ominous, or a simple fact of the weather in the moment being described. Regardless, by memorably expressing the hushed presence of the fog, the poem evokes the mystery and magic of nature as a whole.

The speaker's comparison of the fog to a cat indicates, from the start, that the poem isn't just about fog. It's also about nature in a larger sense, and the ways one aspect of the natural world (the fog covering a city) reminds the speaker of another (a cat). By comparing the fog, which isn't alive, to a cat, which is, the speaker imbues the fog with a sense of life and agency, making the natural world seem more alert than people often think it is.

The speaker's comparison makes sense on a number of levels. Both fog and cats are often silent; both are often quick to appear and disappear, as the fog does in the span of the poem's six short lines. As the poet's [metaphor](#) links the two, the fog seems to take on further cat-like qualities. Since cats are often intensely observant, independent, and aloof, the fog seems, in



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*The fog comes
on little cat feet.*

At first, "Fog" seems like a fairly simple poem. There's nothing especially unusual about the title or the first line: "The fog comes."

But the poem's seemingly straightforward, bare-bones style quickly shifts and becomes more interesting. Line 2 introduces a striking [metaphor](#), comparing the fog to a cat. What kind of fog, readers might ask, appears "on little cat feet"? In what ways can fog be like a cat? Why compare fog (an inanimate, often inconvenient weather event) to a cat (an often lively and beloved animal) in the first place?

These first two lines don't necessarily answer those questions, but they do establish the fog/cat parallel that will continue throughout the poem, becoming an [extended metaphor](#).

These lines also contain lots of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#): notice the repeated consonant sounds in "fog" and "feet," "comes" and "cat," and "little cat feet." These sounds announce the opening of the poem, the appearance of the fog, and the introduction of the fog/cat metaphor. The tripping/t/ sounds, in particular, mirror the pitter-patter that "little cat feet" might make so that the poem itself seems to arrive in the same delicate way as the fog.

This first [stanza](#) (a [couplet](#)) also establishes some characteristics of the poem as a whole. "Fog" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning that it follows no set [rhyme scheme](#) or [meter](#). Several of its lines (including line 1) are [enjambéd](#), meaning that their clauses continue across the [line break](#) (the end of the line doesn't coincide with the end of a clause or sentence). These effects give the poem a plainspoken and flexible quality; they're also hallmarks of the style that made Carl Sandburg an acclaimed, popular poet.

LINES 3-5

*It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches*

After the initial [couplet](#), which announced the appearance of the fog and introduced the poem's [extended metaphor](#), the first three lines of the second [stanza](#) (a [quatrain](#)) develop the fog/cat comparison. Now that the cat-like fog has appeared, the speaker describes how it "sits looking / over harbor and city / on silent haunches."

Notice how the [metaphor](#) has become the central, defining element of the poem. Before, the fog simply arrived "on little cat feet," but the fog and metaphorical cat were still separate things. Now, though, it's as if the fog has truly *become* a cat, transformed by the power of imagination into an independent, living being.

By giving the fog, an inanimate part of nature, the qualities of an animal, the speaker makes it seem more alert, observant, and alive. Its "silen[ce]" has a mysterious aspect as well. Is this cat-like fog an omen of something? Is it threatening, comforting, friendly, or simply inquisitive? It's impossible to say, but the poem seems to raise such questions. Much like a person observed by a silent, aloof cat, the speaker seems uncertain about what the fog is thinking, or how to feel about it. Regardless, the speaker invests it with an agency and vitality that people don't usually ascribe to simple weather events.

Like line 1, lines 3-5 are [enjambéd](#). Enjambment slows the poem's pace and gives it an air of suspense, as if the fog is a powerful, mysterious force patiently "looking" for something. The way the clauses spill across [line breaks](#), without a pause or stop at the end of the line, also reflects the fog's shapeless, drifting quality.

Notice, too, how these lines contain repeated /s/ sounds: "sits," "city," "silent." This whispery [sibilance](#) adds to the air of mystery surrounding the fog while also contrasting with the harder [alliterative](#) sounds in the first two lines. If the repeated /t/ sounds in lines 1-2 echoed the pitter-patter of "little cat feet," the hushed /s/ sounds of lines 3-5 mimic the eerie, "silen[cing]" effect a blanket of fog can have on a city.

The city and harbor over which the fog "sits looking" are never named; the [setting](#) might be any city with a harbor. That said,

Carl Sandburg spent much of his life in Chicago, Illinois, and that city plays a central role in much of his writing. Some sources even suggest that "Fog" was inspired by an actual day in Sandburg's life when he was unexpectedly trapped in Chicago by a sudden, thick fog.

LINE 6

and then moves on.

The last line of the [quatrain](#)—and of the poem itself—marks another sudden shift. Whereas lines 1-2 announced the fog's arrival and introduced the [extended metaphor](#) of the cat, and lines 3-5 described the cat-like way the fog covers the city and harbor, this last line starkly describes the fog's disappearance. Just like that, the fog has come, settled in, and gone away, all in six short lines.

Even the thickest fog can lift suddenly to reveal a clear, sunny day; likewise, even the most intensely observant cat can suddenly dart away, almost without anyone noticing. Thus, the suddenness of the line—enhanced by the [enjambment](#) at the end of line 5—seems a natural way to bring this brief, memorable poem to an end. The poem and speaker, like the fog, abruptly "move[] on."

With this final line, the poem's three-part structure also becomes clear: the fog appears, "sits," then disappears. This structure was apparently inspired by the Japanese haiku, a form that packs as much poetic intensity as possible into three lines (or phrases) and 17 syllables (or Japanese syllable-like units called *on*). Like "Fog," haiku are often about the mysterious beauty of nature, and they often rely on vivid [imagery](#) and striking comparisons and contrasts. Given all this, it's easy to see why Sandburg described "Fog" as an "American hoku" (i.e., haiku).



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Fog" contains some [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in its first two lines, which describe the appearance of the fog. Notice the [repetition](#) of /f/, /k/, and /t/ sounds: "fog"/"feet," "comes"/ "cat," "little cat feet."

By creating a bit of noticeable music, alliteration emphasizes the approach of something worth paying attention to. It underscores the surprise of the fog's appearance, as well as the introduction of the poem's central, [extended metaphor](#): the comparison between fog and cat. Those tripping /t/ sounds even sound a bit like the patter of "little cat feet"!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fog comes"
- **Line 2:** "little cat feet."

SIBILANCE

Whereas the poem's first two lines (or [couplet](#)) use repeated /f/, /k/, and /t/ sounds to announce the fog's appearance, the last four lines (or [quatrain](#)) use [sibilance](#) to reflect the quiet, mysterious atmosphere the fog creates.

Listen to these soft, quiet, lightly hissing /s/ and /z/ sounds: "sits," "city," "silent haunches," "moves." Just as the harder [alliterative](#) sounds of lines 1-2 reflected the fog's sudden onset, these repeated /s/ sounds reflect the fog's blanketing hush—as well as the quiet, unremarkable way it "moves on." The hiss of sibilance might even subtly reinforce the poem's cat [metaphor](#) (cats can hiss, too!).

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sits"
- **Line 4:** "city"
- **Line 5:** "silent haunches"
- **Line 6:** "moves"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

In "Fog," the speaker uses a central, [extended metaphor](#) to compare fog (an inanimate part of the weather) to a cat (a live animal). The metaphor is "extended" because it carries throughout the poem; it's referenced multiple times in different ways.

First, the speaker establishes the metaphor by saying that the fog appears "on little cat feet." Then, the speaker develops the metaphor by describing how the fog/cat "sits looking [...] on silent haunches." Even when the fog disappears, the extended metaphor continues: the fog "moves on," as if, like a cat, it has a mind of its own. (Inanimate objects are moved, but living creatures move of their own volition.)

The metaphor blurs the distinction between what the speaker actually observes and the speaker's *feelings* about their surroundings. By comparing the fog to a cat, the speaker projects cat-like qualities onto it—particularly a "silent" watchfulness that suggests they find the fog a bit eerie.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 5-6

ENJAMBMENT

"Fog" uses [enjambment](#) in four out of its six lines. These enjambments serve several purposes.

The lack of a pause between lines 1-2 underscores the surprise and relative suddenness of the fog's appearance. Likewise, the enjambment between lines 5 and 6 highlights another surprise: the fog's disappearance! No sooner has the speaker described

the "silent," mysterious fog than the enjambment moves the poem forward, ushering in the moment the fog "moves on."

Enjambment also slows the poem's pace (brief as it is), heightening the impact of its [imagery](#). In line 5, for example, the enjambment after "It sits looking" creates a small moment of suspense (sits looking at *what?*). Finally, the grammatical "spillover" from one line into the next suggests the shapeless drifting of the fog, which can't be confined to a rigid form.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "comes / on"
- **Lines 3-4:** "looking / over"
- **Lines 4-5:** "city / on"
- **Lines 5-6:** "haunches / and"



VOCABULARY

Harbor (Line 4) - A large, protected part of a body of water (such as an ocean or lake) that serves as a docking area for boats and ships. Many harbors, as in the poem, are located near cities.

Haunches (Line 5) - An animal's rear end and hind legs; hindquarters.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Fog" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning that it doesn't follow a particular [rhyme scheme](#), [meter](#), or established poetic form.

However, the poem *does* have some important formal qualities. It contains two [stanzas](#): a two-line [couplet](#) and a four-line [quatrain](#). The couplet describes the arrival of the fog and establishes the poem's central [metaphor](#), which compares the fog to a cat. The quatrain then describes how the fog hangs "over harbor and city" before it disappears, or "moves on."

This formal progression—from the fog's appearance to its presence in the city to its disappearance—gives the poem an elegant, three-part structure somewhat reminiscent of a haiku. In fact, Sandburg said that he wrote the poem in an attempt to create an "American hoku" (haiku).

METER

"Fog" is a [free verse](#) poem, meaning it doesn't follow any particular [rhyme scheme](#) or [meter](#). The six lines that make up "Fog" vary in their number of syllables (ranging from three to seven) and the rhythm those syllables follow.

These variations help convey a sense of freedom, exploration, and even mystery or uncertainty. By varying the length and rhythm of the lines, the speaker creates a sense of curiosity and

drama around the appearance and disappearance of the cat-like fog.

RHYME SCHEME

"Fog" has no [rhyme scheme](#); as a [free verse](#) poem, it doesn't use rhyme or [meter](#). Its avoidance of these structures gives the poem a sense of freedom and flexibility. The relative formlessness of "Fog" might even mimic the shapelessness of the fog itself, with its shifting, unpredictable movements.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Fog" isn't identified by name, gender, or any other characteristic. In fact, it's hard to say anything definitive about the speaker. They seem to be in or near a city with a harbor, where a fog appears and then disappears. But even that's not completely certain—the speaker could just be imagining or remembering this fog and the urban [setting](#). In fact, what seems most certain is that the speaker is imaginative, as evidenced by their vivid use of [metaphor](#).

It's possible—though by no means clear—that the speaker of "Fog" is Carl Sandburg himself. Some sources suggest that the poem was inspired by an actual experience Sandburg had while living in Chicago. The poem doesn't explicitly say so, however. Rather, the speaker remains mysterious, just like the fog and, in a sense, the poem itself.



SETTING

The [setting](#) of "Fog" isn't specified, though the poem clearly takes place in or around a "city" with a "harbor" nearby. Of course, many cities have harbors, and the poem could be set in any one of them. However, the speaker, a possible stand-in for Sandburg himself, may have a particular American city in mind: Chicago, Illinois. Sandburg often wrote about Chicago, was a member of what came to be called the Chicago Literary Renaissance, and was living in Chicago when he wrote "Fog"—which appeared in his book *Chicago Poems*.

That said, nothing in the poem pinpoints the location, and in a sense, the location doesn't matter. The lack of identifying detail not only seems thematically fitting—the poem is "foggy" about its setting, speaker, and larger meaning—but also makes "Fog" feel universal and timeless, nowhere and everywhere at once.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Fog" was published in Carl Sandburg's first major poetry collection, *Chicago Poems*, in 1916. At the time, Sandburg was living in Chicago, where he worked as a journalist and wrote

poetry. Though there's no firm indication that "Fog" is about Chicago, it's possible that Sandburg had the city in mind when writing the poem. In fact, some sources have suggested that "Fog" was directly inspired by a Chicago fog, which, as in the poem, appeared by surprise, hovered for a while, then disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"Fog" embodies the approachable, memorable [free verse](#) style that won Sandburg critical acclaim and popular success. Sandburg was heavily influenced by the free verse style of Walt Whitman, and he became, like Whitman, a distinctly American poet fascinated by the sights, sounds, and people of his country. In Chicago, he was encouraged by Harriet Monroe, who founded *Poetry* magazine and published many of his poems. Along with writers like Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser, he was an important member of the movement known as the Chicago Literary Renaissance.

Sandburg wrote about both nature and the increasingly industrialized city, as in "Fog," which combines the cat-like fog with an urban setting. T. S. Eliot had woven a similar image into his longer poem "[The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](#)," which was published in *Poetry* the previous year (1915) and describes a feline-seeming fog that "rubs its back" on the windows of a city.

"Fog" also draws inspiration from the Japanese haiku, a form that packs rich poetic description, often of natural scenery, into just 17 *on* (syllable-like units). In its brevity and rough three-part structure (the fog's appearance, presence, and disappearance), "Fog" represented Sandburg's attempt—as he put it—at "a free-going, independent American [haiku]." In turn, the brevity and intensity of "Fog" anticipates the compression and sharp visual description of a poem like "[The Red Wheelbarrow](#)" (1923), by the imagist poet William Carlos Williams.

Carl Sandburg won three Pulitzer Prizes: two for his poetry and one for *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, the second part of his influential, multi-volume biography of Lincoln. During his time, he was a beloved and well-recognized American cultural figure, and his work continues to influence American poetry today.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though "Fog" could be about any harbor city in America—or the world, for that matter—it's likely that Carl Sandburg had Chicago, Illinois, in mind when he wrote the poem. (Chicago sits on Lake Michigan, and its harbor system extends from that lake to the Chicago River and other surrounding bodies of water.)

The probable setting of Chicago is important for historical reasons. In 1916, when "Fog" was published in Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*, many Midwestern cities (and Chicago especially) were rapidly growing and industrializing, prompting both concern about the effects of industrialization and celebrations of the new, modern American city. Perhaps more

than any other poet, Sandburg explored the tension between the harsh realities and the emerging beauties of the industrial Midwest. (In fact, it's possible that the fog in "Fog" is not lake mist but smoke from factories.)

This period also saw Chicago's development as an important literary hub in America. In 1912, Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (a publication that's still based in the city today), which helped spark a movement that became known as the Chicago Literary Renaissance. Suddenly, New York and other East Coast cities no longer had a monopoly on serious literary culture; artists like Sandburg helped put Chicago on the map. Thus, while "Fog" doesn't reference Chicago specifically, it forms an important part of a body of work that changed the course of American literature.

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/257.html>

- [Who Was Carl Sandburg?](https://poets.org/poet/carl-sandburg) – A short biography of the poet from the Academy of American Poets. (<https://poets.org/poet/carl-sandburg>)
- [Chicago Poems](http://www.esp.org/books/sandburg/chicago/chicago-poems.pdf) – The full text of Chicago Poems, the book in which "Fog" first appeared. (<http://www.esp.org/books/sandburg/chicago/chicago-poems.pdf>)
- [An Interview with Carl Sandburg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGfQS1yNhaQ) – An interview with the poet by NBC. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGfQS1yNhaQ>)



HOW TO CITE



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMgJzVCRCNk) – Listen to Carl Sandburg reading "Fog." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMgJzVCRCNk>)
- [What Was the Chicago Literary Renaissance?](#) – An introduction to the literary movement in which Sandburg played an important role.

MLA

Martin, Kenneth. "Fog." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Oct 2021. Web. 23 Nov 2021.

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Martin, Kenneth. "Fog." LitCharts LLC, October 25, 2021. Retrieved November 23, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carl-sandburg/fog>.