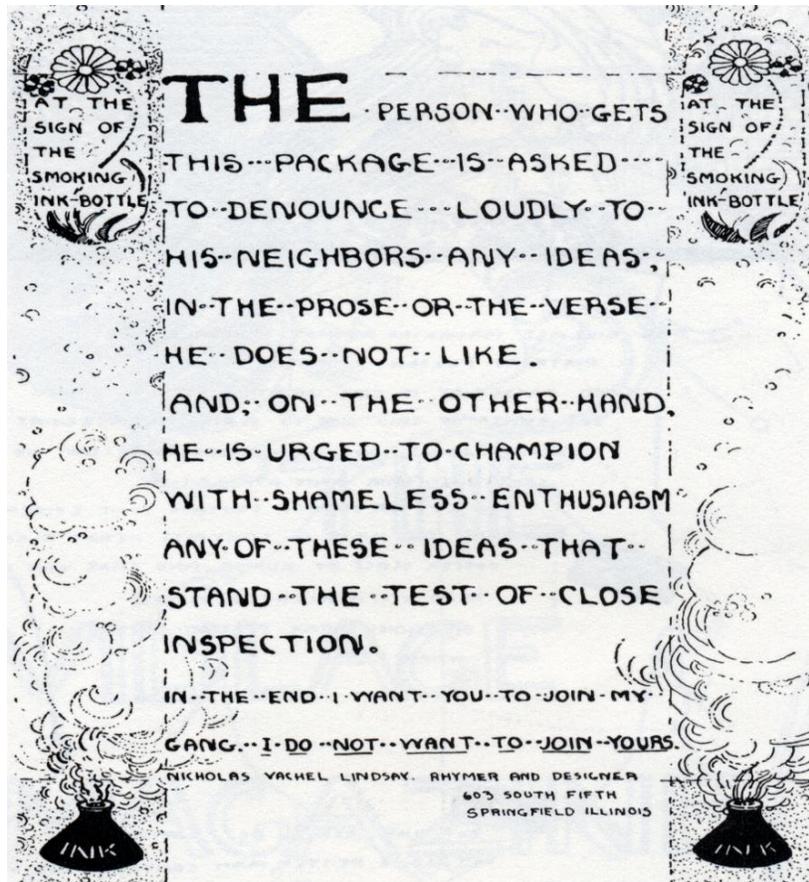


# Uncle Boy

## A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

### Chapter One



[Vachel's insert introducing his self-published *Village Magazine* (1910)]

by

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[This ongoing biography may be read online at [www.VachelLindsayHome.org](http://www.VachelLindsayHome.org)  
 Choose "Biography" and then "Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay."  
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## 1. Introduction to *Uncle Boy*

“I am a Child of Destiny and I am fond of sweets.”

1

Curiously, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay once recorded his own ideas as to what a biography should be: “The essential thing in the biographies,” he observed in a notebook dedicated to art study (1906-08), “is to rouse men to play a part in the Drama of History, to appeal to the sense of adventure of those coming to the big city to make their fortunes, play the great game.” Indeed, playing “the great game” was an essential characteristic of Vachel’s perspective on life; and any biography that fails to capture his serious playfulness is, ultimately, a failure. What happened to Floyd Dell happened to countless other people who met and knew Vachel Lindsay: “I found my lost youth again in another poet, who sent me some verses from Springfield, Illinois, and then came up to Chicago to see me. His name was Nicholas Vachel Lindsay—an ungainly youth, a youth in spite of his being then thirty-six years of age; a mere boy, with his heart full of beautiful and preposterous dreams” (Dell 208-209).

Meeting Vachel through a biography should at least approximate Dell’s experience. Vachel’s boyish antics, for Dell and for many others, were captivating. Indeed, his childlikeness was perhaps the most striking aspect of his adult nature. In his peak creative years, he seemed living proof that Wordsworth’s “hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower,” is seldom far from human reach. Writing about Vachel’s poetry, the practical, but romantic Dell (himself no stranger to anomalous behavior) confessed: “I did not mind its lack of elemental interest; its message—and it was all message, except what was quaintly boyish fantasy—touched my heart” (209). Thus, our subject himself set biographical expectations; and, if we believe Floyd Dell, Vachel’s life and work helped to effect those expectations. To that end, we begin with two biographical games: two childish scenes culled from already published accounts of Vachel’s life. The two incidents happened more than thirty years apart, but when considered together, they begin to explain the sobriquet “Uncle Boy.”

The first vignette is recorded in biographer Eleanor Ruggles’ work, *The West-Going Heart*, and is based on the author’s interviews with Vachel’s older sister, Olive (“Ollie”): “[Vachel] was far from shy, an affectionate and excitable little boy who at home in Springfield raced up and down Fifth Street wearing his Indian suit, his big kite tugging at his arm. When their parents were away he and Ollie played their favorite game with Lucy the cook, a tall, powerful and very black woman. With her kinky hair streaming and stuck through with feathers, she would lead the children in single file around and around the outside of the house, while all three chanted, in an atavistic transport: ‘Injun chief! Injun chief! Injun chief!’” (27). In the combinations of youth and age, cultures and skin colors, Olive’s reminiscence is an emblem that prefigures several

of her brother's mature interests, including his passion for chanting. Olive herself, with her dark hair and dark eyes, was named in memory of her father's first wife, "Ollie" Crouch, a delicate Kentucky girl who had died of tuberculosis. Following Olive came "dandelion-headed Vachel," with his long blond curls, an unlikely "Injun chief," with or without the kite draped over one arm. He was behind in his physical development (due to severe illness in his first year of life); and he was destined, figuratively anyway, never to catch up, always to be something of a boy. At the same time, racial issues, especially in regard to black, white, and Indian, as well as awareness of the contrasting values of the American North and South, were to play important roles in this Injun chief's future thought and work.

The second vignette, recounting events that occurred more than thirty years later, is also based on the memory of childish games played in and around the Lindsay family home. This time the three players are an adult Vachel Lindsay and Olive's two young daughters: Catharine (age four) and Martha (age two). The three marched from room to room, chanting "Yo . . . ho, yo . . . ho"—the chorus from a poem in the making, Uncle Boy's "The Sea Serpent Chantey" (*Poetry* 382). Years later, at age eighteen, Catharine related that her poet uncle "introduced a special feature into the day's proceedings—a ritual which we observed religiously each morning just after breakfast. We three would get excused early from the table and then parade around the dining-room and on into the old-fashioned parlor chanting the 'Sea Serpent Chantey.'"

The year was 1917. Olive had been married to Dr. Paul Wakefield for thirteen years, and the Wakefields, who served as medical missionaries in China, were home on furlough. For little Catharine and little Martha, however, "home" was not Springfield, Illinois, but Nanking, China, the city of their birth. "Neither of us spoke very much English," Catharine later explained, adding that ten years earlier, when her older brother (Vachel Wakefield) had faced a similar language problem, he had been told that in English his new friend was called a "boy" and that this "boy" was his "uncle." Thus, the name "Uncle Boy" evolved, and persisted, as the Wakefield girls also referred to their entertaining playmate as "Uncle Boy" (Catharine Wakefield 126). [Note 1] Although he was 37 years old, Catharine's Uncle Boy was still living at home, as he had been for the past nine years. He had achieved a modicum of fame as the author of three books of prose and three of poetry, and he was currently immersed in writing and rewriting a utopian vision intended to perfect the city of his discontent, a vision he would finally publish as *The Golden Book of Springfield* (1920). He was authoring his vision of the future Springfield, that is, except for the daily poem games and romps with his visiting nieces—childish play reminiscent of the time he himself had stalked about the house as an "Injun chief." In a very real way, Vachel had not grown up: he was both an uncle and a boy. [Note 2]

Six years after the summer of play with his nieces, at age forty-three and in a defiant tone, Uncle Boy proclaimed: "No man may escape his bouncing infancy. I do not expect to get ten feet from my childhood till I die" (*Poetry* 952). At age fifty, in the "Inscription" for his last book of poetry, *Every Soul Is a Circus*, he remained defiant: "This is a book for precocious children, twelve or fifty years of age. All mothers admit their youngsters are precocious. They are right. . . . This book of mine is aggressive, however sinful, and full of pride. If they do not like aggressive verse at twelve, they

never will” (*Poetry* 981, 983). Vachel was reacting to critics who had charged him with immaturity, and his reference to “bouncing infancy” is an important manifestation of his own perspective on his life and work. In fact, the older he grew, the more “aggressive” he became in regard to his boyish fervor.

As with any personal or biographical perspective, however, Uncle Boy’s claim to “bouncing infancy” is true and not true. It is true in that when he became a man he did not always put away childish things. It is not true in that his disposition for boyish behavior constituted but one aspect of his existence. He also loved to play the role of the mature, knowledgeable counselor or guardian, a role that is normally considered characteristic of an “uncle” rather than a “boy.” On occasion, moreover, what many contemporary observers saw as Vachel’s childishness was, more accurately, evidence of his lifelong propensity to express, spontaneously and uncritically, his innermost feelings and ideas. Unlike the average grown-up or, more to the point, unlike the usual concept of the average grown-up, Vachel Lindsay was candid and unaffected to the extreme, often manifesting the vivid imagination and lack of rational control that we typically (but I think carelessly) identify with childishness.

To begin, though, we shall consider Vachel as a man who enjoyed describing himself as “a Child of Destiny and . . . fond of sweets” (*Prose* 162). In this respect, we at least share a side of his life that he himself proposed when, significantly, he expressed frustration with his detractors. Further, Vachel’s boyishness is a consistent theme in the published accounts of those who knew him personally, especially in the remarks recorded by the many who attended his platform performances and by the few who went so far as to read his books.

## 2

That Vachel was characterized as boylike from the very outset of his “higher vaudeville” performances is a fact amply supported by the contents of two family heirlooms. As early as 1914, Frances (“Aunt Fannie”) Frazee Hamilton, Vachel’s aunt (his mother’s youngest surviving sister) and one of his favorite confidantes, purchased a scrapbook to document her nephew’s growing renown. Before her death in 1928, Aunt Fannie filled two large scrapbooks, concentrating not only on her nephew’s own work but also on the reviews, criticism, and interviews published in contemporary magazines and newspapers across this country and, after 1920, from across the Atlantic Ocean as well. Fannie’s books include a rich variety of clippings that describe Vachel’s youthfulness, starting with one of his earliest stage appearances (at age thirty-four) and continuing through the periods in which he gained national and, finally, international recognition.

Typically, one Mrs. George Fitch, in a newspaper review (undated but likely late 1916) proclaims that Vachel’s *Handy Guide for Beggars* is a book “like Vachel Lindsay”: “it is full of the flaming youth of the writer—his zest of life, his cocksureness, his fine rapture in beauty. He is dripping with idealities, and can grow a cosmic theory in any handy jug as instantaneously as a Hindu magician. And he is like a fresh and tonic wind to us older folks whose enthusiasms all have the bitter drop of indifference at the bottom.” Mrs. Fitch then recalls the time “several years ago” [1914], when Vachel addressed the Peoria [Illinois] Woman’s Club, whose members, according to Mrs. Fitch, were “cultured real ladies . . . who were accustomed to the scholarly fitness or the smooth

saccharine of the Victorian writers.” The cultured ladies were in for a surprise: “They had pictured a poet as an ethereal being with a flute for a voice. And when this virile and stalwart youth loosed on them the torrents of his vocabulary, the boom of his resonant voice and his flashing panorama of strange images, they felt as out of place as a celluloid deck on the Mississippi” (“A Peoria Appreciation of Lindsay,” *Peoria Journal-Transcript*).

Mrs. Fitch’s opinions of Vachel’s book, as well as her descriptions of his stage performance, are typical of contemporary appraisals. For example, in a long feature article written for the *Sunday Magazine* of the *New York Morning Telegraph* (June 18, 1922), Roy L. McCardell begins with a brief biographical comment: “Nicholas Vachel Lindsay was born in Springfield, Illinois, some forty-odd years ago, but he has never grown out of his teens in heart and spirit.” Other reporters were amused by the obvious contrast between Vachel’s youthfulness and the ages of typical members of his audiences, as illustrated by the following title from a Detroit newspaper: “Women Yodel Vagabond Airs / Vachel Lindsay Throws His Head Back and Gray-Haired Club Members Sing, Too.” This particular reporter, Leonard Lanson Cline, was covering Vachel’s first appearance in Detroit: during the fall of 1918, just a year after his summer games with nieces Catharine and Martha. Cline describes the performer’s “virility” (“this was a man’s man”), and then he alludes to the age of the audience: “the women in the audience forgot their gray hairs or their polite restraint and yodeled at him, after he had shown them how.”

About the same time, a Cleveland reporter was apparently not ready to equate Vachel’s playfulness with serious literature: “Hear Banging Drum? ’Tis Poetry,” the title announces, but the anonymous reporter was, to say the least, skeptical. Still others were overtly hostile, at least in regard to Vachel’s childlikeness. In a review of *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (from an untitled and unidentified newspaper, probably late 1917), one O.W. Firkins grants that “Mr. Vachel Lindsay is a true poet and an earnest man.” But, Firkins continues, “he gives too much play to his elfishness, if I may so define his pursuit of freak insensible images. He is a pleader for great causes; he would arrest the flow of wine and of blood; and his apostleship ought to dignify, or even consecrate, his fantasies. But somehow the fantasies are unconverted. The whimsicality joins the crusade as Falstaff went to the wars; the enlistment itself is partly whimsical. Moreover, it is curious even among freaks. It is prankish, but not gay, and in such material, if I may risk the paradox, the defense against absurdity is humor. A comedian may fittingly stand on one leg; an anchorite in the same pose is out of keeping. Let Mr. Lindsay write ‘poem games,’ if he will, but why five pages of sapient prose exordium? Must poetry solemnize its amalgamation with play? Must we take our teddy-bears to the christening fount?”

Reporters like Firkins, though, were in the minority, even if we take into consideration that the many approving newspaper reviews in Fannie’s scrapbooks reflect the selective bias of a devoted aunt. Typical descriptive words for Fannie’s nephew’s performances are “new,” “virile,” “fresh,” “naive,” “candid,” “youthful,” and even “flaming youth,” whether or not the reviewer is appreciative or depreciative.

Meanwhile, scholarly evaluations of Vachel’s published work during his own era are in general agreement with the newspaper reviews. In the *North American Review* (January 1924), for instance, Herbert S. Gorman declares: “I have said that naïveté is a

necessary corollary of evangelism, and considered from certain aspects Vachel Lindsay is the most naïve poet that we have. His heart is always exposed. His passions are unveiled. He is unique in his spontaneous giving of himself to the casual reader. There is a clean, childlike quality about him, and it comes most naturally when we observe him fashioning dance poems for children or moon poems which are first of all children's rhymes and only secondarily meant for adults" (Flanagan 14-15).

Hazelton Spencer, Vachel's friend and a Macmillan Company editor, entitled his essay, "Lindsay and the Child's Approach to Art," for the Lindsay Memorial Number of *The Elementary English Review* (May 1932). Spencer avers: "Lindsay's poetry is like the man—direct, outspoken, uncompromising. That is the kind of poetry children love best, for they hate a literary pussy-footer . . . children responded warmly to the man Lindsay and to his noble chanting. Perhaps they sensed that in some respects he had never ceased to be one of them. Now that the great heart has stopped and the rich voice is stilled, what of the key that for so many children opened magic casements on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn? To fling wide those windows was Lindsay's special function in the schools" (120, 131).

Albert Edmund Trombly, author of the first book-length Lindsay biography (1927), established his perspective on his subject by noting that the poet "says in one of his prefaces that he does not expect to get very far away from the boy he was at six years of age" (2), presumably referring to Vachel's claim to "bouncing infancy" quoted above. A year after Trombly's book was published, an unsympathetic Gorham B. Munson entitled his deprecatory remarks: "Vachel Lindsay, Child-Errant." Munson's summation is: "In a word or two, Vachel Lindsay's poetry is mainly an agent for voicing his yearnings and wishes with intervals for preachment or fancies, or buffoonery" (73). Meanwhile, Vachel's second book-length biographer, Edgar Lee Masters, concludes: "Whether at Gulfport or Spokane, whether at New York or on the tramp, Lindsay dwelt forever in cuckoo cloudland, and so far as he could fortify himself against realities of life with moons and mists, and the playthings of childhood he could dream magical cities and plan great campaigns for the reclamation of his country. He never really grew up. The curled darling became a man of great emotional strength; but the memory of himself as the apple of his mother's eye, as the child wonder of the grammar school, produced a sort of Narcissism, not very marked, and not at all offensive, but still definite and recognizable. He was not exactly stunted, but rather he reached a full maturity while remaining in many ways a child" (352).

In 1925, critic Llewellyn Jones, then editor of the *Chicago Evening Post Friday Literary Review*, struggled with the positive and negative implications of Vachel's childlike naiveté. Focusing on *Collected Poems*, Jones argues: "Lindsay has a playful fancy and he will indulge it on any subject and unblushingly print the result, even in his collected works, but his imagination (as opposed to fancy) is not playful, or if it be playful it is the playfulness of a Campbellite Christian, of a millennium-seeking soul" (85). Jones uses descriptive phrases such as "prolonged adolescence" (87) and continues: "What we shall expect, then, in these poems, is primarily large and roseate vision and riotous fancy which is, however, always bent to some religious end—except when it is disporting itself with children—and a lot of very uncritical hero-worship" (88). Jones then concludes: "The fact that this volume is entitled 'Collected Poems' does not mean

that we can yet sum Mr. Lindsay up completely. He is not only young in years but he is young in mind. To a certain type of reader, the optimistic and millennial tone of his thought will be taken as equally indicative, as is his giving rein to mere fancy, of something immature in him. But even if we grant the immaturity—the failure of his mind to be rigidly selective—we have to admit a large number of successes in his work . . .” (95).

By 1932, a year after Vachel’s death, one of his lifelong friends, Witter Bynner, obviously felt in position to “sum Mr. Lindsay up completely.” In his essay “The Whole Lindsay,” Bynner confesses that he does not care for Lindsay’s poems for children, presumably poems like “The Sea Serpent Chantey”: “one may regret that he indulged his genius too often in trivial exercises, that he was too often misled from magic to the mediocre.” The best poems, Bynner argues, reflect “the singing child-heart of Lindsay. And this is why I have not liked those poems of his which are intentionally and technically childish”:

From the beginning, he was a child and spoke to the child in the hearts of his hearers. His responses to life were those of a child unfrightened by growing up. The Golden City which he wished his town to become was a town laid out in toy-blocks by an imaginative child. The Negro, whom he felt and echoed in his “Congo” was the Negro a wise child would feel when brought under the spell of Negro rhythm, charm and fate. And his “Chinese Nightingale” sings forever, against growing maturity and consciousness, the dawn of romantic love. So does his earlier “General Booth” ascend to heaven in the eyes of a child listening from the curbstone to the impressive emotion and simple rhythm of the Salvation Army. Even his “Lincoln” is the Lincoln of a thoughtful schoolchild, as all his flesh and blood heroes—except perhaps Altgeld—are the heroes of a boy dreaming in a schoolroom.

Bynner adds that he does not intend to “disparage Vachel Lindsay”: “I would to God there were more modern poets who could bring a childlike faith and fervor to their song of life” (129).

Bynner’s views are echoed by another friend, Christopher Morley, whose tribute was written only a week after Vachel’s death (December 5, 1931): “The one thing that we will always think of in connection with Vachel Lindsay was his youth and boyish spirit. He was fifty-two when he died, and yet he was nothing more than a boy. He was poetry as we like to think of poetry—the living spirit of youth and of the human heart opening itself to the winds and sunlight and starlight of every night and day. . .” (quoted in South, *Cousin Vachel* 99). Yet another friend, Louis Untermeyer, remarks on Lindsay’s “indomitable energy, such a steadfast, skylarking, overbrimming sense of life” (126). Untermeyer recalls an evening during which Vachel illustrated his theories of a personal hieroglyphic. When someone asked—“how does that bring us to poetry?”—Vachel responded: “That’s the next step . . . . You must proceed with the same childlike simplicity. The greatest poetry is the simplest. It all begins with a half-conscious rhythm, an unsophisticated chant, a sort of glorified nursery rhyme.” Today, Untermeyer’s conclusion seems all too obvious: “Here Vachel was describing, more or less unconsciously, his own poetry” (136).

Louis Untermeyer was one friend, however, who recognized that, on certain occasions, Vachel Lindsay was not as naive as he appeared: “Vachel was always mixing the ingenuous poet and the industrious pamphleteer; a seeming innocent, he had guile enough to appear guileless” (131). The accuracy of Untermeyer’s observation is readily apparent in many of Vachel’s surviving letters (of which there are hundreds, perhaps thousands). In 1914, for example, at age thirty-four, and living at home with his elderly parents, Vachel lectured Sara Teasdale: “Old age and youth live in two universes. I feel for you child, in your struggle. Yet it is a battle I myself have somehow strangely won these latter years, and my home now is such that I have entered into a second boyhood almost—and am as naturally in place as though only twelve years old. But many special circumstances may have brought this about. Few others work it as well” (Carpenter 187). In his correspondence with older women, women who frequently seemed to serve as surrogate mothers for Vachel, passages that reflect boyish posturing are common. He wrote to Jessie Rittenhouse that he would attend her annual poets’ party and then confided: “I hope to have the honor of being your escort for the poetry banquet, and if there are any little details and matters of technique involved in that high office which I appear to neglect, please give me a few broad hints even before the emergency occurs<sup>^</sup>, for I am a child in arms in these matters, and I certainly want to be a credit to you” (January 2, 1915, Rollins). The next year, after complaining rather bitterly that his publisher had cut several parts of *A Handy Guide for Beggars*, Vachel apologized to Harriet Moody, another older, favorite confidante: “Well I am a spoiled child and should not complain for everyone fools me to the top of my bent [that is, as much as I can take] most days. One day of calling down is good for the soul” (September 23, 1916). Similar posturing is apparent in letters to Harriet Monroe, Katharine Lee Bates, and Frances Hamilton, all of whom were women approximately a generation older than their correspondent.

Vachel’s obvious delight in writing to older women reflects, in part, his lasting respect for his mother, Catharine Frazee. He was especially reliant on her judgment; and it is likely, therefore, that she provided the primary reason for her son’s continuing emphasis on youth. Although warning us against parceling out an intellect “by geometric rules,” Wordsworth himself conjectured that his values could be traced to his mother’s influence (*Prelude* 2). A similar conjecture is possible with Vachel Lindsay. While he was a student at Hiram College, to cite just one example, he received a letter in which his mother praised the leaders of the family church, the Christian Church (popularly referred to as the Disciples or Campbellites): “The one characteristic of our people that impressed me most in our last convention is one that is never suggested by anything I see or feel in mingling with other religious people. It is the same characteristic that I find in your orations—undeveloped strength of youth, a beginning of growth; this is the strongest characteristic of our People—and it is not manifested in the ‘Higher Critic’—over-educated, wise, self-conscious class—who think they are in the lead—folks just like them are in the lead in every other church, more or less . . .” (December 25, 1899, Virginia—misquoted by Masters 90).

In a personal notebook entitled “Homiletics,” a notebook started soon after the above letter was written, Vachel largely substantiated his mother’s views. One entry,

dated “August 5, 1900,” reads: “Such of Christianity as cannot be grasped in a childlike way by the Child mind is not Christianity. Christianity grows like our bodies—there are no new bones added to the skeleton—however it may be tinsel and tasseled by the presuming practice of mankind. . . . The communion is intelligible in its elements to children—the baptism—the confession, the growth in grace and missionary zeal—the whole story of Christ’s life and death” (37). A few months later (December 1900), in another notebook, Vachel mused: “We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it” (“What I remember^ of The Science of English” 63). [Note 3]

Whether from his mother or the New Testament or another source, the childlike frame of reference is an essential part of Vachel’s life story. Albert Trombly asserts that “the best of [Lindsay’s] love-poems are informed with the pathos of broken wings, the pathos of a child’s reaching for the unattainable” (93). An unidentified New York girl confessed to Trombly that, in 1907-08, when Vachel came to visit her, “he would bring his one lone orange, the only dessert his boarding-house supplied, or a peppermint stick such as a child buys” (37). Many other friends commented on Vachel’s love for cake and candy, generally equating his craving with his boyishness. Stuart’s Confectionery, a Springfield candy store, “is my favorite tavern,” Vachel himself confessed to Sara Teasdale (January 3, 1914, Yale 18). Three years later, after his potentially awkward first meeting with Teasdale’s husband, Vachel closed his thank-you letter on a playful note: “My one bitter regret is that I did not take three more of those chocolate peppermints. I found myself just yearning for them on the way home” (February 9, 1917, Yale 174).

Vachel, then, enjoyed depicting himself as “a Child of Destiny,” and an important part of his sometimes posing was his often-expressed fondness for candy. His sweet tooth, however, is reminiscent of other aspects of his character. He genuinely liked sweets, but he also liked to use his mannerisms to poke gentle fun, usually at himself. And, on occasion, as we will see, he used his idiosyncrasies to control or at least to conceal painful or awkward feelings.

## 4

If the “Boy” aspect of Uncle Boy established itself as a critical commonplace even in Vachel’s own day, the “Uncle” side of his nature, in contrast, was and is seldom commented on. Vachel’s life story, nonetheless, reflects a curious mixture of the child, on the one hand, and the avuncular, experienced, evangelical counselor/proselytizer, on the other. “He divided himself into two Lindsays,” his friend Witter Bynner contends: “The Lindsay who must be a thinker and must write importantly, who must be a technician of parts and must write subtly, he separated from the Lindsay who must be a playboy and who must romp with children like a Father Goose; and he thereby left behind him the whole Lindsay who should have remained a heaven-sent child through all vicissitudes” (131). Bynner does not elaborate, but Vachel’s well-documented love for Springfield is often expressed in terms of a father/uncle/teacher figure who views his city of discontent in much the same light as Professor Higgins/Pygmalion views Eliza Doolittle/Galatea. “Pity Springfield,” Vachel advised fellow poet George Sterling: “Do not pity me. The poor little town is in for it.” Vachel had sent Sterling a copy of “The Soul of the City Receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit,” and he explained that others in Springfield “have tried every kind of purgation. . . . Now I will see what the angels can do—each one with a censer in its hand. Springfield shall be whipped by these angels and sent to Sunday-

School like a naughty child. That is—I hope so” (Chénetier 70). Two years later, Vachel repeated his intent in a letter to Harriet Moody: “Springfield—my dear Harriet—is my kindergarden<sup>^</sup>. Never you mind—it will be a well-reared child some day. I am educating it every minute” (January 2, 1915).

As part of the “educating,” mentor Lindsay tutored a select group of Springfield High School boys during winter months, beginning in 1910 and continuing to the spring of 1914. With the help of Susan Wilcox, his own high school teacher, Vachel chose boys that he believed to be the cream of the junior and senior classes. And in early 1914, toward the end of his fourth class, he summarized his perspective in a letter to Sara Teasdale: “I try to get the High School leaders—and these are live ones I’ll tell you. They are the joy of my life. Then, after they go to college—they come back and take walks with me Christmastime. They get to be men mighty quick. Thus I have new friends coming on all the time, and keep in touch with the young blood of the town.” Vachel’s letter, written late at night after the weekly meeting of the “class,” includes an example of the teacher’s pedagogy: “We had warm debates tonight. Every man named the local and national reforms for which he would be willing to shed his blood, if that were the way to help. One wanted more efficient High Schools, a stronger Chief of police—and a nationalized educational system. Another wanted a dry state and nation. Another wanted Professional legally educated salaried Jurymen—. And the debate was warm” (January 7, 1914, Yale 20).

A week later, again in a letter to Teasdale written after his class, Vachel further explained his intent: “And of course 2/3 of the boys will leave the town forever, when they graduate from High School. But every year there will be one or two left over to take walks with—and it is my hope at the end of ten years or so to have say—six or ten, still in town whose Ideas I have really soaked up and who have a grasp of mine—and with these ten—we will say, we can really start in to change the atmosphere of the town.” His purposes, the teacher confessed, would amount to “lots of waste and lots of waiting, before the bunch is really built up”; but, he added, he did not mind waiting: “Meanwhile [the boys] are delightful company” (January 14, 1914, Yale 25). The very next week Teasdale was apprised that the boys had been back to “class,” this time with their dates. He did “not do much with them,” Vachel contended: “I am rather like the old woman who lived in the shoe who had so many children she didn’t know what to do.” However, he confessed: “I just feed on their youth, like a vampire” (January 20, 1914, Yale 28).

Indeed, the teacher/uncle aspect of Vachel’s character was seldom far removed. Ten years or so after his informal classes, he poured his old-woman-who-lived-in-the-shoe feelings into a poem, “These Are the Young,” the opening work in *Going-to-the-Stars* (1926):

“This is a chosen people,  
This is a separate race,  
Speaking an alien tongue—  
These are the darlings of my heart,  
These are the young.” (*Poetry* 559)

These “darlings” finally led to Vachel’s often-expressed preference, especially in the 1920s, for poetry performances at colleges and high schools, rather than at women’s

clubs. In actuality, though, the school appearances started as early as May 1914, when Vachel was invited to read his poetry at Knox College. Franz Lee Rickaby, a Knox freshman and a “graduate” of Vachel’s special Springfield classes, arranged the reading. In the end, Rickaby’s former teacher was a resounding success, and he seemingly began to realize that the stage was to be an important part of his future: “the applause was so clean-cut and strong,” he exulted to Sara Teasdale: “it looks like the Platform is inevitable” (May 23, 1914, Yale 108). [Note 4]

Less than a year after the Knox recital, to his genuine satisfaction, Vachel reported that he had performed before many other college students. “I am making friends in the very heart of the ‘works’ of America,” he wrote to his parents: “—and it is particularly remarkable the way the Literary departments of the Universities come my way. I am delighted—because they instruct the next generation” (February 24, 1915, Library of Congress). Soon afterward, in what is now a fragment of a letter, Vachel repeated his views to Professor George H. Palmer of the Wellesley College English Department: “I think it is a wonderful thing to be placed as you are where you can guide so many ardent young spirits. The earnest college Graduate is about the most charming creature upon the face of the Earth. The blessed lambs are so full of unspoiled ardor and sweetness of soul. Spring comes on forever—forever and forever” (April or May 1915, Wellesley). Frederic G. Melcher, who attended a Lindsay recital for a thousand students at a Montclair, New Jersey high school (February 1920), also recalls the performer’s enthusiasm for students. Before the recital, according to Melcher, Vachel proclaimed: “At the teen-age level you either have the whole group at attention or you have none.” Following the recital, Melcher relates, Vachel “had them all” (16).

Beginning about 1915, Vachel’s missionary zeal for young students and for Springfield was combined with an emerging zeal to create artistic principles for America’s new film medium, what Vachel describes as “Edison’s great invention” (*Poetry* 740). In point of fact, Vachel’s *Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) is the world’s initial book-length study of film as an art form; and it was a matter of great pride for the author that Columbia University professor, Victor O. Freeburg, adopted the work as a text to instruct his students in “photoplay construction,” as Freeburg referred to filmmaking. In early 1916, Vachel made what was to be the first of a number of annual visits to Freeburg’s classes; and Epes W. Sargent, who attended Vachel’s 1917 presentation, has left us with an important clue as to the reason for the speaker’s newest enthusiasm: “Perhaps Mr. Lindsay’s most striking remark was his explanation of the greater favor the pictures find with the younger generation. No person over thirty-five, he asserts, can take the same interest in photoplay as the younger generation because photoplay is a new language.” According to Sargent, Uncle Lindsay then used his two young nieces as examples. Catharine and Martha Wakefield, Vachel argued, “speak Chinese as fluently as English because they were born in that country and absorbed the language”:

In precisely the same way photoplay is a new language of art expression, and like all innovations is more readily accepted by those whose minds have not become too firmly committed to old ideals. The younger generation, educated instinctively to photoplay, more readily accept it as the art it is than those to whom it is merely a

radical departure from sound, established ideas, in which, because of its newness, there can be no great good. (1583)

Vachel's attention to the principles of filmmaking was consistent with his goal of providing direction for the young, the "darlings" of his heart. Film was the artistic medium of and for the new generation.

From his mother's perspective, anyway, an avuncular concern for the well-being of others was one of Vachel's earliest traits. Catharine remembered when her teenage son "attracted comment by running to the assistance of a dirty old woman who had fallen down in the middle of the street" at a Springfield railroad crossing. "Again," Catharine continued, "when a miserable old man fell down drunk near our front yard, he picked him up and, with his arm around him, talked to him encouragingly until he had led him to his home near South Grand Ave. [about eight blocks away]."

As Vachel matured, this purposefulness endured, although his attention increasingly focused on the younger generation rather than the older. His life story includes efforts to help a young Russian poet, Marya Zaturenska, and a young black waiter, Langston Hughes. In his final years of life (1930-31), he was intent on gaining recognition for promising Springfield High School student, Robert Fitzgerald, the nephew of Art Fitzgerald, Vachel's friend from his high school days. In the October 1982 issue of *Poetry—A Magazine of Verse* (the 60th anniversary issue), Robert Fitzgerald published a brief memoir in which he acknowledges the efforts of his famous and fifty-year-old friend: "Kind and avuncular Vachel made me send some poems to *Poetry*, whence came in December, 1930, a letter of acceptance in fine italic script from the Associate Editor, Morton Dawen Zabel, of whose critical distinction I would have the benefit thereafter through years of friendship and correspondence" (35). Fitzgerald's poems appeared in August 1931, just a few months before "Kind and avuncular" Vachel's death. Fitzgerald, of course, continued to write and publish poetry, as well as to establish himself as a critically acclaimed translator of Sophocles, Virgil, and Homer.

## 5

The "Uncle" side of "Uncle Boy," however, is most easily seen in his romantic relationships, especially those dating from his thirtieth year. Ironically, as these relationships matured, the "boy" side also became manifest. We have noted that, often in a boyish manner, Vachel was attracted to older women—Harriet Monroe, Harriet Moody, Katharine Lee Bates, Jessie Rittenhouse—all of whom seem to have served, in various ways, as mother surrogates. In traditional romantic relationships, on the other hand, Vachel consistently preferred women who were youthful, often very youthful: Nellie Vieira, Mary Johnson, Sara Teasdale, Eleanor Dougherty, Isadora Bennett, Elizabeth Mann Wills, and his wife-to-be, Elizabeth Conner (who was some twenty-two years younger than her husband). Vachel's infatuation with Nellie Vieira (who was twelve years his junior) belongs to a later chapter in his life, but the pattern of his courtship is characteristic of nearly all his adult romantic encounters. In this respect, the relationship offers an especially apt illustration of both the "uncle" and the "boy" in Uncle Boy.

Vachel's letters to Vieira were unknown to biographers Trombly, Ruggles, and Masters, not having been made public until March 1968, when Elizabeth Thomas Fowler completed her annotated edition. Lindsay and Vieira met in the fall, probably 1898,

when she was in the first grade and he was a Hiram College student: “Their mothers were friends and co-workers in the Missionary Social Union, founded by Mrs. Lindsay as an organization of ecumenically minded women from all the Protestant churches of Springfield” (Fowler 22). Sarah Sylvester Vieira was also Catharine Lindsay’s seamstress; and while mothers Lindsay and Vieira sewed clothes and discussed projects for worldwide Christian unity, Vachel entertained young Nellie with rides in one of his father’s ratty buggies. Successive summers saw many such rides (Fowler 23).

After ten or more years, in June 1909, Vieira was graduated as salutatorian of her Springfield High School class, winning additional honors for her oratorical abilities, honors that Vachel likely associated with his mother’s considerable public-speaking skills. His excitement over Vieira’s successes, along with her dark Portuguese beauty and their mothers’ continuing togetherness, sparked a very innocent summer romance, with eighteen-year-old Vieira a somewhat willing participant and Vachel, nearing his thirtieth birthday, behaving like an infatuated gallant addicted to the grand chivalric style. Vieira was the child of relatively poor immigrant parents and lacked funds to attend a four-year college, although she did win a two-year scholarship at the Cumnock School of Oratory, then part of Northwestern University. Between June and September 1909, when she began her elocutionary studies in Evanston, Nellie and Vachel walked, read Carlyle, and—on one electric night—shared a single kiss under what became for Vachel a particularly unforgettable tree. Sometime in August or early September, the two quarreled, parted company, but were soon after reconciled, with Vachel giving Vieira a keepsake locket to wear at college.

While Vieira was in her first term at Cumnock, Vachel wrote almost daily, and sometimes twice or more a day. In one of his letters (October 12, 1909), he explained his intentions: “I thank you heartily for reading what I have asked you to read, and trying to do one or two of the things I have advised. I am selfish in all this. I flatter myself I am just trying to educate you in an impersonal way, but behind it all is the fear that unless I take precautions to get us somewhat on the same ground, we may not fit each other well enough for comfort, it is somewhat the unholy fear of having you reach maturity and harden into an admirable person, but one rather useless to me, for purposes of constructive living and thinking. Yet I do not want to be so cranky and special in my ideas that I will spoil you for anybody else” (Fowler 153-154). This letter (and similar correspondence sent this fall) exemplifies Vachel’s Pygmalion temperament, that is, the “Uncle” aspect of his nature. He liked to contrast Vieira’s youth and innocence with his own age and experience: “I Thank^ God you are so young. Youth is delightful in itself—and besides I feel you have a good start in soul growth—for your age, and you can grow up and up now, sheltered in Evenston^, when the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (September 23, Fowler 75). Two weeks later, he asserted: “I am writing to the Youth and the Hope in you, it is the young blood in you that is dearest of all. I want to be young like you” (October 6, Fowler 114).

By mid-October, however, the relationship was beginning to cool, and the tone of Vachel’s letters changes dramatically. In the October 12 letter cited above, for example, Vachel went on to claim: “Somehow—the Woman is the keeper for man. When I give you a book, I feel that it is my book, in the hands of the maid who will keep it dusted . . . I cannot keep things, do not like to. But it gives me a delight to feel that lovely things are

being cherished by lovely hands, that I am sending silk and feathers to help line a nest that maybe is being built for me, certainly for some good man, and I know the little bird will use every bit of floss to advantage” (Fowler 154). When Vieira did not write as often as her correspondent desired, he suggested a letter for her. She was to begin by addressing him as “Dear Boy.” Then, in January 1910, when the relationship was clearly finished, at least from Vieira’s perspective, Vachel complained: “I have appointed you my custodian, and you refuse to take your job seriously. If you do not like it—resign. If you do like it, work. I need as much attention as a sick rabbit, and must have it. Now do not be cross. Write me a nice motherly letter” (January 16, Fowler 321). In essence, Vachel had effected a reversal, abandoning the assumed role of a concerned uncle/Pygmalion and revealing the emotional distress of a rejected boy. Meanwhile, Vieira was transformed from a dependent little girl to a responsible mother—was transformed, that is, had she allowed the relationship to continue. She did not: she resigned—in accordance with Vachel’s ultimatum.

Similar reversals recurred in Vachel’s other mature courtships—and continued, to his wife’s sometimes dismay, in his marriage. Either side of his nature, the uncle or the boy, had the potential to rise to the fore, and often did, at times within days or even hours of one another. Vachel could be generous and protective, but he could also demand motherly care and attention. The mood variations could be striking.

## 6

Vachel’s values, on the other hand, and his devotion to those values changed very little, so that his life story also evidences remarkable uniformity. He was a man of consistent inconsistencies, as it were. He had a forthright missionary desire to help people, especially young people, yet as a man he often behaved as a child who begged for pampering and attention. He adored Franciscan solitude but reveled in public acclaim—only to return once more to being a fierce advocate of St. Francis. He loved “the 90 million Americans,” as he often insisted to Sara Teasdale and to others, but he issued *War Bulletins* that announce: “To the Devil with you, average reader.” And, in his later years, he fought like the Devil himself with audiences that wanted to hear “The Congo” or “General William Booth Enters into Heaven.” With women, Vachel could be Sir Walter Raleigh [“Raleigh” is a misspelling] or, in his own estimation, “a sick rabbit.” With his parents, he was rebellion and respect personified. In youth, he was considered exceptionally mature; in age, he was often described as childlike. Indeed, the dialectic reflected in the sobriquet Uncle Boy, with all the tension implicit in any dialectic, provides, I believe, a useful frame of reference for understanding the manifest ambiguities in Vachel Lindsay’s life story.

Finally, although I realize the potential for error in what Vachel himself termed “psychological pathfinding,” I suspect that the depths of Uncle Boy’s life might not have been as unusual as the surface suggests. I realize that even his closest friends considered him “different” or “peculiar”; his enemies dismissed him as a “buffoon” or a “nut.” But I am not convinced that Vachel Lindsay’s difference lies so much in his anomalous behavior as it lies in his readiness to speak of his emotions at the moment, each and every moment, no matter how diverse the moments, no matter how diverse the emotions. Most adults practice at least a modicum of reserve: Vachel seldom wore his heart anywhere but on his sleeve. [Note 5]

In my own experience, susceptibility to nearly simultaneous adult and childish inclinations, no matter what a person's chronological age, seems unusual only if an attempt is made to reduce human life to logical regularity. Few sensitive people make such a mistake, so that it is easy to find ambiguous youth-age combinations in the literature of western culture. Wordsworth proclaims the child as "father of the man," as well as the "best Philosopher" ("Intimations of Immortality"); Jesus of Nazareth praises children because "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14); Thomas Hardy's "Father Time" is, in actuality, a precocious stripling (*Jude the Obscure*); Euripides depicts and then defends the immature behavior of ancient Cadmus and Tiresias in *The Bacchae*; and William Butler Yeats knew all too well the childhood dreams that haunt "A sixty-year-old smiling public man" ("Among School Children"). La Rochefoucauld, a writer often credited with profound insights into the human condition, suggests: "Childishness follows us all the days of our life. If anybody seems wise it is only because his follies are in keeping with his age and circumstances"; or, more simply, "Not many know how to be old" (maxims 207, 423: Leonard W. Tancock, translator). Vachel Lindsay's characteristic frankness can provide insight into our human nature, especially for those of us who experience mixtures of boy-uncle or girl-aunt feelings but who are more artful than Vachel in maintaining surface consistency. As for Uncle Boy himself, Sherwood Anderson has inadvertently left some very sound advice: "The thing to get at is what the writer, or the young thing within the writer, was thinking about" ("Book of the Grotesque," *Winesburg, Ohio*). The young thing within the writer: that is the key to the life story of Uncle Boy.

### Notes for Chapter One

[Note 1] Catharine, now Catharine Wakefield Ward, provided additional details in a personal letter (May 12, 1987). The Lindsay family often repeated names, so the genealogy can be confusing. Poet Vachel's mother was Catharine ("Kate") Frazee, while Catharine Wakefield Ward and Catharine Frazee Blair are his nieces. Vachel's older sister Olive married Paul Wakefield, and they had four children: Vachel, Mary, Catharine, and Martha. Vachel's younger sister Joy married Benjamin Blair, and they had six children: Vachel, Benita, Catharine, Alexander, Francis, and Harrison. Besides having a grandfather, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, and a father, Vachel Thomas Lindsay, our Vachel had two nephews: Vachel Lindsay Wakefield and Vachel Lindsay Blair.

[Note 2] In *Tramping with a Poet in the Rockies*, Stephen Graham quotes Vachel: "There is a great romance connected with the Indians; there are the traditions of the battles with them; there is the personal grandeur of the braves. Every American boy has longed to be an Indian chief. And then there is the strain of Pocahontas, the Indian princess, married into the pride of Virginia. I believe an Indian President is just what we want to root us in America and give us a genuine American inspiration. It would bring poetry into politics. It would bring all the glamour of the West" (215-216). See also Vachel's "How Mrs. Joy Celebrated Peace," *The New Republic* 17 (November 23, 1918): 102, now available online at [www.VachelLindsayHome.org](http://www.VachelLindsayHome.org) – in the section entitled "Biography" and the subsection "Essays & Stories."

[Note 3] Edgar Lee Masters misquotes the first part of this entry (84).

[Note 4] Stephen Graham asserts, for example: “Vachel is devoted to the universities and high schools of America and the life they represent. He has almost completely changed his constituency from the ‘ladies’ club’ and the heavy society of Mr. and Mrs. Leo Hunter and is now a poetic voice of young germinal America” (98-99). Mr. and Mrs. Leo Hunter are the “heavy society” figures satirized in Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers*, Chapter 15.

[Note 5] On December 31, 1898, Hiram College sophomore Nicholas Vachel Lindsay submitted his thesis paper for “Psychology.” Entitled “The Development of Conscious Life,” the essay states that the first day of life, “that day of squirming and squalling and blankets,” finds the human being “a mystery forever fathomless, a dark sea where we may dive, but never find bottom, where we can little more than guess where we venture to know” (Virginia). About fifteen years later, the subject of this sophomore paper would become the focus of a poem, “The Would-Be Merman” (*Poetry* 269).

### Photograph for Chapter One



NICHOLAS VACHEL LINDSAY  
at six months. June 10, 1880

Perhaps the earliest picture of Uncle Boy, published in South’s *Cousin Vachel*.

