



Spoon River Anthology

BY EDGAR LEE MASTERS



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SENIOR EDITOR: Paul Moliken

EDITORS: Lisa M. Miller and Mary Grimes

COVER DESIGN: Larry Knox

PRODUCTION: Jerry Clark



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P.O. BOX 658 • CLAYTON, DELAWARE 19938

TEL: 1.800.932.4593

FAX: 1.888.718.9333

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Edgar Lee Masters was born in Garnett, Kansas, on August 23, 1868. During the first ten years of his life, both a brother and a best friend died, which influenced the young Masters and stimulated his interest in how death affects the living, who are left behind.

In 1880, he and the rest of the family moved to Lewistown, Illinois, near the actual Spoon River.

He married Helen M. Jenkins in 1898, and Masters began to practice law, which he did for nearly thirty years. Intermittently, though, Masters wrote poems, a play, a few novels, and essays. None however achieved nearly the fame of his most popular work, *Spoon River Anthology*, the collection of epitaphs in free verse for which he is most famous. This collection of the secret lives of seemingly ordinary citizens instantly placed Masters in the company of Whitman and other great American poets, at least in the minds of the reading public and some critics. His rightful place among the literary greats, however, is debated, even today.

Later in his life, Masters wrote biographies of Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Abe Lincoln. After a bitter divorce and a long fight against pneumonia, Masters married again and moved to New York, where he retired from the law.

Masters died in 1950. He is remembered as a transitional poet, one whose work laid the groundwork for many of the poets of the mid-twentieth century.

Pointers

R E A D I N G P O I N T E R S

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

To fully appreciate the complexities found in Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, be aware of the following concepts as you read:

1. **Setting:** Imagine a graveyard in Spoon River, Illinois. It is a fictitious, small town, where everyone knows everyone. Many of the characters are actual portrayals of people Masters knew from his own hometown, Lewistown, Illinois, and from his grandparents' town, Petersburg, Illinois. For this anthology, Masters created individual epitaphs for the townspeople.

Spoon River was a community that longed for perfection. The town officials and many of the townspeople wanted their town to be free of sin and full of faith and goodness. As a result, this conservative town became extremely judgmental, harsh, and conforming, which caused hostility and animosity in some of them.

2. **Epitaphs:**

- Masters chose to write the epitaphs using a free verse poetic form; this technique adds to the unique style of *Spoon River Anthology*.
- The inhabitants have written their own epitaph after their death.
- The epitaphs are written with honesty, confidence, and are free of shame. During life, everyday facades typically hinder people from telling the whole truth; now that they are dead, they have nothing to fear.
- The afterlife is not a typical topic in the epitaphs because the dead seem most concerned with other issues (their gravesite, the way they died, their actions during life, asking for forgiveness, the community, etc.).
- Many epitaphs are used to teach a lesson. Those characters who realize the mistakes they made during life, will try to convey that as a warning, but other epitaphs use the way the deceased were treated by the community as examples of how not to live life.
- The town of Spoon River was small, so most of the characters knew each other and mention people in their epitaphs.



Spoon River Anthology

The Hill †

WHERE ARE ELMER, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozier, the fighter?
All, all are sleeping on the hill.

One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith,
The tender heart, the simple soul, the loud, the proud, the happy one?—
All, all are sleeping on the hill.

One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
One of a broken pride, in the search for heart's desire,
One after life in far-away London and Paris
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate and Mag—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

*Where are Uncle Isaac and Aunt Emily,
And old Towny Kincaid and Sevigne Houghton,
And Major Walker who had talked
With venerable men of the revolution?—
All, all are sleeping on the hill.*

*They brought them dead sons from the war,
And daughters whom life had crushed,
And their children fatherless, crying—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.*

*Where is Old Fiddler Jones
Who played with life all his ninety years,
Braving the sleet with bared breast,
Drinking, rioting, thinking neither of wife nor kin,
Nor gold, nor love, nor heaven?
Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,
Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary's Grove,
Of what Abe Lincoln said
One time at Springfield.*



Nod Putt

HERE I LIE close to the grave
 Of Old Bill Piersol,
 Who grew rich trading with the Indians, and who
 Afterwards took the bankrupt law
 And emerged from it richer than ever
 Myself grown tired of toil and poverty
 And beholding how Old Bill and others grew in wealth,
 Robbed a traveler one night near Proctor's Grove,
 Killing him unwittingly while doing so,
 For the which I was tried and hanged.
 That was my way of going into bankruptcy.
 Now we who took the bankrupt law in our respective ways
 Sleep peacefully side by side.†

Ollie McGee

HAVE YOU SEEN walking through the village
 A man with downcast eyes and haggard face?
 That is my husband who, by secret cruelty
 Never to be told, robbed me of my youth and my beauty;
 Till at last, wrinkled and with yellow teeth,
 And with broken pride and shameful humility,
 I sank into the grave.
 But what think you gnaws at my husband's heart?
 The face of what I was, the face of what he made me!
 These are driving him to the place where I lie.
 In death, therefore, I am avenged.

Fletcher McGee

SHE TOOK MY strength by minutes,
She took my life by hours,
She drained me like a fevered moon
That saps the spinning world.
The days went by like shadows,
The minutes wheeled like stars.
She took the pity from my heart,
And made it into smiles.
She was a hunk of sculptor's clay,
My secret thoughts were fingers:
They flew behind her pensive brow
And lined it deep with pain.
They set the lips, and sagged the cheeks,
And drooped the eyes with sorrow.
My soul had entered in the clay,
Fighting like seven devils.
It was not mine, it was not hers;
She held it, but its struggles
Modeled a face she hated,
And a face I feared to see.
I beat the windows, shook the bolts.
I hid me in a corner—
And then she died and haunted me,
And hunted me for life.†

Glossary

Due to the number of epitaphs in *Spoon River Anthology*, the Glossary and Vocabulary have been arranged in alphabetical order to allow for more efficient navigation; however, *The Hill* is in the beginning, as it appears in the text, and *The Spooniad* and the *Epilogue* are located at the end.

The Hill

The Hill – This poem, different in both length and form from the others in *Spoon River Anthology*, sets the tone for the book. Basically, it serves as an introduction. In “The Hill,” Masters develops the concept that this book is a collection of epitaphs from the small town of Spoon River, Illinois, that represents different ways of living and dying, and, despite evil, wealth, or innocence, everyone is equal in death and they are all “sleeping on the hill.”

A

Armstrong, Hannah

Menard – a city in Illinois

“**I wrote him...and telling stories.**” – This epitaph tells the story of Armstrong’s attempts to receive a discharge from the army for her son.

Arnett, Justice

“**...why do you torture me with leaves...**” – As Justice lay dying, papers showered around him, “like a deck of cards,” he describes. These pieces of paper represented his life and the accomplishments he made over the years. The papers also represented the thoughts of dying people, when evaluating their lives. This can be a negative experience because one has the tendency to be over critical of his or her decisions, experiences, and accomplishments.

Atheist, The Village

Upanishads – a collection of texts believed to date as far back as 500 B.C.; they cover the theology and teachings of ancient Hinduism.

Atherton, Lucius

“**When my moustache...dregs of life.**” – Atherton, who previously had been a cad and a womanizer, felt discarded and useless before he died. His earlier life as a lover is overshadowed by what he has become.

B

Bartlett, Ezra

ecstatic vision – a state of religious inspiration

celestial uposts – a possible reference to the community of Heaven

Vocabulary

The Hill

brothel – an illegal establishment used for prostitution

thwarted – hindered, stifled

venerable – valued, respected

A

Arnett, Harold

abysm – an abyss

Arnett, Justice

concede – to admit, acknowledge (usually reluctantly)

docket – a file or list of documented statements or things to be done; in this instance, it appears to be a file of all the accomplishments Justice had throughout his life.

sleight – skillfully, dexterously

Atheist, The Village

doctrine – rules or principles of belief (religious)

infidels – people who have no religious beliefs

Atherton, Lucius

dregs – the lowest part, the leftover residue

knave – a crafty person (usually, a dishonest person)

B

Ballard, John

resolute – firm

Barker, Amanda

portals – entrances

proclaim – to declare, announce

slew – past tense of *slay*, killed

Barrett, Pauline

decennial – a ten year anniversary

rapture – extreme joy, ecstasy

Bartlett, Ezra

chaplain – a member of the clergy

divinity – godliness

exhorter – a person who argues certain points

Beethoven, Isaiah

agate – a type of quartz

battlements – an exterior wall built around the top of a castle for additional protection

Bennett, Hon. Henry

anon – presently