Spoon River Anthology Study Guide

Spoon River Anthology by Edgar Lee Masters

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Hill-Hare Drummer

The Hill-Hare Drummer Summary

Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology begins with the poem, "The Hill," which describes numerous members of the town of Spoon River and their stories, and then asks the reader where these people may be found. The answer provided by the poem is they all may be found sleeping on "The Hill," or the Spoon River Cemetery.

The litany of Spoon River residents and their exploits breaks off abruptly, and what follows are epitaphs spoken by selected dead of Spoon River. The reader is first introduced to Hod Put, who states that he is buried next to Old Bill Piersol, who grew rich trading with the Indians and later declared bankruptcy and emerged even richer than ever. Tired of toil and poverty and seeing the incredible wealth of Piersol and others like him, Pod tells the reader he robbed and unwittingly killed a traveler one night. Put tells the reader he was tried and hanged thereafter.

Next the reader meets Ollie McGee and her husband Fletcher, who tell us of their mutual loathing for one another. Each spouse accuses the other of being a thief of joy and vitality, and both say they died with very bitter spirits.

After this, Robert Fulton Tanner tells the reader he came to the cemetery after he was bitten by a rat while demonstrating the use of a rat trap in his hardware store. Tanner compares the life of a man to a rat being caught in a trap.

Cassius Hueffer takes issue with the words chiseled on his headstone which describe him as a gentle man. Hueffer tells the reader that he actually made war on life and could not cope with slanderous tongues. These qualities, Hueffer says, led to his death.

Serepta Mason blames the bitter winds of life for blowing her petals away, and decries Spoon River for never seeing the flowering side of her.

Amanda Barker tells the reader that her husband, Henry, knew she could not give birth without losing her own life, and so he impregnated her in order to slay her.

Constance Hately tells the reader she was praised by Spoon River rearing the orphans of her older sister, but the town never knew how she poisoned her benefactions by constantly reminding the girls of their dependence.

Chase Henry tells the reader he was denied burial on holy ground because he was the town drunkard. When the cemetery was purchased by the Protestants, however, Henry tells us he was buried next to a wealthy banker.

After this the reader meets Harry Carey Goodhue, who died a loser of many fights with the institutions of Spoon River; Judge Somers, a celebrated public figure buried in an unmarked grave; Kinsey Keene, a local revolutionary who died refusing to surrender;

Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Pantier, a couple who died estranged from one another; Ruben Pantier, Benjamin's son who lost himself in Paris; Emily Sparks, a Spoon River school teacher who prayed for Ruben Pantier; Trainor the Druggist, who died mixing chemicals for an experiment; Daisy Fraser, a self-righteous Spoon River resident; Benjamin Fraser, a man who crushed souls; Minerva Jones, the village poetess; "Indignation" Jones, the village malcontent; Doctor and Mrs. Meyers, a couple driven apart by scandal; Butch Weldy, a local bully who was severely injured in an explosion at the canning works; Knowlt Hoheimer, a thief who was killed in the Battle of Missionary Ridge; Lydia Puckett, a woman who cheated on Knowlt Hoheimer; Frank Drummer, who tried to memorize the Encyclopedia Britannica; and Hare Drummer, who longs for Siever's orchard in late September.

The Hill-Hare Drummer Analysis

This first section establishes the conceit of Masters' Anthology and sets a prevailing tone for the work. The conceit is that the reader is visiting the Spoon River Cemetery, or "The Hill," where she will meet many ghosts of Spoon River who will speak their individual stories to her. The mysterious and other-worldly tone, established by the location and the eerie opening verses of "The Hill," is ideal for a work which will examine the impact of spiritual attitudes and choices on human destinies.

In the introduction, Masters states that the first characters the reader meets are drunks, failures and fools. The first character, Hod Put, was hanged for thievery and murder, crimes he committed because he grew tired of work and poverty. Success in life for Mr. Put would have entailed acceptance of his material circumstances and the necessity of work, or making a choice to alleviate his suffering in some constructive way; however, Mr. Put chose a path to destruction. Ollie and Fletcher McGee destroyed their marriage and the peace and joy in their souls because they failed to accept their choice of spouse. Cassius Hueffer failed to overcome the destructiveness of his pride that led him to his death by the hand of a slanderer in a duel. Chase Henry freely describes himself as a drunkard. Ruben Pantier is also in this category, and might well be described as a fool for seeking himself in thrills and sensual pleasures. Trainor, the Druggist died mixing chemicals for an experiment, a very foolish thing for a man who mixes chemicals for a living to do. The one exception to this is perhaps Emily Sparks, Ruben Pantier's school teacher who loved him and prayed for him and tried to save him from himself. In the end, however, she did fail to save him.

A sense of the story of Spoon River, as well as the major figures and big events that shaped the town, begins to emerge in this section. Kinsey Keene tells the reader about some of the principal leaders of the town such as Editor Whedon, Reverend Peet and Mayor A.D. Blood, and through him the reader learns of the Social Purity Club. Daisy Fraser speaks of the same men and alludes to various acts of corruption in which they were involved. The reader also learns of the canning works explosion and Minerva Jones's abortion.

Conrad Siever-Cooney Potter

Conrad Siever-Cooney Potter Summary

In this section the reader meets Conrad Siever, a man who worked long under an apple tree; Doc Hill, who poured out his love to the town because his wife hated him and his son came to no good; Andy, the Night-Watch, who guarded the residents of Spoon River while they slept; Sarah Brown, who fell deeply in love out of wedlock; Percy Bysshe Shelly, who accidentally shot himself in the heart after learning nothing at the University of Montreal; Flossie Cabanis, the Spoon River actress who tried to make it on Broadway; Julia Miller, who married a man twice her age to hide her indiscretion with a man of her own age; Johnnie Sayre, who was run over by a train; Charlie French, who got lock-jaw when a piece of cap from a toy pistol went into his hand; Zenas Witt, who had the most terrible dreams; Theodore the Poet, who saw the city lives of men and women in a craw-fish's burrow; The Town Marshal, who came to power when the saloons were voted out because he had been a drunk; Jack McGuire, who shot the Marshal; Dorcas Gustine, whom no one in Spoon River liked because she spoke her mind; Nicholas Bindle, who gave to every organization in town and was left with nothing; Jacob Goodpasture, who lost his son in the war; Harold Arnett, who shot himself when his wife warned of burning potatoes; Margaret Fuller Slack, who bore children and then had no time to write; George Trimble, who stood on the courthouse steps and talked of free silver; Dr. Siegfried Iseman, who left medical school and idealist but was later thrown in jail for selling an Elixir of Youth; "Ace" Shaw," who never saw the difference between playing cards for money and selling real estate; Lois Spears, who was born blind; Justice Arnett, who was killed by a iron-rimmed docket; Willard Fluke, who collapsed just before confessing his sin to the congregation; Aner Clute who lived in Chicago, New York and Frisco; Lucius Atherton, the toothless Don Juan; Homer Clapp, who lost all of his father's inheritance investing in the canning works; Deacon Taylor, who died of a secretly-contracted cirrhosis; Sam Hookey, who ran away from home with the circus; and Cooney Potter, who made two-thousand acres out of forty.

Conrad Siever-Cooney Potter Analysis

In this section is heavy with fools. After wasting the opportunity to get a good college education, Percy Bysshe Shelly tells the reader, he accidentally shot himself in the heart. Johnnie Sayre tells the reader that because he disobeyed his father's orders to stay away from the tracks, he was run over by a locomotive. Justice Arnett foolishly neglected to find a proper place for his heavy docket with the iron rim, and was killed by it. Nicholas Bindle gave and gave and gave to every organization in town and left himself with nothing to bequeath. Maybe Mr. Bindle's giving was not so foolish from a higher perspective, but he certainly seems to regret it in his epitaph.

There is also no shortage of failures in this section. Harold Arnett admits to the reader that he was unable to come to terms with "[his] own failure," (p. 69) and so he shot

himself, a decision which he tells the reader he immediately regretted. Margret Fuller Slack failed to find time for her writing amidst all of the responsibilities of family life, and died full of regret for her wasted talents. Dr. Siegfried Iseman failed at maintaining his integrity when he was unable to accept the financial sacrifice entailed in helping the poor.

However, the reader does meet some quiet heroes and souls who, if they are not completely enlightened, are beginning to see through the veil of the worlds suffering. Andy, the Night-Watch, for instance, provided security to the residents of Spoon River. Though he worked a somewhat thankless job, Andy seems like he was content with what he did and satisfied with the treasure he was laying up for himself in Heaven. "Ace" Shaw tells the reader he saw that gambling and selling real estate were essential the same thing, whatever the moralizers might say about it. Perhaps the most inspiring character in this section is Lois Spears, who tells the reader she was the happiest of women in her life despite being born blind. She says she made a happy home and cared for her children, and she closes her epitaph saying, "Glory to God in the highest." (p. 74)

Fiddler Jones-Mrs. George Reece

Fiddler Jones-Mrs. George Reece Summary

In this section the reader meets Fiddler Jones, who died with a thousand memories and not a single regret; Nellie Clark, whose innocence was taken by Charlie at age eight; Louise Smith, whose fiancée abandoned her after an eight-year engagement; Herbert Marshal, who left Louise for Annabelle; George Gray, whose boat never left the harbor because he feared to take chances; Hon. Henry Bennett, who was loved to death by his wife's malice of heart; Griffy the Cooper, who looked above the rim of his tub to see the true expansiveness of life; Sexsmith the Dentist, who knew that moral truth is hollow and must be propped with gold; A.D. Blood, the several-times mayor of Spoon River; Robert Southey Burke, who gave his love away to A.D. Blood; Dora Williams, who was abandoned by Ruben Pantier and married a drunk; Mrs. Williams, who was Dora's milliner mother; William and Emily, who saw something in death like love itself; The Circuit Judge, who made decisions in life based on points lawyers scored; Blind Jack, who was crushed by a falling carriage; John Horace Burleson, who won the prize essay at school; Nancy Knapp, who burned down her house; Barry Holden, who killed his pregnant wife with a hatchet; State's Attorney Fallas, whose son was made an idiot by a pair of fumbled forceps; Wendell P. Bloyd, who believed God crucified his own son because it sounded just like him; Francis Turner, who in boyhood could neither run nor play; Franklin Jones, who with one additional year could have finished his flying machine; John M. Church, who defended insurance companies against the claims of widows and orphans; Russian Sonia, who was actually German; Isa Nutter, who had satyriasis; Barney Hainsfeather, who was mistook for John Allen after a train wreck; Petit the Poet, who asked what is love but a rose that fades; Pauline Barrett, who killed herself after the surgeon's knife left her a shell of a woman; Mrs. Charles Bliss, who refrained from divorce and drove a wedge between her children; and Mrs. George Reece, who was saved by the wisdom of Alexander Pope.

Fiddler Jones-Mrs. George Reece Analysis

The Anthology evolves in this section into more of a blend between failures, one-life minded folks and more enlightened souls. There are still a number of souls like George Gray and Barry Holden, who were distinct failures at life, but now there is a greater variety of the other two types.

As for one-life minded souls, there is A.D. Blood who in life was obsessed with political success and status; there is John M. Church, who was obsessed with making money and fought widows and orphans in court to get it; and there is the Circuit Judge who administered justice based on points scored by officials rather than on a broader, more universal sense of the matter. All of these men were one-life minded in that they made decisions in their lives based on the assumption, "I will only live once." A.D. Blood's belief in this assumption made him chase status and worldly success fanatically. John

M. Church's belief in the assumption made him gather for himself, utterly ignoring others. Circuit Judge's belief in the assumption made him lazy with regard to questions of justice.

There are also several spiritually inspired characters in this section. The Fiddler Jones is certainly among the most inspiring. He says he discovered early in life that his talent for fiddling brought joy to many people and so he devoted his life to this task. He says he never could work very long before someone would come along and sweep him off to some party or dance, where he would fiddle and fiddle and fiddle. The result of his fiddling: He says he left the world "without a single regret." Mrs. George Reece is another character whose soul was lifted up in life by spiritual wisdom. Mrs. Reece says an Alexander Pope quote she recited to herself over and over saved her: "Act well your part, there all the honor lies." These words brought her to terms with her duties in life, and prevented them from becoming unbearable burdens.

Rev. Lemuel Wiley-Anthony Findlay

Rev. Lemuel Wiley-Anthony Findlay Summary

In this section the reader meets the Rev. Lemuel Wiley, whose greatest deed in life was saving the Blisses from divorce; Thomas Ross, Jr., who conquered his lower nature only to be destroyed by his brother's ambition; Rev. Abner Peet, whose lifetime of sermons were burned as waste paper; Jefferson Howard, who fought valiantly with his father's beliefs; Judge Selah Lively, who stood five feet two; Albert Schirding, who was a failure himself while his children enjoyed great success; Jonas Keene, who could not understand how Albert Schirding could not simply enjoy the success of his children; Eugenia Todd, who saw the destructiveness of thwarted love and ambition; Yee Bow, who was killed by the minister's son; Washington McNeely, who rested under the cedar tree in front of his mansion; Paul McNeely, who was cared for by winsome Jane; Mary McNeely, who said that love is to find your own soul through the soul of another; Daniel M'Cumber, who went to the city and never returned for Mary McNeely; Georgine Sand Miner, who was driven from home by her step mother; Thomas Rhodes, who was a seeker of the earth's treasures; Ida Chickens who attended lectures at Chautauqua and studied French; Penniwit the Artist, whose best picture was of Judge Somers; Jim Brown, who loved his horse Dom Pedro; Robert Davison, who grew spiritually fat consuming the souls of men; Elsa Wertman, who was a peasant girl from Germany and the true mother of Hamilton; Hamilton Greene, who became a great leader, but never knew his true mother; Ernest Hyde, who knew his mind was a mirror; Roger Heston, who argued with Ernest Hyde about the freedom of the will; Amos Sibley, who never divorced his adulterous wife; Mrs. Sibley, who was buried full of secrets; Adam Weirauch, who sold his vote in the state legislature; Ezra Bartlett, who was a chaplain in the army; Amelia Garrick, who lies under a stunted rose bush; John Hancock Otis, who warned of men who rise to power from one suspender; and Anthony Findlay who rose to power from one suspender.

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Rev. Lemuel Wiley-Anthony Findlay Analysis

In this section, Masters' statement from the introduction regarding the ordering of the Anthology and the three categories of souls continues to be true. The reader begins to realize, however, that the difference between the fools, failures and drunkards and the one-life minded souls is only a matter of degrees. The one-life minded souls are foolish in that they fail to view their life from a higher perspective. They fail to find meaning in joy in their very being, their very living-ness. Albert Schirding tells the reader he could not relish in the success of his children because he was overcome by a desire to be successful himself, successful by the world's standards. Mary McNeely could not find peace because she could only find her identity in the romantic love of another person.

Robert Davison consumed other men's souls rather than elevating them by fully inhabiting his own.

Masters also uses a particularly effective device in this section that is repeated throughout the Anthology. He places two or more characters whose stories intertwine next to one another. We see this happen for instance in the case of Hamilton Greene, the successful statesman, and Elsa Wertman, the woman Hamilton never knew was his true mother. This device surprises the reader and draws her more deeply into the work, and also adds striking new dimension to the characters' stories.

John Cabanis-Searcy Foote

John Cabanis-Searcy Foote Summary

In this section the reader meets John Cabanis, who deserted the conservative party to lead the liberal party; The Unknown, who searches Hades for the soul of a hawk he killed; Alexander Throckmorton, who knew great ambition later in life, but had not the strength to pursue it; Jonathan Swift Somers, who enriched his soul with books, thought and suffering; Widow McFarlane, who weaved carpets for the village; Carl Hamblin, who was tarred and feathered; Editor Whedon, who was able to see all sides of a question and to pervert truth for a purpose; Eugene Carman, who broke a vein in his head; Clarence Fawcett, who stole blankets to pay for his little girl's doctor bill; W. Lloyd Garrison Standard, who was a vegetarian and a free-thinker; Professor Newcomer, who marveled that man evolved a spiritual life from his brain; Ralph Rhodes, who wrecked his father's bank dabbling in wheat; Mickey M'Grew, who fell into the water tower; Rosie Roberts, who was mad at the crooked police; Oscar Hummel, whom A.D. Blood beat to death with a stick; Roscoe Purkapile, who lied to his wife about being captured by pirates on Lake Michigan; Mrs. Purkapile, who refused to let her husband out of his marital vows; Josiah Tompkins, who was betrayed in his last days by his son; Mrs. Kessler, who thought the faces of the dead at funerals looked washed and ironed; Harmon Whitney, who was gifted with wisdom but loathed by the small-minded villagers; Bert Kessler, who winged his bird; Lambert Hutchins, who built a great house in Spoon River and a railroad switching yard in Chicago; Lilian Stewart who was the daughter of Lambert Hutchins; Hortense Robbins, whose name was in the papers daily; Batterton Dobyns, who was cut down in his prime from overwork and anxiety; Jacob Godbey, who believed liberty was meant to be of mind and not of appetite; Walter Simmons, who was expected to be greater than Edison; Tom Beatty, who thought Life a gambler; Roy Butler, who was framed for raping Mrs. Bandle; and Searcy Foote, who murdered his Aunt Persis with chloroform while she slept.

John Cabanis-Searcy Foote Analysis

This section of the Anthology is filled with many strikingly contradictory characters. Clarence Fawcett is a fine example of this. He tells the reader he stole blankets to pay for his little girl's doctor bill, and for the act, his boss fired him and had him tried and hanged. Fawcett says his children cried and his wife hated him, but his little girl got the medical attention she needed. Was he wrong? This is the kind of complicated question many of the characters' stories urge the reader to consider in this section. Searcy Foote is another excellent example. Searcy tells the reader his Aunt Persis squashed his ambitions all his life. First he says he wanted to go to college, but his rich Aunt would not allow him. Despite his aunt's wealth, Searcy says he was forced to work and work to satisfy even his most basic needs, and so when he wanted to marry Delia Prickett, he was unable to afford it. Aunt Persis fretted about mortgages and notes and rents until well into her seventies, and one day while she was sleeping, Searcy used her

chloroform, which was lying around, to bring about her demise. Did Aunt Percy deserve death? Does anyone? Is Searcy Foote worthy of the reader's sympathy? These are the kind of complicated questions raised in this section.

Edmund Pollard-Dippold the Optician

Edmund Pollard-Dippold the Optician Summary

In this section the reader meets Edmund Pollard, who believed the Life is for feasting upon; Thomas Trevelyan, who read Ovid; Percival Sharp, who stirred "vibrations" in Spoon River; Hiram Scates, who ran for the nomination for President of the County Board; Peleg Poague, who believed horses and men are just like one another; Jeduthan Hawley, who made coffins and died the same week as Daisy Fraser; Abel Melveny, who bought every kind of known machine; Oaks Tutt, who dreamed of righting the wrongs of the world; Elliot Hawkins, who looked like Abraham Lincoln; Voltaire Johnson, who was abused by Spoon River for pointing out their foibles; English Thornton, who hated high-class society types; Enoch Dunlap who was a leader Spoon River cursed when he fell from grace; Ida Frickey, who was a poor girl who came to Spoon River from Summum; Seth Compton, who built up the Spoon River library; Felix Schmidt, who lost his five-acre plot to Christian Dallman; Schroeder the Fisherman, who wondered if there was anything in man that made him different from a fish or a hog; Richard Bone, who chiseled epitaphs; Silas Dement, who burned down the Spoon River Courthouse; Dillard Sissman, who flew a kite; Jonathan Houghton, who despaired for the passing of the Spoon River of his boyhood; E.C. Culbertson, whose many efforts for the town of Spoon River were forgotten; Shack Dye, who had jokes played on him by white men; Hildrup Tubbs, who was ignored by death for many years; Henry Tripp, who lost his savings when the bank broke; Granville Calhoun, who was abandoned by his supporters after two terms as County Judge; Henry C. Calhoun, who sought to punish Spoon River to avenge his father; Alfred Moir, whose soul was saved by a book he read over and over; Perry Zoll, who achieved some notoriety for an article he wrote on the intelligence of plants; and Dippold the Optician, who saw eyeglass lenses as a metaphor for spiritual understanding.

Edmund Pollard-Dippold the Optician Analysis

In this section the reader meets a number of characters who suffered greatly as a result bad luck or outright cruelty on the part of others. Felix Schmidt, for instance, tells the reader that he started it out with very little. He had barely five acres and a small two-room abode that he tells the reader was more like a child's play house. When he discovered that Christian Dallman had purchased the land that included his estate during his late father's illness, he took Dallman to court, where it was proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that his land belonged to Dallman. Thus, Schmidt says, he lost the little he had and became Christian Dallman's tenant. Henry Tripp is another example of the tragic impact of bad luck. He tells the reader he lost all of his money when the bank broke, and then was arrested in Spoon River because he was the witness to a fight. Shack Dye on the other hand suffered as a result of racial cruelty. Seth Compton spent his life building up the Spoon River library only to have it cruelly dismantled after his death.

Masters develops the theme of vengeance significantly in this section with Silas Dement, who tells the reader how he burned down the courthouse. Granville Calhoun who was abandoned by his political supporters and his son Henry who devoted his life to avenging his father further establish this theme as well.

In this section the reader also notices the number of enlightened souls increasing. Percival Sharp, who says his lasting epitaph in Spoon River is the vibrations he stirred, probably falls into this category. Kite-Flier Dillard Sissman is blissfully contented by life's simple beauty. Dippold the Optician's epitaph is rather humorous and suggests enlightenment.

Magrady Graham-Mabel Osbourne

Magrady Graham-Mabel Osbourne Summary

In this section the reader meets Magrady Graham, who loved Altgeld and wanted him elected Governor; Archibald Higbie, who loathed Spoon River and moved to Rome; Tom Merrit, who was killed by his wife's lover; Mrs. Merrit, who was blamed for her lover's killing her husband; Elmer Karr, who was forgiven by Spoon River after murdering Tom Merrit; Elizabeth Childers, who lost a child giving birth to it; Edith Conant, who lamented change; Charles Webster, who died and left his beloved behind bidding her to be brave; Father Malloy, who related the great past to the people of Spoon River; Ami Green, who had the face of a boy as long as he lived; Calvin Campbell, who wondered how a plant finds poison in the soil and becomes poison ivy; Henry Layton, who was half violent and half gentle; Harlan Sewall, who repaid the unknown one who healed him with diminished thanks; Ippolit Konovaloff, who was a gunsmith in Odessa; Henry Phipps, who was the Sunday school superintendent; Harry Wilmans, who followed the flag to Manila where he was killed fighting for his country; John Wasson, the husband of Rebecca who went to war with the British; the many Soldiers who died for America; Godwin James, who also fought for his country and hated Harry Wilmans; Lyman King, who knew fate to be his image in the mirror; Caroline Branson, who wished she and her beloved had passed out of wooing into winning; Hamlet Micure, who had visions while in a long fever; Mabel Osbourne, who saw her life in a drooping geranium.

Magrady Graham-Mabel Osbourne Analysis

In this section the reader finds new iterations of the failures-one-life-minded-souls-heroes-enlightened-souls pattern. Some of the characters stand out especially, however. Father Malloy's epitaph is interesting, for instance, because it is not spoken by him. Rather, the writing shifts to second person and a group of souls on The Hill speak of him praising him for the spiritual gifts he brought to the residents of Spoon River. The Many Soldiers is also a notable epitaph in that the point of view shifts to first person plural, and the soldiers speak with a high level of spiritual understanding of their fate, saying that it was the great, invisible hand of life that drove them to war and indeed created the war. Lyman King's epitaph is startlingly insightful. He speaks to the reader about Fate. He warns the reader of a common misunderstanding, namely that Fate is something outside of oneself. Lyman's apprehension that Fate is truly one's very character is a first in the Anthology.

William H. Herndon-Alphonso Churchill

William H. Herndon-Alphonso Churchill Summary

In the chapter the reader meets William H. Herndon, who saw in his memory figures of the past; Rebecca Wasson, who with her husband John gave her republic all her strength and love; Rutherford McDowell, who enlarged ambrotypes of pioneers; Hannah Armstrong, who got President Lincoln to discharge her boy from the Army for "old times' sake"; Lucina Matlock, who lived to age ninety six and had the strength to love Life; Davis Matlock, who was married to Lucinda and saw human life in the activity of a bee hive; Herman Altman, who wanted no monument built to him lest his memory be used in some perverted fashion; Jennie McGrew, who had second sight; Columbus Cheney, who proposed planting weeping willows for the souls of children as yet unborn; Wallace Ferguson, found eternity in Geneva looking up at Mount Blanc; Marie Bateson, who discovered that the "inner kernel" of heaven is freedom which neither find nor lose; Tennessee Claflin Slope, who was the laughing stock of Spoon River; Plymouth Rock Joe, who thought the people of Spoon River were as chickens in a barnyard; Immanuel Ehrenhardt, who read widely looking for the secret of life; Samuel Gardner, who kept a greenhouse; Dow Kritt, who dug the ditches of Spoon River; William Jones, who was beloved for his love of nature; William Goode, who zigzagged aimlessly; J. Milton Miles, who could not distinguish one church bell from another when they all rang at once; Faith Matheny, who saw flashes of the Ultimate; Scholfield Huxley, who saw the countless wonders of God's creation all around him; Willie Metcalf, who could crawl between the legs of wild horses without getting kicked; Willie Pennington, who was thought a simpleton because he did not enjoy the worldly success of his brothers; The Village Atheist, who read the Upanishads and the poetry of Jesus on his deathbed and passed into life eternal; John Ballard, who cursed God and found he paid no attention; Julian Scott, who toward the last found the justice of the world unjust and the world's truth false; and Alphonso Churchill, who found truth in his study of astronomy.

William H. Herndon-Alphonso Churchill Analysis

In this section Masters leads the reader into the heart of the enlightened and heroic souls. Rebecca and John Wasson who toiled all their lives for the Republic are certainly heroes. Lucinda Matlock tells the reader she lived heroically through the death of eight of her children and numerous burdens without complaint, buoyed up by her love of life. Herman Altman tells the reader he awoke to the eternal life of his soul looking up at Mount Blanc. The Village Atheist says he awoke to his eternal nature on his deathbed as he read ancient spiritual wisdom. Julian Scott and Alphonso Churchill also obtained great spiritual awareness in their lifetimes. As the quality of the epitaphs grow increasingly spiritually high minded the spiritual thrust of the Anthology becomes increasingly clear. The reader begins to see all of the tribulations of the other characters in the work in context of an ultimate spiritual goal. Thus the reader begins to see the Anthology as representative of the universal human spiritual experience. All humans

encounter the forces of despair and greed, but have the opportunity to seek detachment from these things and attachment to the deep joy and mystery of life on earth.

Altman and Columbus Cheney also introduce the concept of reincarnation. This theme is very much wrapped up with the Anthology's notion of spiritual evolution in that it is over numerous incarnations that despair, greed and all forms of selfishness and suffering are overcome.

Zilpha Marsh-Webser Ford

Zilpha Marsh-Webser Ford Summary

In this section the reader meets Zilpha Marsh, who was a medium universally derided by the residents of Spoon River; James Garber, who walked swiftly to work every day through the lot where the Spoon River Opera House now stands; Lydia Humphrey, who loved the church; Le Roy Goldman, who believed a close friend or relative must speak to God on your behalf if you die having always rejected Him; Gustav Richter, who worked long days in his hot-houses; Arlo Will, who was fascinated by alligators rising from the mud; Captain Orlando Killion, who knew his captaincy in the Army and his faith in God were no mutual exclusive; Jeremy Carlisle, who believed the worst sin of all was blindness to other souls; Joseph Dixon, who tuned harps and pianos; Judson Stoddard, who wondered what God does with mountains that reach almost to heaven; Russell Kincaid, who felt a kinship with an apple tree with a ruined trunk and flowers growing on it; Aaron Hatfield, who spoke at Concord Church of the peasant boy from Galilee; Isaiah Beethoven, who sat staring at the mill for hours after he found out he had three months to live; Elijah Browning, who told a story about climbing a mountain, touching a star and obtaining infinite truth; and Webster Ford, who was infatuated with Delphic Apollo.

Zilpha Marsh-Webser Ford Analysis

This section is the first that contains only enlightened souls. Thus it is among the most stirring sections in the entire Anthology. Here the characters are at peace with their lives and their deaths. There is no longer a sense of longing for anything outside of the characters' selves. The characters' thoughts linger on God and truth, and find kinship with other souls and with nature. The reader is invested with a sense of life's true purpose in this section. In most of the previous sections, the reader has been introduced to characters who seem to have failed at life for one reason or another. Meeting characters who have died and are at peace with their destiny firmly establishes the perspective from which the reader is intended to approach the Anthology.

The Spooniad

The Spooniad Summary

The Spooniad is the story of John Cabanis's struggle to topple the conservative power structure in Spoon River. Cabanis's daughter Flossie returns to Spoon River from a tour with her troupe of players. She is condemned by the church, and to spite them she decides to throw a dance. Someone in the church calls Flossie a wanton and calls for her banishment. John Cabanis leaves the church and the conservative party because of this and joins the liberals in an attempt to overthrow Mayor A.D. Blood and establish himself as the mayor of Spoon River.

On the night before the city elections, the liberals meet in Nicholas Bindle's Hall to discuss their situation and their plan. They resolve to band together and fight the conservative regime of gloom. Jefferson Howard, however, stands up and challenges the reasoning for fighting the conservatives. Are the liberals really stirred up over real issues or only over John Cabanis's daughter being called a wanton? Why can such fights never be over large things rather than small things (like John Cabanis's wounded pride) he asks. The hall grows disorderly during the course of this, and when the marshal comes and sees the chaos he locks the liberals up. During this, in a small room in the back of the church, the conservative leaders scheme.

The next day as the townspeople are going to the courthouse to cast their votes, Hog-eyed Allen, an enormous bully appears, evidently commissioned by the conservatives to intimidate voters. He trolls around the courthouse scarring folks for a bit, but then Bengal Mike, a man three-fourths Hog-eyed Allen's size but with an iron heart, appears at the courthouse on behalf of the liberals and begins to harass Hog-eyed Allen. At the end of the day, after all the votes have been cast, Bengal Mike insults Hog-eyed Allen's mother and a fight ensues. Bengal Mike ends up dashing Hog-eyed Allen's head with a stone and killing him. There are calls for the Mike's lynching right as the fragment of the Spooniad ends.

The Spooniad Analysis

In the Anthology up to this point the reader encounters fragments of the larger story of Spoon River. As the Anthology nears its end the reader obtains clarity regarding some basic events that shaped the town. The reader knows, for instance, that the bank broke and many people lost money. The reader also knows the courthouse burned down and there was some kind of major rift that divided the town between liberals and conservatives. An extended and coherent story of Spoon River, however, never emerges. Because of this, The Spooniad is of special interest, as it provides the reader with an extended snippet of Spoon River history. It fills in the blanks regarding the rift between democrats and liberals, and the character and position of John Cabanis and the towns' relationship to him and his daughter. It also offers and hearty taste of the

flavor of the town apart from any individual's particular interpretation. It is also an exciting story in its own right with its riveting David-and-Goliath-esque ending.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

The Epilogue begins with two voices heard behind a screen beginning a game of checkers. The game continues until the first player grows tired and says his son will take over for him and win. The second player turns over the table and scatters the checkers. The screen vanishes leaving behind Beelzebub, Loki and Yogarindra. They greet one another and set about the task of making a man from clay. Once finished, the three leave the man alone with other companions for a bit, marveling at their new-found existence. Then, Beelzebub returns and interprets the scene for the audience. After this, Beelzebub mixes the ingredients of spirit in the play's hero and then creates for him the play's heroine, who is, unknown to him, closely related to him. The two come together in sexual union and are mated. In time, however, she cheats on him and he kills her. The hero is condemned to death and rendered unable to speak in his own defense. Beelzebub being omniscient begins to explain the "various truths" when he is interrupted by a voice that says, "Only an earth dream." "With which we are done," follows another voice. These voices continue as Beelzebub vanishes. These are the voices of souls and one is the voice of God. The rest of the epilogue is a reuniting of the souls with God.

Epilogue Analysis

After offering the reader all the epitaphs and the dramatic and illuminating Spooniad, Masters shifts gears one final time in presenting the reader with an allegorical play. The epilogue places a distinct tonal stamp on The Spoon River Anthology. It emphasizes the work's spiritual and moral side, as it takes the reader through a competition between God and the devil for human souls, and the fabrication of human drama by the devil. And just when the reader feels the devil is in charge and humanity is doomed, the illusion vanishes, and the play ends with a beautiful atonement between God and creation. This reinforces the sense of human spiritual destiny that is established in the epitaphs: the sense that humans begin life frustrated by separateness and a sense of lack, and through the course of human life (and perhaps multiple incarnations) humans relinquish their attachments to things that do not matter and find the foundation of their being in the simple joy of being.

Characters

Ruben Pantierappears in Page 39

Ruben Pantier, son of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Pantier, addresses his epitaph to Emily Sparks, whose prayers for him, he says, "were not wasted." Ruben says the milliner's daughter made trouble for him and so he left Spoon River and traveled out into the world becoming intimate with women and wine. Ruben tells a particular story of an encounter he had one night in the Rue de Rivoli with a black-eyed coquette. Ruben says he cried thinking of Spoon River and Emily Sparks, but the Parisian girl thought the tears were for her.

Butch Weldyappears in Page 48

A few pages prior to meeting "Butch" Weldy, the reader learns that he raped Minerva Jones. Butch tells the reader that after he "got religion and settled down" he got a job at the Spoon River canning works, where each morning he had to fill the tank in front of the works with gasoline. One day he was on a ladder executing his daily task when the gasoline-filled tank exploded and sent him flying. Butch tells the reader he landed on the ground with both of his legs broken and his eyes fried to a crisp "like a couple of eggs." At his trial, Butch says, the judge determined that whoever caused the explosion was a fellow worker of Butch's so the owner of the canning works did not have to pay him for his suffering.

Fiddler Jonesappears in Page 83

Fiddler Jones tells the reader about a vibration that the earth keeps going in a man's heart. That's your essence, Jones says. Fiddler says he found he could fiddle and so he had to fiddle all his life. He says he had forty acres of land, but he could never turn it into any more because every time he would set to work someone or other would come by and sweep him off to some dance or picnic. Fiddler says he "ended up with forty acres . . . a broken fiddle—/ and a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,/ and not a single regret."

A.D. Bloodappears in Page 91

The reader learns from many characters that A.D. Blood was the several-time mayor of Spoon River and he favored conservatives and the status quo. Mr. Blood himself tells the reader that his life's work was good, as he closed the saloons and stopped the playing at cards, and led crusades against sin in general. Ironically, Blood tells the reader, Dora, the milliner's daughter, and Ruben Pantier make love on top of his grave!

Barry Holdenappears in Page 100

Barry Holden tells the reader he had eight children and another on the way one fall when he was sitting on a jury at the trial of a man who had murdered a pregnant woman. When Barry arrived home, he tells the reader, the first thing he saw lying in the ditch in their house was a hatchet. He walked in to the house and his pregnant wife immediately started talking about how they had mortgaged their house to Thomas Rhodes. Barry Holden killed her and their unborn child with the hatchet.

Judge Selah Livelyappears in Page 117

Judge Lively tells the reader he is five feet two and he worked as a grocery clerk while he studied law until finally he became an attorney. He says through his diligence and regular attending of church he became the attorney for the richest man in town and then became county judge. All through the aforementioned, Lively tells the reader, the "giants" of the town laughed at his height and mocked his clothes. For this reason, Lively says, he naturally made things hard for the giants when they came to court and stood at the bar and said, "Your Honor."

John Cabanisappears in Page 143

John Cabanis tells the reader he left the party of "law and order" to lead the liberal party not because of spite or forgetfulness or shiftlessness, but rather because he had a vision of democracy making every soul as "strong and fit to rule/ As Plato's lofty guardians." The reader learns in the Spooniad that, as the leader of the liberals, there was a bitter enmity between Cabanis and Thomas Rhodes, the leader of the Bank, and A.D. Blood the Mayor of Spoon River.

Archibald Higbieappears in Page 204

Archibald Higbie says he loathed Spoon River, and his loathing led him to Rome, where he lived among artists, spoke Italian and French, and did all he could to extirpate all trace of his roots. Archibald says he worked as an artist himself, but could never create anything with meaning. Archibald ascribes this deficiency in his work to a lack of culture in Spoon River; however, the shrewd reader cannot help but think the fault probably lay in Higbie's disowning of his roots.

Tom Merrittappears in Page 205

Tom Merritt tells the reader he first suspected his wife was cheating on him when she began acted strangely calm and absent-minded. Merritt knew for certain, he tells us, when one day he heard the door shut and saw Elmer Karr slipping out the back. Merritt

says he intended to kill Karr on sight, but he ended up coming upon Karr unexpectedly, and Karr shot him.

Mrs. Merrittappears in Page 206

Mrs. Merritt says she was silent before the jury when the judge asked her if she had anything to say about her sentence of thirty years in prison, handed down to her for enticing her lover Elmer Karr to murder her husband Tom. She says she had warned Elmer to go far away, fearing she had maddened him with her body. Elmer did not heed her advice and Mrs. Merritt died in Joliet Prison.

Elmer Karrappears in Page 207

Elmer Karr asks the reader what it could possibly be but the love of God that caused the residents of Spoon River to forgive him for the murder of Tom Merritt and take him back into the fold. Somehow the people of Spoon River managed, though. Karr tells the reader he became penitent after being taken back. He went to church and rejoiced in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Hannah Armstrongappears in Page 238

Hannah Armstrong tells the reader she sent a couple of letters to President Abraham Lincoln, petitioning him to discharge her sick son from the Army. She says she received no response from the letters. Finally she went to the courthouse herself and told a guard to tell the President, "It's old Hannah Armstrong from Illinois." The President admitted her. They laughed and talked about old times, and then Lincoln discharged her boy from the Army.

The Village Atheistappears in Page 259

The village Atheist tells the reader that in his life he was an avid non-believer. He states he was argumentative and well-versed in the arguments against God and an afterlife. Later in life, when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, the Atheist tells the reader, he read the Upanishads and the "poetry of Jesus," which changed his perspective. The Atheist says this wisdom kindled a spiritual fire in his soul and led him successfully through the shadow realm of death. The Atheist final message to the reader and to all who live "through the senses" is that immortality is not a gift, but rather an achievement obtained only by those who strive mightily for it.

Zilpha Marshappears in Page 263

Zilpha Marsh tells the reader she was a medium in her life in Spoon River, who saw many spirits and spoke often of occultish subjects. The townspeople accused her of

talking nonsense, she tells the reader. For her defense against that charge, she tells the reader that speaking to the people of Spoon River was like speaking to spiritual children: when one speaks to children, one must needs speak nonsense.

Objects/Places

The Hillappears in The Hill

This Hill is the site of the Spoon River Cemetery, where all of the characters in the Spoon River Anthology are buried.

The Canning Worksappears in Butch Weldy

The Canning Works is a factory in Spoon River with a gasoline tank in the yard that exploded while 'Butch' Weldy was refilling it.

Prohibition Loaded Caneappears in Jack McGuire

A Prohibition Loaded Cane is a wooden cane filled with lead at one end and used as a weapon. Jack McGuire carried one.

Chicagoappears in Dora Williams

Chicago is the nearest major U.S. city to Spoon River. Many characters make reference to traveling here.

Iron-Rimmed Docketappears in Justice Arnett

An Iron-Rimmed Docket sat on a shelf above Justice Arnett's Desk. The shelf broke, the docket fell on his head and killed him.

Silk Dressappears in Aner Clute

Aner Clute says she started living "the life" after she first put on a silk dress and received a promise of marriage from Lucius Atherton.

Red Eagle Cigarsappears in Cooney Potter

Cooney Potter died from smoking Red Eagle cigars while drinking hot cups of coffee and working long hours on hot summer days.

Fiddleappears in Fiddler Jones

A fiddle was the instrument Fiddler Jones played for hours and hours each and every joyful day of his life.

Chloroformappears in Searcy Foote

Searcy Foote murdered his oppressive Aunt Persis while she slept using chloroform.

The Circulating Libraryappears in Seth Compton

Seth Compton built up the circulating library in Spoon River only to have it dismantled after his death.

Hatchetappears in Barry Holden

Barry Holden used a hatchet to kill his pregnant wife when he arrived home and she started to talk of their mortgaged farm.

Genevaappears in Wallace Ferguson

Geneva is where Wallace Ferguson looked upon Mount Blanc and was filled with the eternal joy that allowed him to relinquish attachment to his current incarnation.

Themes

Revenge

Henry C. Calhoun warns the reader that, when passing the Fates at their weaving, "Stop for a moment, and if you see/ The thread of revenge leap out of the shuttle/ Then quickly snatch from Atropos/ The shears and cut it, lest your sons,/ And the children of them and their children/ Wear the envenomed robe" (p. 198). Threads of revenge leap frequently out of the shuttle and into many characters robes in The Spoon River Anthology. Granville Calhoun tells the reader that his hatred of the residents of Spoon River, born out of their refusal to elect him to one more term as County Judge in order to satisfy his vanity, infected his son Henry, who then spent all his years endeavoring to exact his father's revenge on the town that lifted him up. Ollie and Fletcher McGee hated one another throughout their marriage. Fletcher claims Ollie drained the very life out of him bit by bit, and to avenge himself Fletcher molded his wife into a drooping, sagging, hateful figure. To avenge herself, Ollie tells us she haunted Fletcher unrelentingly after death. Both Fletcher and Ollie lived and died miserably. Judge Selah Lively poisoned the justice of his courtroom exacting punishments on giants of the town who mocked him for being short. Editor Whedon sold the print in his paper to powerful revenge seekers. Chase Henry, the drunkard, voted for Prohibition to exact his revenge on a saloon that cut him off. Rare are the cases in the Anthology where revenge is not a destructive, life-draining force that leaves the person harboring it bitter, and alone. One might consider Searcy Foote a notable exception, as he prospers materially and emotionally after murdering his admittedly oppressive aunt while she slept, but even in this case the reader cannot help but feel that the killing cost Searcy a large portion of his goodness. In the Anthology, Masters seems to view Revenge as a stumbling block with which each soul must contend on the road to enlightenment.

Life Through The Senses

Life through the senses reveals itself as a major obstacle to the spiritual evolution of the residents of Spoon River. To begin with, there are many drunkards in the work. Chase Henry tells the reader he was the "town drunk." Though he claims he did not devote his life to dissipation, Jefferson Howard admits to being fond of the tavern. No one knew of Deacon Taylor's affinity for the sauce, but he tells the reader the true reason for his death was cirrhosis of the liver which he contracted from thirty years of drinking generously from a bottle labeled "spiritus frumenti." Many other characters tell the reader they attempted to satisfy their senses by seeking comfort. Thomas Rhodes and Jonathan McNeely satisfied themselves by becoming some of the richest men in town. Aner Clute sought the comfort of male affection. Ruben Pantier sought the comfort of female affection. Ace Shaw found comfort in the thrill that came from playing cards for money. Felix Schmidt found comfort in owning a small two room house on five acres. All of these comforts, the dead characters come to realize, are ultimately taken away. Therefore they each are compelled to realize that peace is found in something beyond

the senses; as The Village Atheist says, "Listen to me, ye who live in the senses/ And think through the senses only:/ Immortality is not a gift,/ Immortality is an achievement;/ And only those who strive mightily/ Shall possess it."

Death

Masters alerts the reader very early in the Anthology that death is a central theme in the work. The first poem, "The Hill," introduces the Anthology's setting, The Spoon River Cemetery, where the characters the reader will meet are all "sleeping." The first character the reader meets, Hod Put, sent a man he robbed to an early grave and was then hanged and brought to one himself. Indeed, the reader finds that each character's story is either a description of his death event or a reframing of his life from the perspective of death. This latter is particularly significant. Because all of the characters addressing the reader have passed into death, their words joy or bitterness, wisdom or foolishness assume a spiritual resonance. The reader sees the attitudes and actions that have led characters to happiness or pain. This naturally encourages the reader to examine her own life from the perspective of her future death. This encourages her to evaluate priorities in her life as well as the destructiveness or constructiveness of choices she makes. The theme of death evolves later in the Anthology as a number of characters introduce the concept of reincarnation. Columbus Cheney wonders if the "birth [of a newborn child]/ rupture[s] the memory of previous being." (p.243) Wallace Ferguson comforts his soul, asking rhetorically, "If you lose yourself in death,/ And wake in some Geneva by some Mt. Blanc,/ What do you care if you know not yourself as the you/ Who lived and loved in a little corner of earth/ Known as Spoon River ages and ages vanished." This widening of perspective about the nature of death transforms the readers understanding of the purpose of life. Life becomes a process of evolving one's soul, not merely a one time game to try and win. Death becomes not a bitter terror that robs life of all joy and meaning, but rather an easy transition from one state of living to another for one's ultimate benefit.

Enlightenment

In the latter half of the Anthology the reader meets many wise and heroic souls that cultivate the theme of enlightenment. Lucinda Matlock tells the reader she lived ninety-six years, lost eight of her twelve children before she was sixty, worked constantly and nursed the sick. She never complains to the reader of any of her trials, but rather seems thankful for every moment of her life. In fact she ends her epitaph with a rebuke of those souls who are discontented and losing hope. "Life is too strong for you," she says, "It takes life to love Life." For his epitaph, Judson Stoddard simply shares with the reader a thought he had while sitting on a mountain top. "That peak is the thought of Buddha," he says, "and that one is the prayer of Jesus,/ And that one is the dream of Plato . . ." He concludes by simply asking the reader or perhaps himself what it is God does with mountains that rise almost to heaven. Elijah Browning simply tells the reader of the many stages of climbing a mountain until he reached the top where he touched a star and vanished into Infinite Truth. The reader cannot help but recognize that it is the

fullness, challenge and potential reward of a human life bravely lived of which Mr. Browning speaks. Wallace Ferguson has one of the most inspiring discoveries of all. He tells the reader of a rapturous experience he had in Geneva, looking up at Mt. Blanc. Ferguson says he asked himself if his rapture was less "[b]ecause [he] could not link himself with the [he] of yore,/ When twenty years earlier [he] wandered around Spoon River[.]" Ferguson goes on to say he realized he should not care if he loses memory of his current life in death because the joy in his soul will continue. The many souls in the Anthology who lived artfully and attained wisdom provide a sense of spiritual direction to the work.

Style

Point of View

The Spoon River Anthology is written almost exclusively in first person singular. The conceit of the book is that the reader has entered the Spoon River cemetery and is meeting the dead townsfolk, who then speak about their lives in retrospect. Thus it is quite natural that the spirits would use "I," "me," and "mine," to convey their stories. There are a few notable exceptions. The first occurs in the opening poem, "The Hill," (p.223) which occurs in second person, as the dead of Spoon River (presumably) ask one another where various members of the town may be found. The answer? All of them are sleeping on the hill. The second example occurs in "Father Malloy," (p. 212) which is also in second person. Father Malloy is buried elsewhere in Spoon River and a group of the dead speak together about him and his life using "you," and "your." There are a few other characters throughout the book who employ second person either to put the reader in the character's own shoes (as in the case of Judge Selah Lively: "Suppose you stood just five feet two/ . . ." (p. 117).) or to make their story of universal significance (e.g., Lyman King, who says, "You may think, passers-by, that Fate/ Is a pit-fall outside of yourself,/ around which you may walk with the use of foresight,/ and wisdom . . ." (p. 226)). Also, there are a few examples of first person plural, as in the case of Caroline Branson, who speaks of herself and her lover, saying, "With our hearts like drifting suns, had we but walked,/ . . .," and third person limited is even employed in The Spooniad. However, the default point of view in the Anthology is decidedly first person singular.

Setting

The setting of The Spoon River Anthology is the Spoon River Cemetery, or "The Hill," as it is identified in the first poem of the same name (p. 23). Masters employs one other setting in his epilogue, "The Spooniad," which is a meeting hall in Spoon River.

Language and Meaning

Although Masters' word selection in the Anthology is determined principally by the character of the person speaking, there are a few common themes regarding his style of language usage. The language of the Anthology feels very poetical and born of turn-of-the-twentieth-century small town America. The Town Marshal provides a fine example: "The Prohibitionists made me town marshal/ When the saloons were voted out,/ Because when I was a drinking man,/ Before joined the church, I killed a Swede/ at the saw-mill near maple grove" (p. 64). Talk of "prohibitionists," and "saloons," and places like "the saw-mill near maple grove," give the reader a sense of a kind of iconic provincial America, and the rolling, rhythmic build of, "When the saloons . . . I killed a Swede," adds a distinctly poetical flare that elevates the speech's content. Masters employs the preceding throughout the work, and adapts it to develop the nuances of

individual characters. In "Butch" Weldy, Master's iconic American poetical language is modified to fit into the mouth of an uneducated, rough-edged working man and rapist: "After I got religion and steadied down/ They gave me a job in the canning works,/ And every morning I had to fill/ The tank in the yard with gasoline,/ . . . And down I came with both legs broken,/ And my eyes burned crisp as a couple of eggs/ For someone left the blow-fire going,/ And something sucked the flame into the tank" (p. 48) The language maintains the same feel it has elsewhere, but phrases like "After I got religion," and "burned crisp as a couple of eggs," give the reader a sense of the character's uneducated, lower-class status. Masters' language can also become simple, elegant and highly spiritual, as in the case of Judson Stoddard: "On a mountain top above the clouds/ That streamed like a sea below me/ I said that peak is the thought of Buddha,/ And that one is the prayer of Jesus,/ And this one is the dream of Plato,/ . . . And I said "What does God do with mountains/ That rise almost to heaven?"" (p. 272) Almost startling in its simplicity this passage is arguably one of the most beautiful in the whole Anthology. It is straightforward and earnest in a way that makes it feel at one with the rest of the language in the work, but its exceptionally lofty focus and pristine clarity make it unique and quite spiritually compelling as well.

Structure

The Spoon River Anthology is a walk through the graveyard of Spoon River, Illinois. The work is divided into poems or epitaphs where each of the 244 Spoon River dead convey either their story or some spiritual message to the reader. The 244 poems are preceded by "The Hill," a poem which establishes the work's setting, and followed by "The Spooniad" (p. 281) and an epilogue (p. 293). As far as the epitaphs are concerned, it is worth noting that Masters, in the introduction to the Anthology, states, "When the book was put together in its definitive order, the fools, the drunkards, and the failures came first, the people of one-birth minds got second place, and the heroes and the enlightened spirits came last" (p. 7). "The Spooniad" is a fragment of an epic poem about Spoon River written by one of the residents of the town, and the epilogue is a morality play set in the Spoon River Graveyard. "The Spooniad" helps the reader to understand the relationships between the members of the town. These relationships have been hinted at in the epitaphs or revealed in fragments along with bits of the town's drama, but a coherent picture of it all is never set down. And the morality-play epilogue underlines the theme of human spiritual journey that is established in the epitaphs. The structure is very simple. It is compelling for its effectiveness at locating the reader not only in the Spoon River cemetery, but also in that private place in the reader's heart where matters of life, death and spiritual purpose are considered.

Quotes

"My boy, wherever you are,/ Work for your soul's sake,/ That all the clay of you, all of the dross of you,/ May yield to the fire of you,/ Till the fire is nothing but light! . . ./ Nothing but light!" (p. 40, Emily Sparks)

"I ended up with forty acres;/ I ended up with a broken fiddle—/ And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,/ And not a single regret." (p.83, Fiddler Jones)

"I reached the highest place in Spoon River,/ But through what bitterness of spirit!" (p. 198 Henry C. Calhoun)

"You may think, passer-by, that Fate/ Is a pit-fall outside of yourself,/ Around which you may walk by the use of foresight/ And wisdom . . . / But pass on into life:/ In time you shall see Fate approach you in the shape of your own image in the mirror;/ Or you shall sit alone by your own hearth,/ And suddenly the chair by you shall hold a guest,/ And you shall know that guest,/ And read the authentic message of his eyes." (p. 226, Lyman King)

"What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,/ Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?/ Degenerate sons and daughters,/ Life is too strong for you—/ It takes life to love Life." (p. 239, Lucinda Matlock)

"This weeping willow!/ Why do you not plant a few/ For the millions of children not yet born,/ As well as for us?/ Are they not non-existent, or cells asleep/ Without mind?/ Or do they come to earth, their birth/ Rupturing the memory of previous being?/ Answer! The field of unexplored intuition is yours./ but in any case why not plant willows for them,/ As well as for us?" (p.243, Columbus Cheney)

"Therefore, O soul, if you lose yourself in death,/ And wake in some Geneva by some Mt. Blanc,/ What do you care if you know not yourself as the you/ Who lived and loved in a little corner of earth/ Known as Spoon River ages and ages vanished?" (p. 244, Wallace Ferguson)

"Ye young debaters over the doctrine/ Of the soul's immortality,/ I who lie here was the village atheist,/ Talkative, contentious, versed in the arguments/ Of the infidels./ But through a long sickness/ Coughing myself to death/ I read the Upanishads and the poetry of Jesus./ And they lighted a torch of hope and intuition/ And desire which the Shadow,/ Leading me swiftly through the caverns of darkness,/ Could not extinguish./ Listen to me, ye who live through the senses only: Immortality is not a gift,/ Immortality is an achievement;/ And only those who strive mightily/ Shall possess it." (p. 259, The Village Atheist)

"Toward the last/ The truth of others was untruth to me;/ The justice of others was injustice to me;/ Their reasons for death, reasons with me for life;/ Their reasons for life, reasons with me for death;/ I would have killed those they saved,/ And saved those they killed." (p.261, Julian Scott)

"You talk nonsense to children, don't you?/ And suppose I see what you never saw/ And never heard of and have no words for,/ I must talk nonsense when you ask me/ What it is I see!" (p.263, Zilpha Marsh)

"Nor duty, gold nor power/ Can ease the longing of the soul,/ The loneliness of the soul!" (p. 264, James Garber)

"On a mountain top above the clouds/ That streamed like a sea below me/ I said that peak is the thought of Buddha,/ And that one is the prayer of Jesus,/ And this one is the dream of Plato,/ And that one there the song of Dante,/ And this is Kant and this is Newton,/ And this is Milton and this is Shakespeare,/ And this is the hope of the Mother Church,/ And this—why all these peaks are poems,/ Poems and prayers that pierce the clouds./ And I said "What does God do with mountains/ That rise almost to heaven?"" (p.272, Judson Stoddard)

"The mountain delivers to Infinite Truth/ Whosoever touches the star!" (p. 278, Elijah Browning)

Topics for Discussion

Describe Masters' structuring of The Spoon River Anthology and its impact on the reader. How many distinct sections does the work have? What is the relationship of these sections to one another? Where does the work begin? Where does the work end? How does the journey make the reader feel?

What kind of language does Masters employ in The Spoon River Anthology? Why do you think he chose this type of language? How does the language shape your understanding of the characters in the story? How does the language establish the setting of the work? How does the language develop the Anthology's themes?

What is the point of view of The Spoon River Anthology? Does it ever change? If so, in what way(s) and why?

If a good friend asked you to describe what The Spoon River Anthology is about in one sentence, what would you say? Why?

How does the theme of revenge influence The Spoon River Anthology? Which characters are the most vengeful? How does their pursuit of vengeance impact their lives? Does anyone in the Anthology benefit by exacting their revenge on someone? Who and in what way?

Why is it significant that The Spoon River Anthology takes place in a graveyard? How does the setting make the reader feel? Does the setting influence the way the reader understands the story? Does the impact of the setting evolve over the course of the work? How?

Discuss the theme of death in The Spoon River Anthology. How does Masters develop the reader's understanding of death through his characters' stories? Is death a frightening force in the Anthology? Is it a peaceful force? A healing force?

How are the themes of life through the senses central to The Spoon River Anthology? How does sensual pleasure affect the characters in the work? How does sensual pain affect them? What higher purpose do the senses serve in the spiritual life of the human beings in the Anthology?

What is enlightenment? What characters in The Spoon River Anthology seem to be enlightened? Why? What seems to be holding the characters you did not choose back? How is the theme of enlightenment developed over the course of the whole work?