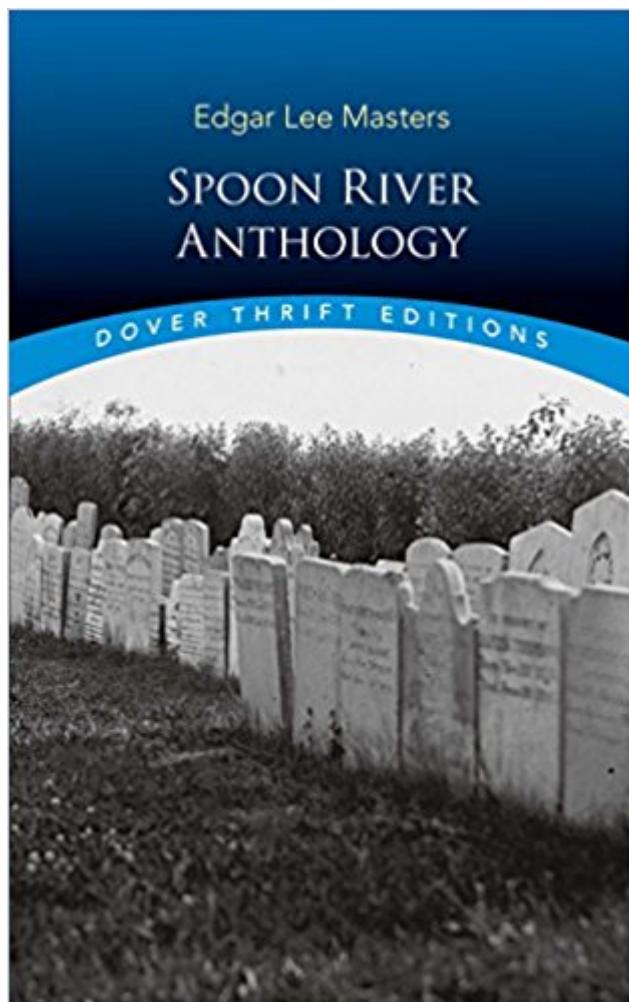


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# Spoon River Anthology (Dover Thrift Editions)



## Synopsis

In *Spoon River Anthology*, the American poet Edgar Lee Masters (1869–1950) created a series of compelling free-verse monologues in which former citizens of a mythical Midwestern town speak touchingly from the grave of the thwarted hopes and dream of their lives. First published in book form in 1915, the Anthology was the crowning achievement of Masters' career as a poet, and a work that would become a landmark of 20th-century American literature. In these pages, no less than 214 individual voices are heard – some in no more than a dozen moving lines. Alternately plaintive, anguished, enigmatic, angry, and contemptuous, the voices of Spoon River, although distinctively small-town Americans, evoke themes of love and hope, disappointment and despair that are universal in their resonance. This American classic is reprinted here from the authoritative 1915 edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

YA-- A richly annotated edition resuscitates a fading American classic. Because Hallivas's pithy introduction adds both perspective and gossip detail, YAs will enjoy learning about the individual struggles of the 244 characters who speak from the cemetery on "the hill." Secondary teachers will find this a useful tool for preparing character sketches, thanks to the lively, specific annotations naming names: who rejected whom; who challenged whom, both physically and politically--and it is all expertly researched. The microcosm of Spoon River comes alive with its central conflicts of agrarian traditionist v. temperance and abolitionist activism. From the grave, the hard-drinking,

roughly hewn frontiersmen challenge the do-good social reformers, reenacting the struggle the 19th-century midwestern push kindled: would any government law prohibiting drinking or slavery impress these strong individual-rights townspeople? They offer their own answers as Masters intended, but they offer the responses against a tapestry of detail the editor provides. Hallivas's cogent essay traces the philosophical influences that marked Masters's works: Spinoza, Goethe, and especially Whitman. The inclusion of several photographs of the characters who speak adds important visual detail.- Margaret Nolan, W. T. Woodson High School, Fairfax, VACopyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

"Definitive... Hallwas' reading of 'Spoon River' is undoubtedly the best and the one the poet intended. The Midwest is seen as the New World Eden assaulted by the forces of modernization." -- Chicago Tribune. "Massively annotated... provides a wealth of information." --The New Republic --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

This classic book was reprinted from the original 1915 edition. The Spoon River Anthology by the late poet Edgar Lee Masters has become a classic and must reading for anyone who is interested in poetry. I was only slightly knowledgeable on this unique Spoon River book of free-verse monologues before reading this text. The late American poet Edgar Lee Masters wrote this interesting story in which the dead citizens of a mythical Midwestern town (Spoon River) speak from the grave. There are more than 215 individuals who speak in this volume. The wide variety of emotions and thoughts of these dead people are revealed. There are themes of sadness, anger, love and hope in these voices from the grave. Even though I do not like the so-called "modern free verse" poetry form; nevertheless, I found these monologues of voices from the grave interesting and thought provoking. This is a very unique book and many of the stories will make you think about your own life. If you are into classic literature and poetry this book should be on your must read list. Rating: 4 Stars. Joseph J. Truncate (Author: The Samurai Soul: An old warrior's poetic tribute).

When you write about a book that's gone through dozens of editions, what should you be focusing on - the content or the presentation? I got the Touchstone edition of Spoon River Anthology because it contains the introduction May Swenson wrote back in 1962, which has been mentioned in a number of articles. I couldn't find it online so I got the book. Somebody has pointed out that Swenson was perhaps the only SRA commentator who had noticed its similarity to Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood." I noticed that similarity too. I loved Under Milk Wood when I listened to a

recording of it a few decades ago. So I wanted to know what else Swenson had to say about SRA. I first became aware of Masters 40 years ago. Translations of about half of the poems that comprise SRA came out in Poland, where I lived, and I bought and read the little volume. I liked some of it enough to keep the book and eventually bring it with me to NY, where I've lived for the last 30 years. But it was only 4 months ago that I opened it again and reread the poems I'd marked all those years earlier as being to my liking. And then I decided to read the whole book in English and study its historical and cultural context. Regardless of the merits of this edition or that, what is it about Masters that makes him interesting? Few people seem to know anything about him anymore. Some vaguely remember the words "Spoon River Anthology" just as most people remember the words "I have a dream" without knowing much about the person who said them. I am not a poetry 'maven' and I am not an American. I write song lyrics for only one performer back home, which has changed so much that I don't really recognize it on my infrequent visits. I'm not sure I understand Americans even though I've lived here for decades - and not in some Polish ghetto. My life is an American life, and Masters was kind of similar to me. His life was very American. His consciousness was something else. We take a lot at face value. We accept the language (and the frame of reference) the media impose on us. Masters wasn't like that. He fiercely rejected much of the rhetoric and mores of his time. He was more educated than most, and the education was the result of his own need to know, not of his pursuit of position (what he called "the wondrous cheese" in one poem). Being individualistic or contrary is not what makes Masters so interesting; he was not unique in that. And I'm not saying he will give you all the perspective you'll need should you decide that today's rhetoric doesn't quite explain the world to you. But he will be one very alternative voice, one that helps understand how relative the meaning of certain words is. It can be enlightening to realize that words we hold dear and think we understand perfectly well weren't always defined as they are today, that they can be made to mean almost anything with enough repetition and amplification. For example, to Masters being democratic meant being against Lincoln - and not at all simply because Lincoln was what was then known as a Republican. Being a Democrat then meant being against the "strife" (Masters' word) Lincoln supposedly was in favor of - never mind that the strife just might make America more lower-case-d democratic (as in "of/by/for the people"). Incidentally, Masters didn't like John Brown either. He didn't think "Brown was the sort of man who should be celebrated." (NYT 02/15/1942). 'Liberal' in those days didn't mean 'socialistic.' As far as I can tell, back then liberal meant anti-Calvinist, opposed to vindictive religiosity with the political power to dictate how people should live, to outlaw drink and tobacco, make divorce shameful, and demand a horse be removed from public view lest 'public morals' be corrupted. Masters was a pamphleteer as much as

he was a poet - or more so. I think he was politically confused but I'm not looking for a prophet. I'm interested in alternative perspectives, and Masters will give you one. So, of course, could some other pamphleteers, whose politics might be easier to define. And herein lies an interesting paradox. Somebody like an Emma Goldman was many times clearer about how society works and how justice might prevail. Masters was 'for the people;' in his law practice he was often the advocate of labor. At the same time he was a typical 21st-century American liberal, who's for the people and justice - so long as there's no 'strife.' And yet, at least in *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters' half-baked ideas may well have been expressed with more passion, more eloquently, than in Emma Goldman's or Lucy Parson's far more mature writings. That's the power of poetry written with conviction, even if the conviction is misguided. So was Masters a great poet? Most commentators seem to feel that SRA was the only one of his 50 books that represented a literary accomplishment. Let's say that's true. So what was it about SRA that made it so special? Three things, I think. (1) In the Anthology Masters is not speaking as himself. No matter how much of himself he put into most of these characters, he was speaking as them, which forced him to curb his preaching and lecturing urges. (2) When he was writing in conventional meters, he also stuck with conventional themes and accepted 'poetic' diction. ("Mr. Masters is seldom original when he writes in regular forms. It seems as though some obscure instinct of relation set his mind echoing with old tunes, old words, old pictures," wrote Amy Lowell). When his friend and publisher Reedy practically forced him to abandon that style, Masters was freed to explore other themes and real emotions of actual people he knew. (3) A commentator (from the Singapore Institute of Management, yet) may have explained this next aspect best. SRA is not a collection of epitaphs. It's a collection of utterances from people who are already dead, so they can 'tell it like it is' (or was). These are dramatic monologues, where two rules seem to dominate: candor and brevity, which, combined, can add up to considerable power. You can't not quote one poem in this context: John M. Church WAS attorney for the "Q" And the Indemnity Company which insured The owners of the mine. I pulled the wires with judge and jury, And the upper courts, to beat the claims Of the crippled, the widow and orphan, And made a fortune thereat. The bar association sang my praises In a high-flown resolution. And the floral tributes were many-- But the rats devoured my heart And a snake made a nest in my skull! Those two lines at the end, that two-fisted punch - in my book it doesn't get much better. And SRA has a lot of those punch lines. If you're ideological/partisan, they probably won't do much for you. If you respond to art based on its merit and not political labels associated with its creator, they may. You won't necessarily agree with Masters; he is dated. But he will get you to think and he'll do it with a power that you won't find in many other places. So did the book 'meet my expectations'? Yes. I bought it for

May Swenson's 10-page intro and I got that. The introduction had some insights and some errors. Hod Putt didn't lie side by side with his victim. That's a venial mistake. Saying 'veniality' when you mean 'venality' ("political swindling, graft, veniality, enforced poverty") is perhaps less so. Was Ida Chicken vain and silly, as Swenson suggests? (...) the clerk of the district Court Made me swear to support and defend The constitution (...) That very morning The Federal Judge, in the very next room To the room where I took the oath, Decided the constitution Exempted Rhodes from paying taxes For the water works of Spoon River! Everybody makes mistakes. A Study Guide to SRA published by a theater in Alabama says on page 4 that Masters died in 1953; meanwhile on page 2 there's a picture of his tombstone that clearly says 1950. The author of The Spoon River Metblog has written a really interesting "modern adaptation of Spoon River Anthology" and, much to his credit, apparently asked some real authorities for help in this undertaking - and then placed them in the wrong university. Minor stuff, forgivable sloppiness. Wrenn & Wrenn, true Masters scholars, describe Masters' phrase "fearless singers and livers" as an "unfortunate apparent reference to the internal organs" and a "synecdoche, common in Masters, for the free and hearty people of Virginia as opposed to New England Calvinists." No, it was not a synecdoche. "Liver(s)" is a key Masters term for those who know how to live, which he uses over and over, eg. "Oh livers and artists of Hellas centuries gone" (Thomas Trevelyan). I've read a lot of Masters scholarship in the last 4 months, so to me Swenson was simply one of the voices. John Hallwas' essay in the University of Illinois Press edition of SRA was infinitely more enlightening. John Hollander in the introduction and Ronald Primeau in the afterword to the Signet edition of SRA also said more than Swenson. So I'm glad I've read her piece, but it wasn't the best writing on the subject. Masters and his vision of life - specifically as presented in SRA - is another matter altogether. Check the Anthology out. If you lend it a sympathetic ear, it will reward you richly. In spite of himself and his ideas about good poetry, Masters accidentally wrote a hit book when his friend and editor refused to print his pseudoclassical fluff and told him to "for God's sake, lay off." The fact that Spoon River Anthology caused a furore and thus became a hit doesn't necessarily mean the poems were any good. The furore (or scandale, as Masters' contemporaries put it) has been described as a succès de scandale meaning that people were glued to the serialized Anthology not because it was great poetry but rather because of the juicy sexual tidbits or the dirty details in the descriptions of easily recognizable personalities. If that were all, we wouldn't be talking about the Anthology. Compared with today's standards, the sex and the corruption were puny, timid. Australian writer Margaret Rees has explained why we're still talking: "Masters seems like an old curmudgeon, but the voices swell together in a chorus evoking the despair and low key tragedy of the town. The songs echo

plaintively in the memory for a long while."Whose songs are these, exactly? Masters created Spoon River and its characters out of the situations and people he knew. But it was not a small Illinois community he set out to depict. As commentators have pointed out many times - repeating what Masters himself had said - Spoon River is a microcosm through which we are presented with the author's vision of how the world works. An unsigned New York Times review from 1915 (the year of the publication of the first, incomplete, version of the Anthology) explains why the village setting is particularly effective and well-suited to such an undertaking:"The weakling or the criminal in a village community has no defenses, no subterfuges; every spring of his action is open to him who can analyze it. In the city the weak and the degenerate tend to segregate: the individual is lost in the class. In the small community the exact opposite obtains; the individual who falls below the community standard or departs from its regularity, stands out with uncompromising distinctness."In other words, the microcosm provided Masters with the opportunity to draw very distinct portraits, and the constraints of the dramatic monologue made those portraits that much sharper. To reiterate one of my earlier points, the same review goes on to say:"In the scheme of Mr. Masters's psychology, however, the novel point is that the subject confesses from the immunity of the grave. The shades of Spoon River rehearse their crimes, sadden us with their little, sordid, futile lives, and now and again hearten us with their dreams and victories. They keep nothing back, not even the aspiration not bold enough to face a philistine world. They reply to each other from the grave, refuting accusations, gibing at hypocrisies, contrasting points of view with delightful humor, satire, and irony."And that is probably why "[t]he songs echo plaintively in the memory for a long while" and why reading the Anthology is still so rewarding even if we agree with Babette Deutsch, who said in Poetry in Our Time, "However they differ in their attitudes and the circumstances of their lives, the characters are not identifiable by their speech. The cadences are monotonous and closer to prose than to song." So perhaps Spoon River is Masters' Song of Myself.

I have heard of the spoon river anthology for years and decided to try it out. The first half was splendid--a clear bittersweet account in verse of what life in small towns even today must be like. Insular in part but sometimes wonderful. Moving poems containing great truths. But there are many and the last third I found the writing tedious at times and purple if you get the sense. Read the first third and understand better the current division of American politics at a much deeper level. One learns the makeup of middle America small towns in beautiful blank verse.

I've read Spoon River Anthology at least three times. I was, until recently, never without a copy.

Now, I've downloaded the book to my Kindle, so I have it with me almost wherever I go. Masters' often poetic approach to the stories of these former Spoon River residents, as they look down on their village from the cemetery on the hill above, are sometimes shocking, repulsive, touching and tender. I've never tired of reading it. I find myself identifying with many of the now-dead residents. I'm especially fond of Lucius Atherton. This book is different from anything you'll read, Give it a shot. Perfect for Halloween!

100 years later and Edgar Lee Masters classic is as powerful and moving as when it was published. The entire book can be read in an hour, but if you are like most people you will go back and read it again , many times. I recommend the 1920 MacMillian Co Edition which includes ALL the poems and the original artwork by Oliver Herford and layout as intended by the Author.

I loved reading this novel approach to examining the lives and thoughts of the people who lived, loved, and passed on in our typical American small-towns. This book would be an excellent companion-read to "Winesburg, Ohio" and "Our Town", or addition to your personal library. The trio would also make a terrific gift to anyone who appreciates American Literature.

in the American tradition, a memorable document of the lives of common people.Their often tragic reality, confessions one cannot read without feeling overwhelmed.A village contains the substance of Shakesperian tragedies, in a nutshell. Highlyrecommended, best after being acquainted with Alfred Kazin,

The introduction and annotations by John E. Hallwas are very helpful in understanding Masters' Spoon River Anthology. I would even say this information is a must in appreciating the poetry in this book. I dived into the poetry in another version and was more than confused. This version explains and enlightens what Masters was doing and why with the "voices" speaking from their graves. Good book from 1915-16.

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