

Spoon River Anthology (1915; 1916) is widely known but not well understood. No other volume of American poetry made such an immediate impact, and few have been so influential. Composed of monologues spoken by the dead in a Midwestern cemetery, it was conceptually stunning; focused on the inner lives of even the violent and socially maladjusted, it was shockingly frank; written in flatly realistic and often ironic free verse, it was stylistically innovative; and concerned with frustration, struggle, and conflict in America, it was an ambitious portrayal of cultural decline firmly grounded in the specifics of community life. No volume of poetry since Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) had attempted so much or had been so original. Masters himself did not fully comprehend the book's uniqueness or the reasons for its powerful impact on American readers. He began it without knowing precisely what he wanted to do; he ended it without clearly realizing what he had done. He thought he could do better work in another, more traditional mode of poetry, but he never did.

William Marion Reedy, the influential editor who published the serialized version in 1914-15, encouraged Masters and provided an enthusiastic readership for the experimental epitaph-poems. In his remarkably perceptive essay, entitled "The Writer of Spoon River," Reedy asserted that the Anthology was 'a great work of literary art'. More than that, he comprehended the basis for its unique appeal: Spoon River, the village in the book, was a sociological microcosm, effectively portrayed because firmly grounded in the poet's experience:

"The Spoon River country is a composite of several small communities around and about Havana, Illinois. It is a small town populated by the memories of Mr. Masters' youth. The youth. . . was impressed by the life of the people, who were very close together. Everyone knew everyone else and the ramifications of family relationships, the multitudinous drama of neighborhood gossip, the ups and downs, successes and failures of the people. But it was left to Edgar Lee Masters to take all this, or as much of it as suited his purposes, and fuse it and shape it into an artistic creation. . . He saw and knew his Spoon River so well that when he came to write it out of himself, with his personality added to what he saw and knew, he wrote the life of man everywhere, or at least everywhere in America."

Trainor, the Druggist

ONLY the chemist can tell, and not always the chemist,
What will result from compounding
Fluids or solids.
And who can tell
How men and women will interact
On each other, or what children will result?
There were Benjamin Pantier and his wife,
Good in themselves, but evil toward each other:
He oxygen, she hydrogen,
Their son, a devastating fire.
I Trainor, the druggist, a mixer of chemicals,
Killed while making an experiment,
Lived unwedded.

Benjamin Pantier

TOGETHER in this grave lie Benjamin Pantier, attorney at law,
And Nig, his dog, constant companion, solace and friend.
Down the gray road, friends, children, men and women,
Passing one by one out of life, left me till I was alone
With Nig for partner, bed-fellow, comrade in drink.
In the morning of life I knew aspiration and saw glory.
Then she, who survives me, snared my soul
With a snare which bled me to death,
Till I, once strong of will, lay broken, indifferent,
Living with Nig in a room back of a dingy office.
Under my jaw-bone is snuggled the bony nose of Nig—
Our story is lost in silence. Go by, mad world!

Mrs. Benjamin Pantier

I KNOW that he told that I snared his soul
With a snare which bled him to death.
And all the men loved him,
And most of the women pitied him.
But suppose you are really a lady, and have delicate tastes,
And loathe the smell of whiskey and onions.
And the rhythm of Wordsworth's "Ode" runs in your ears,
While he goes about from morning till night
Repeating bits of that common thing;
"Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?"
And then, suppose:
You are a woman well endowed,
And the only man with whom the law and morality
Permit you to have the marital relation
Is the very man that fills you with disgust
Every time you think of it—while you think of it
Every time you see him?
That's why I drove him away from home
To live with his dog in a dingy room
Back of his office.

Reuben Pantier

WELL, Emily Sparks, your prayers were not wasted,
Your love was not all in vain.
I owe whatever I was in life
To your hope that would not give me up,
To your love that saw me still as good.
Dear Emily Sparks, let me tell you the story.
I pass the effect of my father and mother;
The milliner's daughter made me trouble
And out I went in the world,
Where I passed through every peril known
Of wine and women and joy of life.
One night, in a room in the Rue de Rivoli,
I was drinking wine with a black-eyed cocotte,
And the tears swam into my eyes.
She thought they were amorous tears and smiled
For thought of her conquest over me.
But my soul was three thousand miles away,
In the days when you taught me in Spoon River.
And just because you no more could love me,
Nor pray for me, nor write me letters,
The eternal silence of you spoke instead.
And the black-eyed cocotte took the tears for hers,
As well as the deceiving kisses I gave her.
Somehow, from that hour, I had a new vision—
Dear Emily Sparks!

Emily Sparks

WHERE is my boy, my boy—
In what far part of the world?
The boy I loved best of all in the school?—
I, the teacher, the old maid, the virgin heart,
Who made them all my children.
Did I know my boy aright,
Thinking of him as spirit aflame,
Active, ever aspiring?
Oh, boy, boy, for whom I prayed and prayed
In many a watchful hour at night,
Do you remember the letter I wrote you
Of the beautiful love of Christ?
And whether you ever took it or not,
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!

