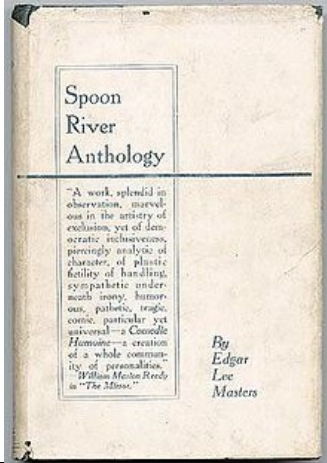




Discussion Guide

About the Book



Book Title: *Spoon River Anthology*

Author: Edgar Lee Masters

Published by McMillan, 1916

About the author: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/638>.

Book Website: www.spoonriveranthology.net

Available in the public domain on above website, audio book also at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsHC8tGLtK4>

Questions for Discussion

1. There are many epitaphs regarding regret, loneliness and sorrow, bitterness. Was there one that touched you more deeply than the others?
2. Some of the epitaphs indicate joy or a person at peace with the life they led? Did you find any that seemed joyful in the life they led on earth and thus at peace in death?
3. Several of the epitaphs are humorous or witty with a dark sort of humor. Name several. (Archibald Higbie is an example).
4. Some are almost impossible to derive the meaning. Were there any that were confusing to you?
5. Several allude to historic events. One alludes to the Haymarket riots in Chicago, Carl Hamblin. Several of the “dead’s” names also carry their story, Silas Dement, for the man who set fire to the court house. Can you think of others?
6. On the whole do you enjoy this kind of poetry or dislike it? What are your thoughts about the book as a whole?
7. Read over the MAMs comments. Which of the MAMs do you most agree with and why?
8. Would you recommend this book for other Book Clubs? Why or why not?
9. In what ways, if any, will this book change your life or perspective?

Nancy and the MAMs discuss the book...



Nancy: Spoon River introduces life in a small town, a slice of 19th century American life; the realm of my grandparents, and my great grandparents. Edgar Lee Masters crafted an artful masterpiece, popular in literature classes because it takes time and consideration to unearth the gems scattered about this collection of eulogies. The relationships, life work, misfortune and bad deeds are woven together through these retrospective poems.

In the insular society of Spoon River, conventional thought clearly separated the influential, religious and prosperous folk from the thieves, drunks and ne'er do well paupers. Yet, in this anthology, all are gathered on the "Hill." Death – the great equalizer brings them all back to dust. The author plays with this theme again and again through the dark humor pondering those lives now six feet under. What I like about this book is the way it underscores that we are all equal. The sins of the rich and poor are not so different. And although a work of fiction, we are told it was based on some real people – and as the dirty laundry of the town is aired into the cemetery of this small town, truth is pronounced at last. Those who may have managed to front their crimes in life, have had had them exposed in death.



PRISCILLA: Emily Sparks, clearly a woman of God, trying to evangelize her student -- but the young lad must've been hopelessly in love with his teacher. Sometimes, lust interferes with the word of God. Not the first time! I've heard this one before!



ABIGAIL: Poor Rev. Peet. God rest his soul. I thought of my late husband who also spent hours every week crafting sermons; and to have them all burned by someone who bought the trunkful after his death? Yet such it is with our life work, often just dust in the wind. I've self-published a book of my husband's sermons, so at least they'll escape the fire for another generation or two!



MOLLY: Well, albeit a rather dark collection, I do appreciate the way the underdogs triumph, or at least are as good as the top dogs in this picture of American life. As a writer, I can appreciate the work as a whole, but lament that the town Poet Petit missed the poetry, blind to the patterns and beauty of nature his whole life long. And I wish that Masters would have contemplated the poetic beauty of personalities in this small town, too, along the misdeeds and shady personalities that dominate his work.



SALLIE: Are people really all that bad? As I read this book, I kept wondering where is the joy, the laughter, the good? Certainly bad things happen in community, but there is always so much good, also. We decry the media for constantly reporting the evil. I say Masters needs to balance the bad with the good. I just don't think any society is as negative as he portrays.



KATHERINE: Surely a literary work of genius, but reading this I remember why I started to escape into romance novels. Sometimes I need something fun to give my mind a break. I read this in high school and remember trying to figure out who the different characters would be in my small Minnesota town. It did help open my eyes to the evil beneath the surface in polite society. Masters speaks a deep truth in this work.



JANE: I, of course, identified with Thomas Rhodes and like his idea that those of us who seek the treasures of the earth, i.e. gold! are compact, self-contained and harmonized to the end, as opposed to you liberals and intellectuals – splitting the soul into atoms! Hear! Hear! .