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Classic Book Notes #10

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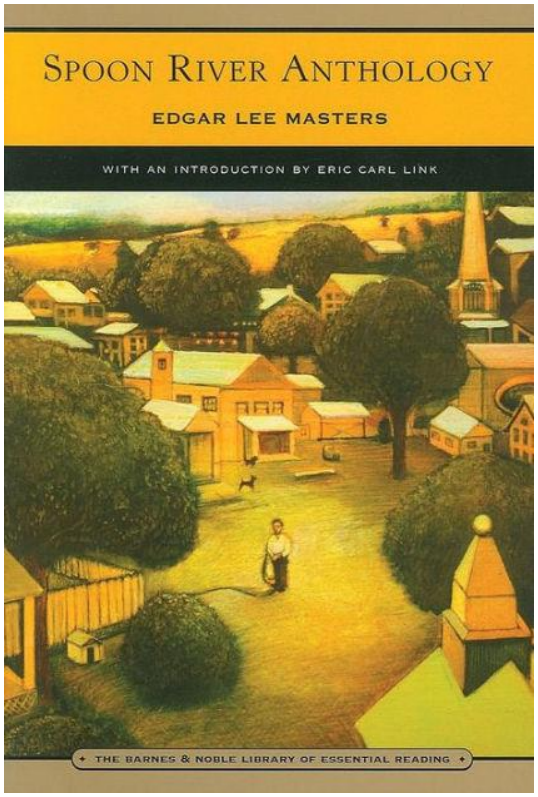
Spoon River Anthology
Part Two of Two

Editor's note: Following is a Book Notes Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It was first published in May 2020.



Although written in the 18th century and set in the English countryside, Edgar Lee Masters would have been very familiar with that other staple of high school reading lists, Thomas Gray's *"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":*

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep …
Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor …
Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way …

The Epitaph

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown. . .
No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailities from their dead abode.

Published in 1915, for the dead in his country church yard, Masters' **Spoon River Anthology** sang a very different dirge. For one thing, he included women and minorities. As historian Roy Strausbaugh said to me, " **Spoon River** pulls back the veil on life in small town, middle-America in the late Gilded Age." [1] Masters rejected Gray's advice not to draw out his town's people's "frailities from their dead abode," for as Laura Scanlan said, "(Masters) shattered the myth of smalltown America as the bastion of American virtue." [2]

If sisters Harriet Beecher Stowe's (yes, that Harriet Beecher Stowe, who also wrote **Uncle Tom's Cabin**) and Catharine E. Beecher's **American Woman's Home,** the classic 19th century domestic guide "dedicated to 'the women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the Republic,'" [3] consecrated *home* as the source of smalltown America's virtue, then *Spoon River* revealed its dark underside. As in:

Amanda Barker

Henry got me with child,
Knowing that I could not bring forth life
Without losing my own.
In my youth therefore I entered the portals of dust.
Traveler, it is believed in the village where I lived
That Henry loved me with a husband's love,
But I proclaim from the dust
That he slew me to gratify his hatred.

And, perhaps evening the score, *Dora Williams,* who, spurned by Reuben Pantier, left Spoon River, married multiple fortunes, and four spouses later was poisoned in Rome by her last husband, but along the way:

… A gray haired magnate
Went mad about me – so another fortune.
He died one night right in my arms, you know.
(I saw his purple face for years thereafter).
That was almost a scandal. I moved on.

Spoon River's underside also included racism, as *Shack Dye* , who after recounting the various ways in which the white lads taunted him by taking fish off his hooks, making him the butt of a leopard tamer's joke when the circus came to town, or tricking him with magnets in the blacksmith's shop, says:

Yet everyone of you, you white men,
Was fooled about fish and about leopards too,
And you didn't know any more than the horseshoes did
What moved you about Spoon River.

Or, echoing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banning all Chinese and most Asians from entering America or gaining American citizenship:

Yee Bow

... For without any warning, as if it were a prank,
And sneaking up behind me, Henry Wiley,
The minister's son, caved my ribs into my lungs,
With a blow of his fist.
Now, I shall never sleep with my ancestors in Pekin,
And no children shall worship at my grave.

In drawing his characters' "frailities from their dead abode," Masters also sheds light on 21st century American politics through the lens of late Gilded Age politics in smalltown America.

What's the cliché – "the more things change the more they stay the same?"

Spoon River is replete with Progressives struggling with over-arching conservatives fighting change; bankers rigging politics to their own advantage; labor fighting for working people's rights; anti-Prohibitionists fending off temperance advocates (Prohibition being the hot-button issue of the age, as abortion is now) and hard-core scolds like A.D. Blood running for mayor on a platform of righteous indignation only to end:

A.D. Blood

If you in the village think that my work was a good one,
Who closed the saloons and stopped all playing at cards,
And haled old Daisy Fraser* before Justice Arnett,
In many a crusade to purge the people of sin;
Why do you let the milliner's daughter Dora,
And the worthless son of Benjamin Pantier
Nightly make my grave their unholy pillow?
**Daisy Fraser was the town prostitute.*

Spoon River's villain, like Henry Potter in ***It's a Wonderful Life*** **,** is a banker. Banks and banking play a very ambiguous role in American history. Rightly or wrongly, bankers are frequently cast as predators preying on the financially naïve and powerless. It was Thomas Jefferson who said, "I sincerely believe that banking establishments are more dangerous than standing armies..." [4] A hard, uncharitable, devious man, banker Thomas Rhodes plays that role in *Spoon River* :

Thomas Rhodes

Very well, you liberals ...
You found with all your boasted wisdom
How hard at the last it is

To keep the soul from splitting …
While we, seekers of the earth's treasures,
Getters and hoarders of gold,
Are self-contained, compact, harmonized,
Even to the end.

For as *Ida Chicken* learned,

I thought I'd take a trip to Paris …
So I went to Peoria for a passport –
(Thomas Rhodes was on the train that morning).
And there the clerk of the District Court
Made me swear to support and defend
the Constitution …
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!

But Rhodes' son Ralph would soon squander all those advantages, for:

Ralph Rhodes

All they said was true:
I wrecked my father's bank with my loans
To dabble in wheat; but this was true –
I was buying wheat for him as well,
Who couldn't margin the deal in his name
Because of his church relationship.

Even then politics was a swirl, for Rhodes' arch-opponent, Progressive *John Cabanis* began as Rhodes' ally but then …

Neither spite, fellow citizens,
Nor forgetfulness of the shiftlessness,
And the lawlessness and waste
Under democracy's rule in Spoon River
Made me desert the party of law and order
And lead the liberal party.

Turn-coating, to coin a phrase, seemed the order of the day, as *Hiram Scates* who supported Cabanis and ran as a Progressive flip-flopped when he was losing, for as he says "And then I faced about,/And rallied my followers to his {his former opponent's} standard/And made him victor…"

Still, Masters' biases remain clear; he was a Populist, who supporting William Jennings Bryan, The Great Commoner, has *English Thornton* say:

Here! You sons of the men
Who fought with Washington at Valley Forge,
And whipped Black Hawk at Starved Rock,
Arise! Do battle with the descendants of those
Who bought land in the loop when it was waste sand,
And sold blankets and guns to the army of Grant,
And sat in legislatures in the early days,
Taking bribes from the railroads.

William Dean Howells, the preeminent literary critic of the era, thought Masters' verse in *Spoon River* "shredded prose," [5] but he also famously remarked "that if America means anything at all, it means the sufficiency of the common, the insufficiency of the uncommon." [6] Howells, who was not a Populist but was a son of the Midwest, that region most associated with the common people, was a champion of the people. He thought America's great gift to the world was liberating the genius, the talents of ordinary people. Like Charles Francis Adams and Henry Adams in his ***The Education of Henry Adams*** , Howells, having seen many at first hand, did not have much faith in "great men" and found them wanting.

The great "common man" of the era, perhaps of American history, was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, like Masters, was a son of Illinois descended from southerners who had come North seeking opportunity. Masters had an ambivalent attitude toward Lincoln. He knew people, including his grandfather, who had personally known Lincoln. In Masters' youth, everywhere one went in central Illinois Lincoln's shadow loomed.

Masters tried to reconcile the memory of Lincoln the ambitious lawyer married to the social climbing wife, the local politician famous for his stories and mastery of "inside politics," with the martyred President approaching secular sainthood. He knew William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner. It was Herndon who famously said of Lincoln, "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." [7] Herndon has a poem in *Spoon River* :

William H. Herndon

And I saw a man arise from the soil like a fabled giant
And throw himself over a deathless destiny,
Master of great armies, head of the republic,
Bringing together into a dithyramb of recreative song
The epic hopes of a people ...

Herndon is one of several in *Spoon River* who was a real person; two of them relate to Lincoln: Herndon and Ann Rutledge. Allegedly, Ann Rutledge was the love of Lincoln's life, but she died young. Some Lincoln biographers dispute the

centrality of Ann Rutledge's memory in Lincoln's life, but Masters seems to accept it as part of local lore:

Ann Rutledge

... I am Ann Rutledge who sleep beneath these weeds,
Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union,
But through separation.
Bloom forever, O Republic,
From the dust of my bosom.

Masters, himself a champion of the common man, would later write an unflattering biography of Lincoln seeking to demystify the myth, to debunk the sanctity, characterizing Lincoln as simply an ambitious politician. But in *Hannah Armstrong,* Masters portrays Lincoln as a common man who never lost his common touch, who never lost his connection with the people and they with him.

Armstrong, who after coming to Washington, D.C. to try to get her wounded son released from the Army so she could care for him at home, is at first rebuffed at the White House by aides and others. In one last effort, she tells a guard to "Please say it's old Aunt Hannah Armstrong/From Illinois, come to see him about her sick boy/In the army."

As Hannah then says,
Well, in just a moment they let me come in!
And when he saw me he broke into a laugh,
And dropped his business as president,
And wrote in his own hand Doug's discharge,
Talking the while of the early days,
And telling stories.

If Masters was undecided and unsure about Lincoln, he did, telling their secrets notwithstanding, honor and respect the people. Perhaps he expressed that most clearly in *Lucinda Matlock* , the story of a pioneer woman modeled after his own grandmother. After recounting her early years in Virginia and then coming to frontier Illinois, Lucinda says:

... I found Davis.
We were married and lived together seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the gardens, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the lark. ...

What's 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.

If I have a reservation about *Spoon River* , it is that neither Masters nor his characters achieve transcendence. They never escape from themselves. It would be wrong to call them solipsists and they certainly aren't narcissists. Telling their own stories, the first person traps them within themselves.

As a result, perhaps structurally, the absence of a narrator tying the stories together, leaves them as simple phenomena. Collectively, a portrait of *Spoon River* emerges. It is far more complex and ambiguous than Currier and Ives "Home Sweet Home," but it never gets over itself, it never transcends itself into something more than the materialistic recitations and recollections of the day-to-day. In short, no one sums it up. Maybe it can't be summed up, which is the point of a summary's absence. Maybe it, they, are just what they are.

Masters knew that, or seemed to intuit it. The last poem, *Webster Ford* , is autobiographical. It is Masters speaking in his own voice. The poems were first published in ***Reedy's Mirror*** signed " *Webster Ford.* " Masters attempts to make some transcendent sense of his vision, but tangles himself up in a snarled analysis of Apollo and Daphne – Apollo the god of wisdom and truth; Daphne the object of his unrequited sexual desire. Ford/Masters identifies with Apollo seeking wisdom by telling truth, but then ensnarled by his lust for Daphne is too knotted to clearly voice the final truth he's seen. Or, maybe that is the point. We are lustful creatures, unable to transcend or tame the life force.

Whatever. It doesn't work.

Two characters come close to transcending themselves, seeing the *"is that is"* we explored with Jack Gilbert and Mary Oliver, seeing beyond *Spoon River's* too rooted historicism. They are *Jonathan Houghton* , who *sees* the epiphany in the everyday:

The forest beyond the orchard is still
With midsummer stillness;
And along the road a wagon chuckles,
Loaded with corn ...
And an old man sits under a tree asleep,
And an old woman crosses the road,
Coming from the orchard with a bucket of blackberries...

Houghton seems to intuit what *Wallace Ferguson* means, when he says in his poem, "We live in the hour all free of the hours gone by..." which is as crystalline

a statement of ***Be Here Now*** as you are ever likely to read or hear. Still, Ferguson has nothing to say about the future and he rather quickly tangles himself in a too specific *present* in Geneva in the shadow of Mt. Blanc. Neither Ferguson nor Masters nor any of Masters' people ever achieve the epiphany Ted Kooser, a wonderful 21st century American poet does in *A Glimpse of the Eternal* :

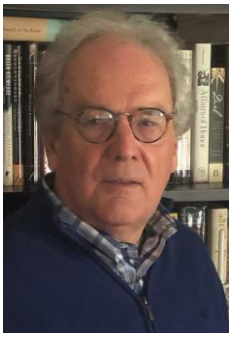
> Just now,
> a sparrow lighted
> on a pine bough
> right outside
> my bedroom window
> and a puff
> of yellow pollen
> flew away. [8]

From the perspective of "reflections on the experience of high school classics after a lifetime of experience," *Spoon River* improves with age. As remarked last week in Part One, reading *Spoon River* as a teenager left no lasting impression, apart from a vague sense of titillation – "Ooh, our grandparents did ***it*** , too"! Rereading it now, however, paraphrasing Carl Sandburg, one appreciates that the characters of *Spoon River* are "the people of life itself." As such, Thomas Gray's admonition to hide their "frailities" aside, by telling their stories *plain and true* Masters provides them with a dignity that life frequently did not.

There are 244 stories in *Spoon River* . Each story sings its own song; collectively they sing not only the song of late Gilded Age America, but the song of America, of its people and of the "sufficiency of the common." By telling their stories, Masters asserts that most *democratic* of sentiments – every *one* is important, every *one* counts and every *one* deserves to be "noted," to be attended to and to be respected, for we're all sinners and no one gets out of here alive.

Or, as *Jeremy Carlisle* , an avowed skeptic and perhaps saying more than he knows or intends, says:

> Passerby, sin beyond any sin
> Is the sin of blindness of souls to other souls.
> And joy beyond joy is the joy
> Of having the good in you seen, and seeing the good
> At the miraculous moment. ...
> We were ready then to walk together
> And sing the chorus and chant the dawn
> Of life that is wholly life.



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Classic Book Notes End Notes

Nb. All quotations from "Spoon River" are from the Barnes and Noble Classics edition published in 2007. Photo from https://www.amazon.com/Anthology-Barnes-Library-Essential-Reading/dp/0760791058

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