Sickness in Spoon River: Village Health at the Turn of the Century

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Edgar Lee Masters published numerous poems, plays, and novels between 1900 and 1942; most go unread, with the exception of Spoon River Anthology, which is among the most popular works of American poetry of the twentieth century. This collection of poems tells of the lives of the inhabitants of a fictional American town—Spoon River, Illinois. Many of the poems consider sickness and health in the community, and the insight they offer into human responses to illness continues to be relevant today, contributing not only to the lasting popularity of Spoon River Anthology, but also the literary value of the work.

Edgar Lee Masters had many agendas when he composed the poems of Spoon River Anthology between 1914 and 1916. Progressively-minded and trained as a lawyer, he sought to demonstrate injustices in the world around him—corruption in government and abuse of power, so prominent in American cities of his day; the inhumanity of individuals toward one another; sexism; and the oppression he felt organized religion imposed on simple-minded people. In Spoon River Anthology (1916), one of the few works of Masters' prolific oeuvre that consistently receives respect, he succeeded in portraying the problems, relationships, beliefs, and strengths of the citizens of Spoon River, a fictional, late nineteenth century, midwestern town modeled after Petersburg and Lewistown, Illinois, small towns in which he grew up.

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In this work, Masters depicted sickness and health in the community, often reflecting his own experiences. He described problems of local practitioners, death in the community, infections, therapies, and attitudes of the time toward such issues as sexuality, violence, and abortion. Masters provided further insight into the medical practices of these times in his autobiography *Across Spoon River* (1936) and his biography of the poet Vachel Lindsay, entitled *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America* (1935). Many of the illnesses described in *Spoon River Anthology* and the biographical and autobiographical works have become rare in contemporary America, but the ways in which people confront serious illnesses remain unchanged. Understanding the tribulations of the citizens of Spoon River, who speak through epitaphs that Masters imagined for their gravestones, helps clarify many of our own responses to sickness.

The *Spoon River Anthology* consists of 242 short epitaphs written in free verse, framed at the beginning by a short, introductory poem "The Hill," and at the end by a laborious, blank verse "Epic" called "The Spooniad," and a final "Epilogue." In the epitaphs, community members candidly summarize their lives. Like judgment day testimony, the epitaphs reveal the sins, hopes, emptiness, and complex relationships between people of Spoon River. "The Hill", a poem about the cemetery at Spoon River, begins the entire sequence, and provides a portrait of life and death in the town:

Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith,
The tender heart, the simple soul, the loud, the proud, the happy one? —
All, all are sleeping on the hill.
. . .One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,

"The Hill" speaks of motives, desires, and the fragility of life. In this way, "The Hill" prepares the dead to speak of their lives and reflect on matters of importance.

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Many of the dead regret their behavior in life. Like today, alcoholism caused great suffering and premature death for many townspeople. Deacon Taylor (#57), a town preacher and avid prohibitionist, ironically died of cirrhosis from surreptitious alcoholism. Alcoholism contributed to the demise of Mr. and Mrs. Pantier’s (#14 and #15) marriage. Harmon Whitney (#139), a frustrated writer who ended up in Spoon River