

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Spoon River Anthology**

by Edgar Lee Masters

written by Amber Reed

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## Notes

Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* was a controversial work of literature when it first appeared in 1915. Until that time, small mid-American towns had been portrayed as idyllic strongholds of human virtue.

Drawing on his boyhood experiences in the towns of Petersburg and Lewiston, Illinois, in the Valley of the Spoon River, Masters creates the mythical town of Spoon River and examines the lives of past residents who are buried on The Hill, the town cemetery. His anthology is the poetic equivalent of Sherwood Anderson's collection of stories set in the fictional *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Masters uses the free verse epitaph form to expose the corruption, disappointments, failures, and hidden secrets that exemplify the hypocrisy and spiritual deterioration of Spoon River.

There are occasional glimpses into the goodness or optimism found in any town, but most of the blunt revelations present a dark picture of small town life in 1915 mid-America.

These revelations may not seem as shocking or scandalous today as they did over eighty years ago, but readers might be surprised to see the same hypocrisy, injustice, political corruption, and despair in Spoon River that exists in the world today.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classic Edition of *Spoon River Anthology*, copyright 2007.

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. understand the following terms:
  - free verse
  - epitaph
  - anthology
  - allusion
2. identify the following devices as they are used in free verse poetry:
  - extended metaphor
  - repetition
  - parallel structure
  - symbolism
  - analogy
3. analyze “The Hill” as an introduction to the following devices:
  - characterization
  - theme
  - repetition
  - parallel structure
  - allusion
4. analyze an epitaph as a small autobiography or biography of a deceased citizen of Spoon River.
5. discuss related groups of epitaphs as representative of the small stories told within the overall framework of the entire anthology.
6. discuss Masters’s attitude toward the following professions in the early 1900’s:
  - doctors
  - lawyers
  - ministers
  - politicians
  - newspaper editors
7. analyze Masters’s attitude toward the following social issues in 1915:
  - war
  - Prohibition
  - scandal
  - class struggle

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Select three Spoon River characters who use extended metaphors based on their occupations to express their views of life. Write an essay explaining how the metaphors are developed and how this is linked to the characters' views on life.
2. Select three epitaphs related to the "power of the press"; write an essay discussing how the newspaper has been used in a harmful way.
3. Write an essay describing Masters's effective use of literary allusions in three epitaphs; include how the allusion is linked to the theme of each epitaph.
4. Select and discuss three epitaphs that reflect Masters's pessimistic view of politics in Spoon River.
5. Select two epitaphs that show a positive view of marriage and two epitaphs that show a negative view of marriage. Write an essay in which you contrast these sets of epitaphs, focusing on the literary device(s) used to express those views.
6. Relate the actual historical event of the Haymarket Square riot in Chicago to Carl Hamblin's epitaph.
7. Think of any four historical figures, or characters from a book you have read, and write a free-verse epitaph for each using repetition, parallel structure, and extended metaphor, as well as any other poetic devices useful to your theme. The epitaphs should reveal the life, historical perspective, or personal insight of these figures.
8. Select a novel or play that you have studied in school. Choose four characters and develop a free-verse epitaph for each. Use the criteria above, as well as cross-referencing, in these epitaphs.
9. Look up information on the real Margaret Fuller, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Theodore Dreiser; relate your findings to the epitaphs of Margaret Fuller Slack (Pg. 37), Percy Bysshe Shelley (Pg. 31), and Theodore the Poet (Pg. 34) in the *Spoon River Anthology*.
10. Abraham Lincoln is mentioned in the opening poem "The Hill." His name appears throughout the *Spoon River Anthology* and is the focus of attention in some epitaphs. Read the epitaphs of Anne Rutledge (Pg. 153), William H. Herndon (Pg. 156), and Hannah Armstrong (Pg. 159). Write an essay that discusses Masters's attitude toward Abraham Lincoln, as reflected in these epitaphs. Make specific reference to the epitaphs and use quotations.
11. Read the epitaphs of Benjamin Pantier (Pg. 19), Mrs. Benjamin Pantier (Pg. 19), Trainor, the Druggist (Pg. 21), Reuben Pantier (Pg. 20), and Emily Sparks (Pg. 21); write an essay discussing how these epitaphs are developed and how they are all related by a common theme.

# Spoon River Anthology

## “The Hill” (Pg. 9)

### VOCABULARY

**brothel** – an illegal establishment used for prostitution  
**thwarted** – hindered, stifled  
**venerable** – valued, respected

1. What literary devices are used at the beginning of stanzas one, three, five, and seven?

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2. Give an example of anaphora from the poem.

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3. What effects do the final lines in stanzas one through six create?

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**“Sarah Brown” (Pg. 30)**

## VOCABULARY

**balmy** – soothing, warm  
**broods** – meditates, focuses, worries  
**rapturous** – joyous, ecstatic  
**whip-poor-will** – a type of nocturnal bird  
**wrought** – created

1. Who does Sarah Brown address in the first verse? What does she request of this person?

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2. Sarah says, “I am not here under this pine tree.” What does she mean?

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3. What is Sarah’s state of mind now that she is deceased, and what words describe her experience of the afterlife?

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4. What are Sarah’s reflections on her affair?

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5. The poem ends, “There is no marriage in heaven / But there is love.” What do these verses imply about social mores?

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**“Margaret Fuller Slack” (Pg. 37)**

VOCABULARY

**lock-jaw** – a condition in which the jaw becomes locked due to a muscle spasm  
**untoward** – not favorable

1. Why does the speaker refer to George Eliot?

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2. What is the “old, old problem”?

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3. Why does Margaret decide to marry the druggist?

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**'Butch' Weldy" (Pg. 26)**

VOCABULARY

heave – to swell

- 1. How do you interpret the first line “After I got religion and steadied down”? How is this related to other epitaphs in this section?

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- 2. What is Weldy’s occupation? Ironically, what does his workplace symbolize?

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- 3. How is Weldy blinded?

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4. How does Rhodes say he feels at the time of his death? Why does he deal with death in this way?

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5. What is the tone of Thomas Rhodes's epitaph?

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6. You have read epitaphs by multiple victims of Rhodes's deeds, including Nicolas Bindle, Ralph Rhodes, Eugene Carman, and Mrs. Reece. After reading Thomas Rhodes's epitaph, have your feelings toward the character changed? For instance, do you like or dislike Rhodes any more or less?

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**“Seth Compton” (Pg. 122)**

VOCABULARY

vestige – evidence

1. To what does Seth Compton devote his life?

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2. What happens after Compton’s death? How is this event related to the question posed by the influential town members, “What is the use of knowing the evil in the world?”

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3. What are Volney’s “Ruins” and “Faust”?

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