

## Chapter 15

# Poem Illustration for the *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters

### ABSTRACT

*This project makes a connection between visual arts and a literary analysis of the masterpiece collection of poems, *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters, his work, and his times. The aim of this project is to create an artistic expression of our understanding of Edgar Lee Masters's work as a personal response to the spirit and the meaning of the verse, as well as to the author's comments on the philosophical, social, and historical issues.*

### INTRODUCTION

This project draws from a collection of poems “Spoon River Anthology” (1915/2012) written by Edgar Lee Masters (1869–1950), which is published as a public domain work at Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/m#a584>. An online publication of Edgar Lee Masters' classic “Spoon River Anthology” can also be found on the page <http://www.bartleby.com/84/1.html> and <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/masters/sranthology6x9.pdf>.

The aim of this project is to create an expression of your interpretation of this work and to set forth your personal response to one of the poems, whether by writing programs for images or applying any

drawing or painting software on a computer, tablet, a smart phone such as an iPad, or on paper. You may prefer to draw by hand on the computer screen using a mouse or a graphic tablet and a stylus, you may use a digital camera or transform scanned images of your choice, or you may also use your own tools or programs. If you have some experience in programming, you may use the programming process for developing an abstract or representational image, and then you may choose to work further on it using graphic or painting software. Concentrate on achieving the artistic integrity of your image and employing all your technical capacity to bring about your vision of the poem.

Derive your inspiration from a selected verse and create a synthetic visual counterpart to Masters' epigrammatic poetry. The work resulting from this experience will envisage the spirit and the meaning of the verse in a single scene from

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it. Literary compositions written with intensity and beauty of language brought the success and fame to the author. Your art may be illustrative or metaphorical. After you create your project as a complement to a selected poem, maybe you will want to compare and contrast your visual artistic solutions for a visual version of the poem with the works of art created in the times of Masters. While working on this project, you may want to explore concepts derived from art and computer graphics and make connections between visual arts and other disciplines. If you would make some sketches, and summaries, and conclusions as short files written in an electronic or traditional notebook, you may later enclose some of these sketches and notes in your artwork.

## **EDGAR LEE MASTERS AND HIS TIMES**

Both the Internet resources and books on history of American literature provide information about life of the poet and his achievements confirmed by almost one hundred editions of his book, translations into many languages, and by granting the poet in 1946 the Academy of American Poets Fellowship; also, some comments and explanations about his personal views within historical and cultural context. Edgar Lee Masters intertwined his social and ethical involvement with the accounts of the frustrated lives of his characters. People portrayed in his poems speak in free-verse monologues that sound like their own epitaphs – inscriptions on their tombstones in memory of themselves, buried there.

Masters conveys his philosophical concerns about accidental events that determined fates of these deceased persons and prevented them from fulfilling their desires. The fatalistic drama about their lives reflects Masters' anger caused by social exploitation, political injustice, and economic hardship. Masters expressed his sympathy aroused by the misfortunes of soldiers just before America entered World War I

(in 1917, throughout the course of Woodrow Wilson's presidency). One may also find in the "Spoon River Anthology" a depiction of how the industrial developments in American economy affected the village life.

Romanticism in literature might influence the writings of Edgar Lee Masters, with its emphasis on imagination, emotions, and social issues. It was reflected by his ardent devotion toward English Romantic poets, such as John Keats (1795-1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), as well as the American poet, Walt Whitman (1819-1892). One may also see how Masters, who studied Greek and declared himself as a Hellenist, attained the clear, precise expression in few words, which is characteristic of Greek epigrams. His epitaphs are characterized by the use of condensed language charged with suggestive power. Masters conveys the experiences, ideas, and strong emotions of his characters in a vivid and imaginative way, without using expressions controlled by meter and rhymes characteristic of poetry. His literary technique includes the use of metaphors to portray ideas and states of mind rather than facts or events.

## **EPIGRAMS, EPITAPHS, AND METAPHORS IN POETRY AND PAINTINGS**

Epigrammatic form of writing was originally a written note on a sculpture erected as a memorial. Epigrams evolved into short satirical verses, and then in brief, witty utterances expressed in a verse or prose. These concise, rich-in-meaning, and expressive short poems or sayings were written by other writers, for example, by American writers Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Ogden Nash (1902-1971), for instance, "*Senescence begins/ and middle age ends/ the day your descendants/ outnumber your friends*", or British authors George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), for example, "*Experience is the name everyone gives to his mistakes*").

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