

CLASSICS TO GO

# SPOON RIVER ANTHOLOGY

EDGAR LEE MASTERS

# **Spoon River Anthology**

**Edgar Lee Masters**



## The Hill

*Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,  
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozier,  
the fighter?*

*All, all are sleeping on the hill.*

*One passed in a fever,  
One was burned in a mine,  
One was killed in a brawl,  
One died in a jail,  
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—  
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.*

*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,  
One of a broken pride, in the search for heart's desire;  
One after life in far-away London and Paris  
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate and Mag—  
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.*

*Where are Uncle Isaac and Aunt Emily,  
And old Towny Kincaid and Sevigne Houghton,  
And Major Walker who had talked  
With venerable men of the revolution?—  
All, all are sleeping on the hill.*

*They brought them dead sons from the war,  
And daughters whom life had crushed,  
And their children fatherless, crying—  
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.*

*Where is Old Fiddler Jones  
Who played with life all his ninety years,  
Braving the sleet with bared breast,  
Drinking, rioting, thinking neither of wife nor kin,  
Nor gold, nor love, nor heaven?  
Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,  
Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary's Grove,  
Of what Abe Lincoln said  
One time at Springfield.*

## Hod Putt

Here I lie close to the grave  
Of Old Bill Piersol,  
Who grew rich trading with the Indians, and who  
Afterwards took the Bankrupt Law  
And emerged from it richer than ever  
Myself grown tired of toil and poverty  
And beholding how Old Bill and others grew in wealth  
Robbed a traveler one Night near Proctor's Grove,  
Killing him unwittingly while doing so,  
For which I was tried and hanged.  
That was my way of going into bankruptcy.  
Now we who took the bankrupt law in our respective ways  
Sleep peacefully side by side.

## Ollie McGee

Have you seen walking through the village  
A man with downcast eyes and haggard face?  
That is my husband who, by secret cruelty  
Never to be told, robbed me of my youth and my beauty;  
Till at last, wrinkled and with yellow teeth,  
And with broken pride and shameful humility,  
I sank into the grave.  
But what think you gnaws at my husband's heart?  
The face of what I was, the face of what he made me!  
These are driving him to the place where I lie.  
In death, therefore, I am avenged.

## Fletcher McGee

She took my strength by minutes,  
She took my life by hours,  
She drained me like a fevered moon  
That saps the spinning world.  
The days went by like shadows,  
The minutes wheeled like stars.  
She took the pity from my heart,  
And made it into smiles.  
She was a hunk of sculptor's clay,  
My secret thoughts were fingers:  
They flew behind her pensive brow  
And lined it deep with pain.  
They set the lips, and sagged the cheeks,  
And drooped the eye with sorrow.  
My soul had entered in the clay,  
Fighting like seven devils.  
It was not mine, it was not hers;  
She held it, but its struggles  
Modeled a face she hated,  
And a face I feared to see.  
I beat the windows, shook the bolts.  
I hid me in a corner  
And then she died and haunted me,  
And hunted me for life.

## Robert Fulton Tanner

If a man could bite the giant hand  
That catches and destroys him,  
As I was bitten by a rat  
While demonstrating my patent trap,  
In my hardware store that day.  
But a man can never avenge himself  
On the monstrous ogre Life.  
You enter the room—that's being born;  
And then you must live—work out your soul,  
Aha! the bait that you crave is in view:  
A woman with money you want to marry,  
Prestige, place, or power in the world.  
But there's work to do and things to conquer—  
Oh, yes! the wires that screen the bait.  
At last you get in—but you hear a step:  
The ogre, Life, comes into the room,  
(He was waiting and heard the clang of the spring)  
To watch you nibble the wondrous cheese,  
And stare with his burning eyes at you,  
And scowl and laugh, and mock and curse you,  
Running up and down in the trap,  
Until your misery bores him.



## Cassius Hueffer

They have chiseled on my stone the words:

“His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him

That nature might stand up and say to all the world,

This was a man.”

Those who knew me smile

As they read this empty rhetoric.

My epitaph should have been:

“Life was not gentle to him,

And the elements so mixed in him

That he made warfare on life

In the which he was slain.”

While I lived I could not cope with slanderous tongues,

Now that I am dead I must submit to an epitaph

Graven by a fool!

## Serepta Mason

My life's blossom might have bloomed on all sides  
Save for a bitter wind which stunted my petals  
On the side of me which you in the village could see.  
From the dust I lift a voice of protest:  
My flowering side you never saw!  
Ye living ones, ye are fools indeed  
Who do not know the ways of the wind  
And the unseen forces  
That govern the processes of life.

## 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.

## Chase Henry

In life I was the town drunkard;  
When I died the priest denied me burial  
In holy ground.  
The which redounded to my good fortune.  
For the Protestants bought this lot,  
And buried my body here,  
Close to the grave of the banker Nicholas,  
And of his wife Priscilla.  
Take note, ye prudent and pious souls,  
Of the cross—currents in life  
Which bring honor to the dead, who lived in shame

## Harry Carey Goodhue

You never marveled, dullards of Spoon River,  
When Chase Henry voted against the saloons  
To revenge himself for being shut off.  
But none of you was keen enough  
To follow my steps, or trace me home  
As Chase's spiritual brother.  
Do you remember when I fought  
The bank and the courthouse ring,  
For pocketing the interest on public funds?  
And when I fought our leading citizens  
For making the poor the pack-horses of the taxes?  
And when I fought the water works  
For stealing streets and raising rates?  
And when I fought the business men  
Who fought me in these fights?  
Then do you remember:  
That staggering up from the wreck of defeat,  
And the wreck of a ruined career,  
I slipped from my cloak my last ideal,  
Hidden from all eyes until then,  
Like the cherished jawbone of an ass,  
And smote the bank and the water works,  
And the business men with prohibition,  
And made Spoon River pay the cost  
Of the fights that I had lost.

## Judge Somers

How does it happen, tell me,  
That I who was most erudite of lawyers,  
Who knew Blackstone and Coke  
Almost by heart, who made the greatest speech  
The court-house ever heard, and wrote  
A brief that won the praise of Justice Breese  
How does it happen, tell me,  
That I lie here unmarked, forgotten,  
While Chase Henry, the town drunkard,  
Has a marble block, topped by an urn  
Wherein Nature, in a mood ironical,  
Has sown a flowering weed?



## Benjamin Pantier

Together in this grave lie Benjamin Pantier, attorney at law,  
And Nig, his dog, constant companion, solace and friend.  
Down the gray road, friends, children, men and women,  
Passing one by one out of life, left me till I was alone  
With Nig for partner, bed-fellow; comrade in drink.  
In the morning of life I knew aspiration and saw glory,  
The she, who survives me, snared my soul  
With a snare which bled me to death,  
Till I, once strong of will, lay broken, indifferent,  
Living with Nig in a room back of a dingy office.  
Under my Jaw-bone is snuggled the bony nose of Nig  
Our story is lost in silence. Go by, mad world!

## Mrs. Benjamin Pantier

I know that he told that I snared his soul  
With a snare which bled him to death.  
And all the men loved him,  
And most of the women pitied him.  
But suppose you are really a lady, and have delicate tastes,  
And loathe the smell of whiskey and onions,  
And the rhythm of Wordsworth's "Ode" runs in your ears,  
While he goes about from morning till night  
Repeating bits of that common thing;  
"Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?"  
And then, suppose;  
You are a woman well endowed,  
And the only man with whom the law and morality  
Permit you to have the marital relation  
Is the very man that fills you with disgust  
Every time you think of it while you think of it  
Every time you see him?  
That's why I drove him away from home  
To live with his dog in a dingy room  
Back of his office.

## Reuben Pantier

Well, Emily Sparks, your prayers were not wasted,  
Your love was not all in vain.  
I owe whatever I was in life  
To your hope that would not give me up,  
To your love that saw me still as good.  
Dear Emily Sparks, let me tell you the story.  
I pass the effect of my father and mother;  
The milliner's daughter made me trouble  
And out I went in the world,  
Where I passed through every peril known  
Of wine and women and joy of life.  
One night, in a room in the Rue de Rivoli,  
I was drinking wine with a black-eyed cocotte,  
And the tears swam into my eyes.  
She thought they were amorous tears and smiled  
For thought of her conquest over me.  
But my soul was three thousand miles away,  
In the days when you taught me in Spoon River.  
And just because you no more could love me,  
Nor pray for me, nor write me letters,  
The eternal silence of you spoke instead.  
And the Black-eyed cocotte took the tears for hers,  
As well as the deceiving kisses I gave her.  
Somehow, from that hour, I had a new vision  
Dear Emily Sparks!

## Emily Sparks

Where is my boy, my boy  
In what far part of the world?  
The boy I loved best of all in the school?—  
I, the teacher, the old maid, the virgin heart,  
Who made them all my children.  
Did I know my boy aright,  
Thinking of him as a spirit aflame,  
Active, ever aspiring?  
Oh, boy, boy, for whom I prayed and prayed  
In many a watchful hour at night,  
Do you remember the letter I wrote you  
Of the beautiful love of Christ?  
And whether you ever took it or not,  
My, boy, wherever you are,  
Work for your soul's sake,  
That all the clay of you, all of the dross of you,  
May yield to the fire of you,  
Till the fire is nothing but light!...  
Nothing but light!

## Trainor, the Druggist

Only the chemist can tell, and not always the chemist,  
What will result from compounding  
Fluids or solids.  
And who can tell  
How men and women will interact  
On each other, or what children will result?  
There were Benjamin Pantier and his wife,  
Good in themselves, but evil toward each other;  
He oxygen, she hydrogen,  
Their son, a devastating fire.  
I Trainor, the druggist, a miser of chemicals,  
Killed while making an experiment,  
Lived unwedded.

## Daisy Fraser

Did you ever hear of Editor Whedon  
Giving to the public treasury any of the money he received  
For supporting candidates for office?  
Or for writing up the canning factory  
To get people to invest?  
Or for suppressing the facts about the bank,  
When it was rotten and ready to break?  
Did you ever hear of the Circuit Judge  
Helping anyone except the "Q" railroad,  
Or the bankers? Or did Rev. Peet or Rev. Sibley  
Give any part of their salary, earned by keeping still,  
Or speaking out as the leaders wished them to do,  
To the building of the water works?  
But I Daisy Fraser who always passed  
Along the street through rows of nods and smiles,  
And coughs and words such as "there she goes."  
Never was taken before Justice Arnett  
Without contributing ten dollars and costs  
To the school fund of Spoon River!



## Benjamin Fraser

Their spirits beat upon mine  
Like the wings of a thousand butterflies.  
I closed my eyes and felt their spirits vibrating.  
I closed my eyes, yet I knew when their lashes  
Fringed their cheeks from downcast eyes,  
And when they turned their heads;  
And when their garments clung to them,  
Or fell from them, in exquisite draperies.  
Their spirits watched my ecstasy  
With wide looks of starry unconcern.  
Their spirits looked upon my torture;  
They drank it as it were the water of life;  
With reddened cheeks, brightened eyes,  
The rising flame of my soul made their spirits guilt,  
Like the wings of a butterfly drifting suddenly into sunlight.  
And they cried to me for life, life, life.  
But in taking life for myself,  
In seizing and crushing their souls,  
As a child crushes grapes and drinks  
From its palms the purple juice,  
I came to this wingless void,  
Where neither red, nor gold, nor wine,  
Nor the rhythm of life are known.

## Minerva Jones

I am Minerva, the village poetess,  
Hooted at, jeered at by the Yahoos of the street  
For my heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk,  
And all the more when "Butch" Weldy  
Captured me after a brutal hunt.  
He left me to my fate with Doctor Meyers;  
And I sank into death, growing numb from the feet up,  
Like one stepping deeper and deeper into a stream of ice.  
Will some one go to the village newspaper,  
And gather into a book the verses I wrote?—  
I thirsted so for love  
I hungered so for life!

## “Indignation” Jones

You would not believe, would you  
That I came from good Welsh stock?  
That I was purer blooded than the white trash here?  
And of more direct lineage than the  
New Englanders And Virginians of Spoon River?  
You would not believe that I had been to school  
And read some books.

You saw me only as a run-down man  
With matted hair and beard  
And ragged clothes.

Sometimes a man’s life turns into a cancer  
From being bruised and continually bruised,  
And swells into a purplish mass  
Like growths on stalks of corn.

Here was I, a carpenter, mired in a bog of life  
Into which I walked, thinking it was a meadow,  
With a slattern for a wife, and poor Minerva, my daughter,  
Whom you tormented and drove to death.  
So I crept, crept, like a snail through the days  
Of my life.

No more you hear my footsteps in the morning,  
Resounding on the hollow sidewalk  
Going to the grocery store for a little corn meal  
And a nickel’s worth of bacon.