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ABSTRACT

"Spoon River Anthology," by poet Edgar Lee Masters, consists of epitaphs spoken by the defunct inhabitants of imaginary Spoon River, Illinois. The poems are a composite recollection of several small, turn-of-the-century Illinois towns, where Masters lived as a boy. Students of these works came to realize that the small town, as assessed by the honest dead, stands as a literary innovation as well as a significant and timeless comment on the larger society. The student productions discussed in this document were largely self-directed. As well as directors and actors, students were producers and writers; they took charge of continuity, program, music, lighting, set, costumes, makeup, and properties. In addition to endless opportunities for student creativity, the "Spoon River" experience offers infinite possibilities for different situations and different teachers. (CK)

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A Spoon River Experience

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In an age print struggles in competition with television, film, and other "involving" media, literature, in its own way most capable of producing involvement, must become an exhilarating experience rather than a dull assignment. Fortunately much literature is essentially drama, intended to be performed publicly rather than savored privately. And students learn what they *do*. Drama, an imitation of life, is a *doing* proposition; it is an active, immediate, sense-walloping happening. Even before students are able to make a written text live in their minds, they can effectively and enjoyably make a script live on stage.

Given these convictions, an American literature class, and the theme of American small town life (as presented by Mark Twain, James Whitcomb Riley, Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Thornton Wilder, and many others), a teacher might concoct a truly serendipitous unit taking a few cues from the outline of a *Spoon River* experience.

This Bulletin contains two approaches for the teaching of the Spoon River Anthology by Edgar Lee Masters. The first by Mrs. Le Bloch deals primarily with oral interpretation and dramatization of Masters. The second by Mr. Reynolds is a more complete unit which includes the writing and taping of original epitaphs. You will enjoy seeing how two superior teachers approach the same subject, and you will see ways in which you can employ the techniques discussed in teaching poetry in your own classes.



Spoon River Anthology, by poet Edgar Lee Masters, consists of epitaphs spoken by the defunct inhabitants of imaginary Spoon River, Illinois. Published in 1915, the poems are a composite recollection of several small turn-of-the-century Illinois towns where Masters lived as a boy. Many Illinois students are in an advantageous position to understand and appreciate Masters because they have visited Lewistown or Petersburg (in the New Salem area) and have seen Spoon River's real life equivalents. But to relate a unit on Masters to my three junior English classes at Centennial High School, Champaign, was a challenge. The classes were heterogeneous and lacked oral ability and dramatic experience; in short, they were entirely normal and not yet up to *Hamlet*. With such a typical group, a traditional play is often plastered together when the teacher assigns lead parts to bright or talented students, relegates pulling curtain to "the halt and improvident," and prays that the leads don't contract chicken pox the day of the performance. Usually the teacher appoints herself director and turns creative students into puppets responding to her less-than-subtle tugs. She does and learns while students hassle with memorizing the verbal and nonverbal behaviors foisted upon them.

Though a dramatic version of *Spoon River Anthology* exists, we found a happier alternative in a strictly student production created from the Spoon River poems.

The first person free-verse poems are perfectly suited to oral interpretation. And because the poems are all relatively short, no individual had to shoulder an inordinate share of the performance. All students had equal risk, responsibility, and experience. None of the productions was particularly public; the three were viewed as class projects for sharing rather than extracurricular show-off affairs. The audience for a given play consisted largely of students scheduled to present their own version the next day. Thus the audience was intelligent and greatly sympathetic. The pressure was definitely off for those students who at the beginning swore that they would die before getting up on the stage.

Students were introduced to the American small town theme before they tackled *Spoon River Anthology*. They discussed small town life as presented in other works before concluding that Masters does not evoke the idyllic small town myth. They saw that he includes more misfits than good guys in the frank and fairly balanced *Spoon River*. Students came to realize that the small town, as assessed by the honest dead, stands as a literary innovation as well as a significant and timeless comment on the larger

society. In addition, students in class considered the epitaph form and composed little statements for professionals, famous men, and themselves.

I outlined and justified the *Spoon River* project at the beginning, so that I could take a less prominent role throughout the planning and performing phases. With the aid of *Spoon River* text and record, students then studied the characters and chose their own parts. There was absolutely no casting problem, since students had 244 varied individuals to choose from.

Some students type-cast themselves. A boisterous member of each class picked drunken Deacon Taylor while optimistic, attractive girls favored Lucinda Matlock and Anne Rutledge. Other students wanted to be unusual or difficult characters completely different from themselves (like the village atheist, Elsa Wertman, and "Indignation" Jones). The particularly ambitious or undecided took several parts. To fight a temptation to boss the show and with an effort to be a decent sport, I myself learned Hannah Armstrong and Mabel Osbourne. (No teacher should ask students to do what she does not have the gumption or desire to do herself.)

The productions were largely self-directed. Students did their own oral interpretation and choreography by looking for clues to their characters in the epitaphs, then deciding on appropriate intonation, gesture, and body tension. Students were encouraged to involve the entire body, keep in character, speak loudly, and improvise freely. Nearly all memorized their parts. Without exception, students adopted a physical appearance, philosophy, language, and personality distinct from their own.

As well as directors and actors, students were producers and writers; they took charge of continuity, program, music, lighting, set, costumes, makeup, and properties.

The trick of producing *Spoon River* was to create a play rather than a series of recitations. The program committees tackled this assignment by grouping chosen characters together in sets of three, four, or five, so that each set presented a single theme or a series of interrelated stories. The program committees also designed and printed the programs.

The music committees chose thematically suitable music to bridge from the exit of one set to the entrance of the next; generally the message of a selection matched the message of a preceding or subsequent set. Choices ranged from traditional folk ballads and revival hymns to songs of the Carpenters, Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel. Though we could have performed live

music, for the sake of expedience we taped the entire soundtrack. Lighting effects were likewise simple and harmonious. Each set was accompanied by a colored background and followed by a fade to the next set.

Like Act III of Wilder's *Our Town*, *Spoon River Anthology* logically takes place in a woodsy rural cemetery. Masters sets the scene in the introductory poem where he says that "all, all are sleeping on the hill." Students constructed tombstones of available corrugated cardboard, gray housepaint, nails, and two-by-fours at no cost. The epitaphs of Knowlt Hoheimer and Franklin Jones describe a marble figure with wings bearing the inscription *pro patria* and a dove carved to look more like a chicken, but the remaining creations were freely designed by my students after nineteenth century models. Though we could have borrowed live shrubs from a nursery, we used, for the graveyard effect, eerie bare metal trees left from another production. Finishing touches included memorial flowers and inscriptions like "RIP" and "Love Eternal."

Students scrounged for costumes from their own wardrobes and those of their families. Suspenders, floppy hats, bandanas, ruffles, long skirts, vests, and overalls were all in style and thus readily available. Makeup was equally simple. We used only eyebrow pencil, lipstick, rouge, and cornstarch. Minimal props like a geranium, a fiddle, and liquor bottles were easily gathered by the prop committees.

Each play lasted about fifty minutes and had approximately thirty characters and eight selections of music in it. Because each class chose its own cast of characters and designed its own program, music and other effects, each play had its own original flavor. All plays were successful with complete and willing participation.

In addition to endless opportunities for student creativity, the *Spoon River* experience offers infinite possibilities for different situations and different teachers. When we put on *Spoon River* last year (at Bishop McNamara High School, Kankakee), we even designed our own stage and, of course, created our own atmosphere. The show took place outside the building with the audience sitting on the grass. Classroom doors became the exit and entrance, and the building wall served as stage rear. Lights were artfully attached to two-by-fours extending from the roof of the building. We charged the public audience admission in S&H Green Stamps and applied the proceeds toward the purchase of a

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bus. Though the second performance was plagued by June bugs, the show had a delightful warmth, freshness, and authenticity.

A future performance might be multi-media with film or slides in addition to the play's usual trappings. Strobe lights, shadows, and other unusual lighting effects would be marvellous. The dead characters might even appear behind graves by popping out of a trap door on the stage. Charged with enthusiasm, I am eyeing our newly landscaped courtyard (complete with several hills) hoping that next year's performance of the *Spoon River Anthology*, or its experience counterpart, can be on this location.

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