

SOAPSTone Analysis
+ Summary/Paraphrase

“Alexander Throckmorton”
Edgar Lee Masters

Summary*: Alexander Throckmorton compares himself to a bird flying into the mountains in order to make the point that youth and wisdom seldom go together.

Speaker: The first-person speaker is Alexander Throckmorton, who is reflecting on one of the lessons he learned in his life. (The poem is actually the epitaph that appears on his tombstone in the fictional Spoon River Cemetery, a place where the former inhabitants of a small town “speak” from beyond the grave in the form of these epitaphs.)

Occasion: Since this is an epitaph written from “beyond the grave,” it is reasonable to assume that such a piece of writing would be spawned by someone who is reflecting on death and/or the lessons one learned in life. To pull back out of the fictional character of Alexander Throckmorton and into the mind of the poet, Edgar Lee Masters, it seems that he was probably trying to create an epitaph with a simple lesson, uncomplicated by the stories and scandals that fill many of the other epitaphs in the anthology.

Audience: This epitaph is part of a collection called Spoon River Anthology. Readers of poetry and dark, mysterious fiction would probably be the intended audience, although this particular epitaph contains a message that could appeal to people of any age. For young people, it could be a reminder to make the most of youth. Older people would probably nod their heads in agreement.

Purpose: On the surface, this epitaph may serve as a definition of genius: being wise when you are young enough for the wisdom to make a difference. On another level, it could also serve to encourage young people to seek wisdom before they are too old, like the speaker of the epitaph.

Subject: The subject is youth and age. It suggests that to have wisdom in youth is genius, but I don’t know if that refers to intellectual things so much as just being successful in life. It is often said that most great life works and discoveries occur before we turn 30.

Tone: The tone of the piece is a bit regretful, as evidenced by the fourth line: “But my weary wings could not follow my vision.” This indicates a failed attempt to fly into the mountains, and failure generally results in regret.

**Do not confuse a summary with a paraphrase. While both must be done, “in your own words,” a paraphrase maintains the same point of view and tone as the original, and it includes everything: the main points as well as all the details.*

Paraphrase: When I was young, I was physically healthy and had stamina, but I had no knowledge of the world. As I got older, I developed such wisdom, but by the time I had achieved it, I was no longer physically able to act on it. Genius is being wise while you are still young and healthy enough for it to matter.