

Introduction to *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters

epi·taph (*noun*)

Etymology: Middle English *epitaphe*, from Middle French & Medieval Latin; Middle French, from Medieval Latin *epitaphium*, from Latin, funeral oration, from Greek *epitaphion*, from *epi-* + *taphos* tomb

1 : an inscription on or at a tomb or a grave in memory of the one buried there

2 : a brief statement commemorating or epitomizing a deceased person or something past

Spoon River Anthology is a mash-up of poetry, drama, and fiction. Masters presents a series of first-person monologues as they appear on the gravestones in a Midwestern cemetery in the early 1900s. The characters “speak” their own poetic epitaphs from beyond the grave, confessing the true motivations of their lives and uncovering many of the mysteries and secrets of the town. The voices of the former residents of Spoon River often appear in clusters that present all sides of a story that would be incomplete if presented by only a single voice. Each epitaph may be appreciated for its own poetic merits, but by cross-referencing them with each other, the careful reader learns elements of the underlying (*get it?*) narrative that even the characters themselves do not understand. Here are eight epitaphs from the text that illustrate this:

Eugene Carman

RHODES, slave! Selling shoes and gingham,
Flour and bacon, overalls, clothing, all day long
For fourteen hours a day for three hundred and thirteen days
For more than twenty years.
Saying "Yes'm" and "Yes, sir", and "Thank you"
A thousand times a day, and all for fifty dollars a month.
Living in this stinking room in the rattle-trap "Commercial."
And compelled to go to Sunday School, and to listen
To the Rev. Abner Peet one hundred and four times a year
For more than an hour at a time,
Because Thomas Rhodes ran the church
As well as the store and the bank.
So while I was tying my neck-tie that morning
I suddenly saw myself in the glass:
My hair all gray, my face like a sodden pie.
So I cursed and cursed: You damned old thing
You cowardly dog! You rotten pauper!
You Rhodes' slave! Till Roger Baughman
Thought I was having a fight with some one,
And looked through the transom just in time
To see me fall on the floor in a heap
From a broken vein in my head.

Clarence Fawcett

THE sudden death of Eugene Carman
Put me in line to be promoted to fifty dollars a month,
And I told my wife and children that night.
But it didn't come, and so I thought
Old Rhodes suspected me of stealing
The blankets I took and sold on the side
For money to pay a doctor's bill for my little girl.
Then like a bolt old Rhodes accused me,
And promised me mercy for my family's sake
If I confessed, and so I confessed,
And begged him to keep it out of the papers,
And I asked the editors, too.
That night at home the constable took me
And every paper, except the Clarion,
Wrote me up as a thief
Because old Rhodes was an advertiser
And wanted to make an example of me.
Oh! well, you know how the children cried,
And how my wife pitied and hated me,
And how I came to lie here.

Mrs. George Reece

To this generation I would say:
Memorize some bit of verse of truth or beauty.
It may serve a turn in your life.
My husband had nothing to do
With the fall of the bank--he was only cashier.
The wreck was due to the president, Thomas Rhodes,
And his vain, unscrupulous son.
Yet my husband was sent to prison,
And I was left with the children,
To feed and clothe and school them.
And I did it, and sent them forth
Into the world all clean and strong,
And all through the wisdom of Pope, the poet:
"Act well your part, there all the honor lies."

Jack McGuire

THEY would have lynched me
Had I not been secretly hurried away
To the jail at Peoria.
And yet I was going peacefully home,
Carrying my jug, a little drunk,
When Logan, the marshal, halted me
Called me a drunken hound and shook me
And, when I cursed him for it, struck me
With that Prohibition loaded cane--
All this before I shot him.
They would have hanged me except for this:
My lawyer, Kinsey Keene, was helping to land
Old Thomas Rhodes for wrecking the bank,
And the judge was a friend of
Rhodes And wanted him to escape,
And Kinsey offered to quit on
Rhodes For fourteen years for me.
And the bargain was made.
I served my time
And learned to read and write.

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Nicholas Bindle

Were you not ashamed, fellow citizens,
 When my estate was probated and everyone knew
 How small a fortune I left?--
 You who hounded me in life,
 To give, give, give to the churches, to the poor,
 To the village!--me who had already given much.
 And think you not I did not know
 That the pipe-organ, which I gave to the church,
 Played its christening songs when Deacon Rhodes,
 Who broke and all but ruined me,
 Worshipped for the first time after his acquittal?

Henry Phipps

I WAS the Sunday-school superintendent,
 The dummy president of the wagon works
 And the canning factory,
 Acting for Thomas Rhodes and the banking clique;
 My son the cashier of the bank,
 Wedded to Rhodes, daughter,
 My week days spent in making money,
 My Sundays at church and in prayer.
 In everything a cog in the wheel of things--as--they-are:
 Of money, master and man, made white
 With the paint of the Christian creed.
 And then:
 The bank collapsed.
 I stood and hooked at the wrecked machine--
 The wheels with blow-holes stopped with putty and painted;
 The rotten bolts, the broken rods;
 And only the hopper for souls fit to be used again
 In a new devourer of life,
 When newspapers, judges and money-magicians
 Build over again.
 I was stripped to the bone, but I lay in the Rock of Ages,
 Seeing now through the game, no longer a dupe,
 And knowing "the upright shall dwell in the land
 But the years of the wicked shall be shortened."
 Then suddenly, Dr. Meyers discovered
 A cancer in my liver.
 I was not, after all, the particular care of God
 Why, even thus standing on a peak
 Above the mists through which I had climbed,
 And ready for larger life in the world,
 Eternal forces
 Moved me on with a push.

Ralph Rhodes

ALL they said was true:
 I wrecked my father's bank with my loans
 To dabble in wheat; but this was true--
 I was buying wheat for him as well,
 Who couldn't margin the deal in his name
 Because of his church relationship.
 And while George Reece was serving his term
 I chased the will-o-the-wisp of women
 And the mockery of wine in New York.
 It's deathly to sicken of wine and women
 When nothing else is left in life.
 But suppose your head is gray, and bowed
 On a table covered with acrid stubs
 Of cigarettes and empty glasses,
 And a knock is heard, and you know it's the knock
 So long drowned out by popping corks
 And the pea-cock screams of demireps--
 And you look up, and there's your Theft,
 Who waited until your head was gray,
 And your heart skipped beats to say to you:
 The game is ended. I've called for you,
 Go out on Broadway and be run over,
 They'll ship you back to Spoon River.

Thomas Rhodes

VERY well, you liberals,
 And navigators into realms intellectual,
 You sailors through heights imaginative,
 Blown about by erratic currents, tumbling into air pockets,
 You Margaret Fuller Slacks, Petits,
 And Tennessee Claflin Shopes--
 You found with all your boasted wisdom
 How hard at the last it is
 To keep the soul from splitting into cellular atoms.
 While we, seekers of earth's treasures
 Getters and hoarders of gold,
 Are self-contained, compact, harmonized,
 Even to the end.

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Now that you know the whole story, describe each character and explain what part the character played in "The Rhodes Affair." Include the voice (tone) of the character as well as the feeling (mood) it creates in the reader: *How does the character feel about his/her life? How do you feel about the character?*

Sample: Eugene Carman is bitter and resentful. For 14 years he worked long hours for little pay in a store owned by Thomas Rhodes. Because Rhodes was influential in the church, Carman had to attend services twice a week to keep up appearances. Overcome by rage and resentment for spending so much of his life as "Rhodes' slave," he starts screaming at his reflection, which causes him to have a brain aneurysm and die. I feel sorry for Eugene Carman because he believed he was powerless; he felt that he was controlled by Thomas Rhodes. Maybe he really was.

Consider what the cross-references in these epitaphs tell you about Thomas Rhodes. What kind of a man was he, and what influence did he have on the town of Spoon River?