Masters: The Man

Judgement played a constant role in the life of Edgar Lee Masters and his poetry, mostly aimed in the direction of others. Legacy, in essence judgement after death, held an even stronger position in his mind, as reflected in his most well-known work *Spoon River Anthology*, a collection of epitaphs featuring the inhabitants of a fictional Illinois town whose personalities are equal parts bitter, petty and tragic. Masters' ideas about legacy and the values of his characters are shaped by his midwestern upbringing and the family tradition of Jeffersonianism - i.e. the support of a "central organization [with] limited sovereignty" and individual sovereignty over that of any organization - he was born into ("Edgar Lee Masters, Political Essayist" 253).

Born in Kansas and raised in Illinois, the midwest was Edgar Lee Masters' "'spiritual home' and 'nurturing spot'" (Norman 44). Petersburg, the Illinois town where many of his childhood memories lie, was not far from the hometown of Abraham Lincoln, and Masters grew up surrounded by contemporaries of the president. Attending high school in Lewistown, Illinois, he read extensively of prominent - and all male - American historical figures, and began a lifetime obsession with portrayals of the greats after death ("Edgar Lee Masters--Biographer and Historian" 57). Despite attending only one year of college, he entered a career in law, concurrently writing "a series of essays and plays, written under the pseudonym Dexter Wallace" (Carnes). In 1903, he joined the law firm of Clarence Darrow, who had famously served as defense in the 1925 Scopes trial. Masters' numerous affairs led to his divorce from Helen M. Jenkins, with whom he had three children; she was represented by Darrow himself in the divorce

proceedings (Hudson). After reading *Greek Anthology*, a collection of Ancient Greek epitaphs gifted to him by William Marion Reedy, publisher of the magazine *Reedy's Mirror*, Masters was inspired to try his hand at poetry; this experiment ultimately became *Spoon River Anthology* ("Edgar Lee Masters"). In 1926, Masters was remarried to a woman 31 years his junior who moved with him into Hotel Chelsea in New York, but the couple was effectively separated within a year (Hudson). In need of money, he turned to writing biographies, first of Lincoln and then of friend and poet Vachel Lindsay. These unfortunately did not relieve his financial troubles; Carl Sandburg said of *Lincoln: The Man* that it was a "'hymn of hate reversing the views of a Masters [he] knew well 10 and 15 years before [Masters] wrote these sickly venomous pages'" (Norman). Growing increasingly ill throughout the 1940s, Edgar Lee Masters died in 1950 at the age of 81 in a nursing home, cared for by his second wife. Despite a highly prolific life in which dozens of works were crafted - comprising both of prose and poetry, criticism and praise, and often joining biography with narrative - *Spoon River Anthology* proved his only lasting work.

Masters has a particular knack for getting to the essence of his characters by analyzing their deaths. Each poem in *Spoon River Anthology* takes the perspective of a deceased person reflecting on their life as a whole, and eloquently sums up the legacy they leave behind in succinct verse. He writes of these legacies in many ways ruthlessly, exposing the basest tendencies found in each of us, but his poetry serves as a warning of sorts, demonstrating how fruitless it is to act on these instincts. Few of the deaths found in *Spoon River Anthology* are due to tangible causes - often they are instead the result of a grudge or bitterness held deep inside for years until the body can no longer retain it.

No poem exemplifies this moral better than "Albert Schirding." Albert is a man who cannot bear the shame of being "a failure while [his] children are successes," whereas most of us would relish in the pride of having "raised a brood of eagles" (lines 4-5). After all, when the all-knowing witches of *Macbeth* first approach the play's namesake and his fellow soldier, Banquo, they reveal that while Macbeth will be king, it is Banquo who will be "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater. / Not so happy, yet much happier" since his descendants will rule the kingdom (1.3.166-167). Albert is unable to appreciate both his children's successes and that these successes are due in no small part to him, which is a clear fault of his own. The "crow" that Albert likens himself to generally symbolizes a bringer of bad luck, so it is impossible for a crow to have raised eagles; he must have some of the eagle's qualities himself ("Albert Schirding" line 7). Further, Albert tries to win the admiration of his children, which he does not need to seek, by running "for County Superintendent of Schools, / Spending [his] accumulations to win--and [losing]" (lines 10-11). This stunt puts in full view how pointless it is to hold on to such bitterness. As often happens with Masters' deeply flawed yet tragic characters, it is precisely this "feeling that [he] was not worthy… [that] finished" poor Albert Schirding (line 15).

This theme of a deeply-distilled pain is perhaps a result of the environ Masters grew up in. Steeped in "midwestern values," Masters was raised to the stereotypical ideal of politeness before honesty, which can easily develop into a deep-seated resentment. In holding with another common theme of Masters', these ideals were both criticized and praised in his work. A close friend of his, Gertrude Claytor, writes of his "deep natural resistance to [those] forces which pushed to destroy and interfere with the freedom of the spirit" that spurred this streak of rejecting certain norms of politeness (13).

Masters further protested what he thought to be "hypocrisy and greed... American to the core, he feared and distrusted the influences that were drawing the United States away from the ideals of the founders of the Republic" at the time (Claytor 12). Masters came from a line of staunch Jeffersonian democrats, and he is credited in reviving the anti-Lincoln tradition that resurfaced in the 1930s (Norman 43). His biography of Lincoln is an uncharacteristic and brash defamation of the widely beloved sixteenth president. His novel, *Children of the Market Place,* is a bizarre story that forces one to question whether his only purpose in writing it was to slander Lincoln and sing the praises of his largely unsung hero, Stephen A. Douglas. The book follows a British immigrant to the United States named Miles who strikes up an unlikely friendship with Douglas himself. After seeing a Lincoln-Douglas debate, Miles both attacks and admires Lincoln, calling him "absurd" as well as "able to rise 'to great heights of eloquence'" in the same breath (46). He later blames the greed of the Gilded Age on Lincoln's return to a Hamiltonian economic program. Masters' hatred of Lincoln fits with his desire to be free from any romantic vision; he admired the grounded politics of men like Douglas and despised the poise of men like Lincoln (Caballero).

The poem "Anne Rutledge" is a tangible expression of Masters' thoughts on legacy and his complicated hatred of Lincoln. Rutledge is the rumored first love of Abraham Lincoln who died tragically in her early twenties. He writes of Anne's legacy positively, describing how she wills America to "Bloom forever, O Republic, / From the dust of [her] bosom" (lines 11-12). Masters almost goes so far as to discount Lincoln's role in saving the country, claiming that "out of [her comes] the forgiveness of millions toward millions," despite the fact that Anne died long before Lincoln's rise to power (line 4). While it seems Masters is trying to make Rutledge more

responsible for Lincoln's feats than Lincoln himself, Masters is likely trying to show the lasting impact Anne had on Lincoln. She is, after all, "Wedded to him, not through union, / But through separation" (lines 9-10). Legacy is all that remains of Anne Rutledge, and even this is largely fiction. Crediting her with shaping "The beneficent face of a nation / Shining with justice and truth," Masters redefines how people view her in a kind but blatant example of revisionist history (lines 5-6).

While much of his work can be seen as a satirical critique of middle America, some poems are a quieter reflection which serve as a sincere warning, learned over a lifetime. In the words of Matthew Caballero, "There is a populism about his poetry… Masters is deeply concerned with the themes of atrophy and cultivation he witnessed in small-town America; his style reflects the ordinary rhythms of its language and life." He may not have always lived up to the morals he held in such high regard when writing *Spoon River Anthology*, being known for having affairs and to be a generally moody person, but Masters was highly self-aware and well-practiced in introspection. This is evident in the poem "George Gray." Gray has "studied many times / The marble which was chiseled for [him]-- / A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor" (lines 1-2). Gray has searched for meaning his whole life but rejected all opportunities at finding it. Gray, in an unusual twist, worries not about legacy, but solely over a life which he now realizes is wasted. Neither love nor sorrow nor ambition did he allow in, and he now sees "we must lift the sail / And catch the winds of destiny / Wherever they may drive the boat" (lines 10-12). A number of characters from Spoon River can be traced vaguely to those from Masters' own life, but few are as vulnerable and potentially autobiographical as this one.

Masters was a man resolute in his opinions, constantly judging his surroundings based on a strict set of morals shaped by, but not based on, the midwest towns he grew up in. While "'he had as much to say from day to day about anyone,'" this judgement was not for the purpose of hurting others, rather it was a habit he practiced to uncover the basic truths about another ("Edgar Lee Masters--Biographer and Historian" 57). In a way, it was for their benefit: Masters was able to pinpoint the faults of a person and issue a sort of warning. Unfortunately, he rarely did this until after the death of his subjects, for a life already lived held his interest much more than one in progress. He never aimed to change a course of action, simply to observe it and reflect on whatever knowledge the situation may offer in retrospect. The true import to be taken from Masters' life is introspection. Inward investigation will lead to discoveries paramount to a contented life. Should one become "a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid," one need only remember the importance of self-fulfillment over that of legacy ("George Gray" line 16).

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