

SPOON RIVER TRIPTYCH

For Mixed Chorus and Piano

Poems by

EDGAR LEE MASTERS

Music by

BRUCE TRINKLEY

Spoon River Anthology, the most famous poetry collection of Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950), was published in 1916 and made an immediate impact. Readers had never before seen poems like these free verse epitaphs, each spoken by the ghost of a departed citizen of Spoon River, Illinois. The epitaphs reveal the secret lives of these rural and small town Americans.

NOTES ON THE TEXTS

“Walter Simmons” is one of the lighter pieces in the *Anthology*. *The Octoroon* is the name of a famous antislavery melodrama written by Dion Boucicault (1822-1890) and produced in 1859.

“Cassius Hueffer” may be a reflection of the poet's own inner conflict. “His life was gentle” is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, act 5, scene 5 where Mark Antony speaks of Brutus.

“Hare Drummer” is based on Masters' childhood memories of the countryside near Petersburg and Lewistown, Illinois, where he grew up. “Siever's” refers to Siever's woods in the southeast part of Lewistown. Aaron Hatfield was a neighbor of Masters' grandparents near Petersburg and is also the title of another poem in the *Anthology* depicting Masters' grandfather.

1. WALTER SIMMONS

My parents thought that I would be
As great as Edison or greater:
For as a boy I made balloons
And wondrous kites and toys with clocks
And little engines with tracks to run on
And telephones of cans and thread.
I played the cornet and painted pictures,
Modeled in clay and took the part
Of the villain in the "Octoroon."
But then at twenty-one I married
And had to live, and so, to live
I learned the trade of making watches
And kept the jewelry store on the square,
Thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking, –
Not of business, but of the engine
I studied the calculus to build.
And all Spoon River watched and waited
To see it work, but it never worked.
And a few kind souls believed my genius
Was somehow hampered by the store.
It wasn't true. The truth was this:
I didn't have the brains.

2. 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!

3. HARE DRUMMER

Do the boys and girls still go to Siever's
For cider, after school, in late September?
Or gather hazel nuts among the thickets
On Aaron Hatfield's farm when the frosts begin?
For many times with the laughing girls and boys
Played I along the road and over the hills
When the sun was low and the air was cool,
Stopping to club the walnut tree
Standing leafless against a flaming west.
Now, the smell of the autumn smoke,
And the dropping acorns,
And the echoes about the vales
Bring dreams of life. They hover over me.
They question me:
Where are those laughing comrades?
How many are with me, how many
In the old orchards along the way to Siever's,
And in the woods that overlook
The quiet water?