A STUDY OF NATURALISM IN

EDGAR LEE MASTERS'

SPOON RIVER ANTHOLOGY

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Chapter I

Naturalism has appeared in America in several literary movements; one of the most important of these movements was, and is, the revolt from the folksy, romanticised small town. The movement began with Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology in 1915 although an earlier work, E. W. Howe's The Story of a Country Town in 1882, also dealt with the frustrations and the swelling discontent caused by the narrow life of the small town.[1] The naturalists writing in the small town tradition were intent on dissipating the false halo of pastoral dignity which surrounds the village; they were the enemies of the middle-class profit motives and the illusion of optimism; they were sick of the artificialities of American literature. "The current of romance, of course did not cease to flow, but from 1890 to 1910 the most marked tendency in American fiction was toward the ethical realism of Tolstoi or the naturalism of Zola."[2]

Outside the small town literature, naturalism first appeared in America as a dominant literary philosophy in the work of Stephen Crane (1871-1900). In 1896, Crane published, at his own expense, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets in a cheap, paper-bound edition; naturalism had entered American letters. It was an unwelcome moment for critics who had been nourished on the Puritan conviction that there is, in life and literature, a realm of grace and a realm of sin, the conviction that life is amenable to the industrious and the good. For the first time

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1 Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, III (New York, 1930), 376-377.

2 Encyclopedia Brittanica, 14th ed., XVI, 576.

readers began to see their society subjected to the uncompromising severity of scientific scrutiny.

Although the historical roots of naturalism may be recognized in the Goncourt brothers, Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Gustave Flaubert (1821-1800), and others, naturalism is usually associated with the name of Emile Zola (1840-1902), the author of Nana (1880). He formulated the official dogma of the naturalists in Le Roman expérimental (1879), which is practically a paraphrase of Introduction à la médecine expérimentale (1865) by Claude Bernard (1813-1878). Although Bernard himself held that the method described in his treatise was not adaptable to creative literature, Zola insisted that the same methods which reveal working general principles in the physical world would, if used in the novel, reveal general principles of character, society, and morals. Insisting on this analogy, he said, "We should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings."[3] With varied ingredients and with an exactitude and dispassionate care approaching that of the experimental scientist, Zola and his followers began the revolutionary attempt to view life objectively. Thus the scientific spirit, insisting on observation, experimentation, quantitative and qualitative analysis of the human being, entered the field of creative writing.

Naturalism was not limited to France; it appeared in many guises and forms and in nearly every corner of Europe. In Sweden, August Strindberg (1849-1912) wrote The Father (1887), in which he portrays

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3 Herbert J. Muller, Modern Fiction (New York and London, 1937), p. 162.

the slavery imposed on man because of his uncontrollable desires, the compulsion and repulsion factors inherent in love, and a very unromantic aspect of marriage. In Germany, a school of naturalists represented, among others, by Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-) came to be known as consistent naturalists. They believed that even the stringent regulations of Zola would not prevent writers from distorting the real world. This was a more radical naturalism.

> The consistent naturalists, then, aimed not to found a new art, but in any traditional sense to abandon it. They desired to reduce the conventions of technique to a minimum and to eliminate the writer's personality even where Zola had admitted its necessary presence--in the choice of subject and in form. For style, the very religion of the French naturalistic masters, there was held to be no place, since there was to be, in this new literature, neither direct exposition, however impersonal, nor narrative. In other words, none of the means of representation were to be used by which art achieves the illusion of reality..... The opinion of Flaubert that any subject suffices, if the treatment be excellent, was modified into: there must be neither intentional choice of theme nor stylistic treatment. For style supposes rearrangement, personal vision, unjust selection of detail, and literature must be an exact rendition of the actual.[4]

It would appear from these principles that an author would have been reduced to transcribing actual conversation, and it is known that this was tried. Using the formula of the naturalists except for his choice of a historical theme, Hauptmann wrote The Weavers (1882) depicting the miserable existence and the 1840 revolt of the Silesian weavers. This was the first powerful drama foreshadowing the great twentieth century conflicts between capital and labor.

Then Maxim Gorki (1868-1936), a Russian, wrote of the seamy side of life in The Lower Depths (1903). However, Gorki was not the only Russian who contributed to the growth and development of naturalism.

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4 Ludwig Lewisohn (ed.), Gerhart Hauptmann, Dramatic Works, I (New York, 1913),xvii.

Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) wrote the poignant Fathers and Sons (1862), a novel portraying the Russian version of the nineteenth century struggle to preserve a glorious but outmoded order. Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) wrote Crime and Punishment (1866) and The Brothers Karamazov (1880), portraying in these a part of the physical and spiritual suffering that he himself had experienced. Leo Tolstoi (1828-1910) poured forth from his troubled soul some of the world's greatest novels. But among the major writers none is more important to the naturalists than the dramatist, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). The plays of Chekhov show men being crushed by their environment. There is almost a total absence of plot or central characters in plays such as The Cherry Orchard (1904) and The Three Sisters (1901). His plays reveal frustrated and dissatisfied people who seem wholly incapable of resisting their fate.

> What counts in them is not a series of catastrophes but the even flow of life revealed as the majority must live it.......In performance the plays are interrupted by long pauses when the people say nothing. In these pauses, as in the undirected talk that breaks them, character is revealed, but what is done counts for less than what is said or left unsaid. So far as plot is concerned, nothing is conventionalized. Servants do not reveal the situation to the audience; confidantes do not elicit secrets from the leading lady; raisonneurs do not enunciate the doctrines of the author. Instead, common folk from seventeen to eighty-seven stroll about the scene and talk. Among them are no villains and no heroes, no magnetic personalities, no strong or willful souls, none torn between compunctions of conscience and burning desire. Chekhov paints a somber world to be tolerated by sensitive creatures without will, hoping perhaps for ultimate improvement, but doing nothing to bring it to pass.[5]

Occasionally Chekhov indicates that perhaps action and work will finally be the salvation of man, but for the present man is hopelessly enmeshed in circumstances. So in spite of individual differences among

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5 Frank W. Chandler, Modern Continental Playwrights (New York and London, 1931), p. 93.

writers,

> it was the aim of all the naturalists to minimize situation and story, and to emphasize temperament, atmosphere, background. They declined to think of character as self-determined. For them it resulted from the shaping stress of natural law--especially the influence of heredity and environment. They aspired to rival the scientists in making art a thing inductive.[6]

Naturalism, growing rapidly out of the nineteenth century's inordinate faith in scientific methods and results, had penetrated to every corner of Europe.

Meanwhile, in the United States the trend of the times was preparing the way for naturalism. A series of great changes was taking place in America. Following the Civil War with its defeat of the states' rights bloc, there was a growing tendency toward centralization of political and economic power. The frontier became history. The growth of trusts, big corporations, railroads, industries, and a real proletariat, all had a tremendous influence on the national and individual psychology. The result was a lessening of the individual's importance, a growing sense of impotence, a conviction of personal helplessness, a feeling of dependence on the group.

> The intellectual backgrounds were thus preparing for a gloomier realism than Howells' or Garland's, a realism that took its departure from two postulates: that men are physical beings who can do no other than obey the laws of a physical universe; and that in the vast indifferentism of nature they are inconsequential pawns in a game that to human reason has no meaning or rules. ... Dreiser was the first spokesman of a later America once more falling within the shadow of the pessimism that springs from every centralized society shut up within the portals of a static economics; that dwarfs the individual and nullifies his will, reducing him from a child of God to a serf.[7]

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) published Criticism and Fiction in

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6 Ibid., p. 151.

7 Parrington, op. cit., pp. 318-319.

1891 in which he declared that a novel such as <u>Crime and Punishment</u> would be impossible in America; the implication was that life in America was generally so good and so pleasant that such novels would lack any basis in fact. It must not be construed from this statement that Howells was unsympathetic with the new movement; his experiences simply did not make certain types of writing feasible. But within five years, reputable publishers were refusing Crane's <u>Maggie</u>, and within the next thirty years a number of writers were to vie with Dostoyevsky in delineating the existence of the disinherited. In this same volume Howells averred that "nothing that God has made is contemptible." However, his attitude is generally consonant with that of his times, that is, that literature must be fit for the most innocent reader--the young girl--who is, of course, wholly ignorant of life. It must be noted that both Howells and Hamlin Garland, older contemporaries of the young naturalists, were writing realistically. Their principal weakness was their studied avoidance of problems of fear, hunger, and sex, their many concessions to the preconceived notions of their readers.

When outcasts of society such as Maggie and Nana became the subjects of art, there was a tendency on the part of critics to consider the novels and their creators immoral. Of course this judgment is fundamentally unsound, the fallacy lying in the fact that the naturalists were, in theory at least, amoral; if the result of their observations was immoral, then life was immoral and not the artists. As a matter of fact, we see

> that the mood of naturalism--in Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, in the French novelists who reacted against romanticism--is inspired by a resistance against delusion and vain sentimentality, against mere decorum and that it is inspired, invariably inspired, by moral ardor. It was constantly the ardor for truth; it has almost

> as constantly the note of human compassion; its desire to enlarge the field and subject matter of art is almost always guided, especially in the Germanic countries, by the belief in human brotherhood, by tenderness for the disinherited of the social order.[8]

The "disinherited of the social order" were chosen by the naturalists for the same reasons that a chemist chooses pure chemicals for an experiment. Among those on the outer fringe of the social order, writers found humanity minus the camouflage with which the so-called best people conceal their basic animality. Most of the characters of naturalistic literature fall into three types: One is of comparatively low intelligence and motivated by strictly biological drives. Another is neurotic and dominated by uncertain and uncontrollable moods. The third and least frequent type is the powerful character who is defeated by the superior strength of adversity. The first type is found in McTeague by Frank Norris and in Nana by Zola. Flaubert's Emma Bovary from Madame Bovary (1856) is an example of the second type.[9] Doctor Meyers from Spoon River Anthology is an example of the good man defeated, his goodness contributing to his fall.

In the course of its development, naturalism has changed in many particulars, but its broad aims have remained practically the same. The naturalists have insisted on objectivity, and the principle of determinism; they have tended to portray man dwarfed in contrast with his milieu; economic and biological forces with which he cannot cope tyrannize over him. These aims have led in the normal course of events to a leaning toward pessimism, the reasonable product of a feeling of impotence, which in

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8 Ludwig Lewisohn, The Story of American Literature (New York, 1939), p. 463.

9 Parrington, op. cit., pp. 324-325.

turn grew out of an inability to demonstrate the existence of a personal will. Thus Parrington was moved to say, "Naturalism is pessimistic realism."[10]

The vital principle of naturalism is determinism. Determinism grew out of the belief, which is of scientific derivation, that causality is a universal characteristic of things; that is, every phenomenon has a cause which may be discovered and which will always operate on a given set of circumstances to produce the same result. This principle has many interesting possibilities, the most important of which is this: If the decisions, judgments, and actions of man are subject to inexorable and certain laws similar to those which underlie the cause-and-effect relationships of inanimate things, then man ought not to be held responsible for his acts. So one finds frequently in naturalistic fiction a panorama depicting mankind struggling for life against the established system, and though the characters may violate the civil or moral code and the system be unjust, the true naturalist leaves judgment for the reader. In Norris' The Octopus (1901), there are many characters and several important plots working at once. Man in the concrete is dwarfed by the tremendous spaces, energy, and deeds of nature as personified by the wheat. Society and the dangers of industrialization are expressed through the railroad; but at the end the railroad is untouched and man is crushed. Norris' cries for reform are seldom direct and are permeated with a sense of cosmic futility. Man has only heredity and environment--one is the wax, and the other, a mold.

Because of the pessimistic, deterministic philosophy of the naturalists, many critics have accused them of being fatalists. The

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10 Ibid., P. 325.

naturalists anticipated this objection and made a distinction which the limitations of the language render very nice. Fatalism presumes that the individual is totally in the grip of a higher power and that his ultimate fate as well as all the incidents of his life is ordered according to the whim of this capricious power and without regard to the peculiar circumstances of his existence. The determinists, and the naturalists insofar as they are deterministic, believe that the individual is a chemical compound and that every phenomenon of his being can be explained on the basis of body chemistry which acts automatically or in response to environmental causes.

This doctrine, that man must react helplessly with an environment over which he has no control, leads to pessimism and inaugurates a conception of tragedy. In the writing of the naturalists, one finds tragedy which conforms in practically no particular with the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. According to the classical tradition, a great and noble character breaks a moral law because of ignorance or a character flaw, and he must bear the consequences of his misdeed. In the naturalistic tragedy, man is caught in a steel web of ineluctable circumstance and insurmountable personal weakness, and, if he has a will, it is utterly impotent. This is reflected in the epilogue of Spoon River Anthology as Loki chants while mixing together the ingredients of a man:

> Passion, reason, custom, rules,
> Creeds of the churches, lore of the schools,
> Taint in the blood and strength of soul.
> Flesh too weak for the will's control;
> Poverty, riches, pride of birth,
> Wailing, laughter, over the earth,
> Here I have you caught again,
> Enter my web, ye sons of men.[11]

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11 Edgar Lee Masters, Spoon River Anthology (New York, 1927), p. 293.

As Parrington analyses it, "The tragedy of naturalism lies in the disintegration and the pity or irony with which we contemplate man and his fate in the world."[12]

The fundamental principles of naturalism forced on its exponents an interest in the body chemistry of man, his fears, aversions, desires, and nervous reactions. They came to consider the basic instincts to be fear, hunger, and sex. The emphasis on the latter was particularly disconcerting to those who had arbitrarily relegated sex to the category of sin. It is not strange then that the appearance of Spoon River Anthology was greeted with outright disapproval by many otherwise fair-minded critics, for Masters, with a frankness foreign to American poetry, portrayed the social and individual disasters which result from the thwarting of the sex urge.

In Spoon River Anthology, Masters demonstrates by means of the dead citizens of Spoon River, who rise and announce their epitaphs, the effect of the small town on its people; most of them succumbed to its limitations; a few rose above the milieu and were happy; no one of them can completely fathom his fate. In the poetry of Masters there is a negligible effort toward prettiness or any standard type of beauty. There is a sincere effort to give a truthful picture of life and its problems. However, for admirers of strength, for those persons who see beauty in truth unadorned, there is a strong, virile beauty in Masters' poetry. His epitaphs in Spoon River Anthology, though hard and even bitter in thought, are often soft in diction, as though the dead were giving a quiet, dispassionate appraisal of their turbulent lives. One seems to hear tired, world-weary voices intoning, "I am Petit the poet--I am Doc Meyers--I

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12 Parrington, op. cit., p. 326

am Anne Rutledge--I thirsted so for love--I hungered so for life."

Chapter II

Thus far in this paper, I have traced in brief the historical roots of naturalism and attempted to state and define its main principles. In the following pages, it is my intention to demonstrate that Spoon River Anthology is naturalistic. In order to systematize my information, I shall discuss Spoon River from the standpoint of the criteria of naturalism; that is, I shall attempt to prove that the ideas and general atmosphere of the Anthology conform to the characteristics inevitably associated with naturalistic literature. The anthology will be analysed, within the limitations of this paper, from the standpoints of determinism and objectivity. Under determinism, evidence will be cited involving the concepts of social and biological determinism. Under objectivity, which is of course impossible without frankness and an amoral attitude on the part of the writer, evidence will be cited relative to the objective treatment of economic idealism, the moral convention, and the population of the small town. In an effort to provide the facts necessary for such a discussion, it will be mandatory that some explanatory material be interspersed from time to time.

Spoon River Anthology purports to be a collection of epitaphs from the graveyard of a village called Spoon River. These are not merely the usual epitaphs, however, but true autobiographical obituaries, written as though the dead themselves had risen and stripped their lives of secret and falsity. The Anthology is composed of two hundred and forty-four epitaphs, an introductory lyric, the fragment of the epic Spooniad, and an epilogue. The book has an organic unity based on the experiences and environment common to all the personalities

of Spoon River.

In writing Spoon River Anthology, it was Edgar Lee Masters' intent to portray the salient features of the whole American civilization by depicting accurately its most representative unit, the American small town. He hoped to give a world view drawn on the scale of a village, to show man in society stripped of the veils and subterfuges which usually hide his real life. Masters himself envisaged his intentions in this manner:

> I had a variety of things in mind in writing the Anthology. I meant to analyze character, to satirize society, to tell a story, to expose the machinery of life, to present to view a working model of the big world and put it in a window where the passer-by could stop and see it run. And I had in mind, too, the creation of beauty, and the depiction of our sorrows and hopes, our religious failures, successes and visions, our poor little lives, rounded by a sleep, in language and figures emotionally tuned to bring all of us closer together in understanding and affection.[13]

In order to be as objective as it was his intent to be, Masters portrayed, in so far as it was possible, both sides of a single human case history. This objectivity was impossible if the primal passions and the actual conditions of human existence were to be obscured beneath heaps of euphemisms, and, in Spoon River Anthology, sex, econmics, religion, government, and the whole scale of social values were regarded with a frankness hitherto unknown in American literature. The Anthology represents, then, a striking reaffirmation of the correlation of life and literature, an important critical concept in my age.

As early as 1906, Masters told his father that he was going to write a book.

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13 C. E. Wisewell, "The Spoon River Anthology," Current Opinion, LVIII (1915), 356.

> I told him that my life in Chicago had shown me that the country lawyer and the city lawyer were essentially the same; that the country banker and the city banker had the same nature; and so on down through the list of tradespeople, preachers, sensualists, and all kinds of human beings.[14]

When this book actually came into being in the form of Spoon River, it proved to be a type of literary work for which Masters was peculiarly well-fitted. His lifelong ambition had been to write verse, and his conscientious studies had equipped him with an extraordinary amount of literary information. Years of law practice had endowed him with the ability to see both sides of an issue and to think clearly and concretely. His boyhood, spent in Petersburg and Lewistown, Illinois, had provided him with first-hand knowledge of the small town.

Masters' law work had impressed him with the value of sheer facts and actualities. He found in Theodore Dreiser, who is probably the most thoroughly naturalistic American writer, a critical quality of mind that he could admire. Of Sister Carrie Masters wrote, "That book gave me a sense of a refreshing realism, and honesty that meant something."[15] So the small town, perhaps like Lewistown or even Petersburg in design, came before a master lawyer for cross-examination.

Under this sort of scrutiny, Lewistown was revealed in Masters' mind not as an idyllic country place entirely full of God-fearing, happy people, as the defenders of the folksy village would have everyone believe, but rather as a place of thwarted loves and ambitions, of lust, hatred, dissimulation, and false pride. Masters' memories

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14 Edgar Lee Masters, Across Spoon River (New York, 1936), p. 286.

15 Ibid., p. 284.

of the Illinois small town where he spent his adolescent years were bitter; he wrote,

> I can see in my mind's eye the people who used to go about the streets of Lewistown on Saturdays, coming from the Spoon River Bottoms: men with sore eyes from syphilis, blinking the light; men with guns or slings in their pockets, carrying whips, and fouling the sidewalks with tobacco spit; women dressed in faded calicoes twisted about their shapeless bodies. Saturdays were days of horror for me...These creatures at Lewistown howled in their insane cups, they fought with knives and guns and knucks. The streets stank. The shopkeepers stood in their doorways eyeing chances of trade; they walked back and forth behind their counters serving the malodorous riff-raff that came from the bottoms.[16]

This is not, however, the whole background and subject matter of the Spoon River Anthology, the statements of many critics notwithstanding. The Masters family lived in Petersburg prior to moving to Lewistown, and there it seems that they were very happy. The farm of Davis Masters, Edgar Lee Masters' grandfather, was nearby in the New Salem district of Lincoln fame. Here in the "neighborhood of fiddlers, dancers, and feasters," life was really good. Of these people Masters wrote:

> Around the Masters place lived hosts of Watkinses, Kirbys, Kincaids, Armstrongs, Pantiers, Goodpastures. I knew them all. They were hospitable, warm-hearted and generous beyond any people I have known, and full of the will to live. For the most part they were happy folk, but at the same time they were touched with the pathos of nature herself, with a voiceless endurance in the presence of flood and drouth, disaster and death. As I spent all the Summers of my boyhood at the Masters farm I stored up memories which were at last to be sung in the more joyous parts of the Anthology.[17]

It shall be more amply demonstrated in future portions of this paper that critics who maintain that Spoon River is composed only of the sordid have misrepresented the Anthology.

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16 Ibid., pp. 410-411.

17 Edgar Lee Masters, "The Genesis of Spoon River," The American Mercury, XXVIII (1930), 39.

The poetic form and spirit of Spoon River Anthology were originally derived from the famous Greek Anthology, a collection of short poems of ancient Greece. William Marion Reedy, editor of the St. Louis Mirror and self-appointed patron of twentieth century American poets, called Masters' attention to this interesting volume in 1909. Even a cursory examination of these brief, subtly ironic vignettes of Greece will reveal many written in the epitaph form and bearing a definite similarity in tone to the Masters' creations. The most frequently-quoted is this one of Dion of Tarsus:

> Dion of Tarsus, here I lie, who sixty years have seen.
> I was not ever wed, and would my father had not been!

This is the Spoon River spirit in a couplet. Often the poems of the Greek Anthology are amusing, but more frequently one finds caustic indictments of life such as this comment on ultimate futility by Palladas:

> Naked to earth was I brought--naked to earth I descend.
> Why should I labor for naught, seeing how naked the end?

Here is no palliating romanticism; here is summed up a life of disillusionment.

William Marion Reedy offered constant encouragement to Masters and read the first Spoon River portraits with unconcealed enthusiasm. On May 29, 1914, the first installment of the poems was published in Reedy's Mirror under the pseudonym, "Webster Ford," and from then until January 15, 1915, the series continued weekly. Finally, Masters admitted authorship of the poems, and the collection was published in book form by the Macmillan Company in April, 1915.[18] Immediately the

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18 The definitive edition of Spoon River Anthology, with new poems, was published in 1916, and a reprint of that edition is used as the basis of this paper.

book became the center of a controversy which is not yet ended.

It was after a talk with his mother about these old citizens of the villages along the Spoon River that Masters wrote the introductory lyric of Spoon River Anthology, "The Hill." It is redolent of the futility and the frustration of Spoon River's inhabitants.

> Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
> The weak of will, the strong of arm, and clown,
> the boozer, the fighter?
> All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

This recurrent query receives an unusual, hypnotic emphasis from variation of the refrain:

> All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Common names of common people are in evidence. Also buried in Spoon River's cemetery are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie, and Edith. They had not been brought to the "hill" after lives gloriously spent, but the accidents which actually occur in the lives of people occurred to them:

> One died in shameful child-birth,
> One of a thwarted love,
> One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
> One of a broken pride, in search for
> heart's desire,
> One after life in far-away London and Paris
> Was brought to her little space by Ella and
> Kate and Mag--
> All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Here in the prologue is reflected the tragedy of lives spent in "a village of little minds." What followed was revolutionary in American poetry. The dead of Spoon River are vocalized, the unique accomplishment and the lasting original vein of the book, and they are permitted, removed as they are from any hope of gain by deceit, to comment on their lives. Some are bitter, disillusioned, and hurt by life; some rise above life and achieve a sort of exaltation; some have caught a

glimpse of an answer to the life riddle; some see life as a trap; others, as a game; still others, as an animal existence lacking in meaning and purpose. From the lips of these people, thwarted and wasted by life in Spoon River, come indictments of the profit motive and of the conventional moral code, indictments of the wanton and needless cruelty of life, denunciations of those who have blocked the way of the people in their struggle to fulfill the American dream.

The distinguishing mark of naturalistic literature is its philosophical interpretation of life. Like the realist, the naturalist looks at life and attempts to represent it in art without regard to his private prejudices, but in addition the naturalist is attempting to demonstrate the existence of universal determinism. His conviction, based on his knowledge of economic and biological determinism, is that all phenomena may be explained on the basis of determinable causes. He portrays man caught in the midst of circumstances which continually act on him, from within and without, and which are absolutely unmanageable from his (the individual's) standpoint. The naturalist implies, even though he may not actually cite instances, that the flux of circumstance is due to knowable causes, and these causes are in turn products of other causes, _ad infinitum_. This concept of determinism, which is the central doctrine of naturalism, causes the naturalist to delineate the impotence of man, and, as a consequence, to assume a general tone of pessimism. Thus, it is easy to see why many naturalists have conceived of man as trapped by life and used the figure of the trap in stating the nature of life.

Among the first epitaphs of _Spoon River Anthology_ are those of characters low in the social scale, "the fools, the drunkards, and the

failures," says Masters. There seems to be no particular reason for their fates; they did not will to be shoved into the world originally, and from birth on the creaking machinery of fact and circumstance, cause and effect, carried them ineluctably toward their end. Hod Putt likens the disastrous end of his life to taking bankruptcy. Hod had become desperate with poverty and had robbed a man and killed him

> ...unwittingly while doing so,
> For the which I was tried and hanged.
> That was my way of going into bankruptcy.
> Now we who took the bankrupt law in our
> respective ways
> Sleep peacefully side by side.

Then follows "Ollie McGee" and its companion piece, "Fletcher McGee." These two poems are an example of Masters' presentation of both sides of the problem. Ollie complains of "secret cruelty never to be told," and Fletcher, reminiscent of Strindberg's misogyny, declares,

> She took my strength by minutes,
> She took my life by hours,
> She drained me like a fevered moon
> That saps the spinning world.
> . . . .
> My secret thoughts were fingers:
> They flew behind her pensive brow
> And lined it deep with pain.

Three lives have passed in review; three lives have suffered unmerited pain. What is the nature of this "monstrous ogre Life" that imposes such anguish of body and spirit on helpless man? In the fourth poem of the Anthology, Robert Fulton Tanner has an answer; he says life is like a trap:

> You enter the room--that's being born;
> And then you must live--work out your soul,
> Aha! the bait that you crave is in view:
> A woman with money you want to marry,
> Prestige, place, or power in the world.
> But there's work to do and things to conquer--
> Oh, yes! the wires that screen the bait.
> At last you get in--but you hear a step:

The ogre, Life, comes into the room,
(He was waiting and heard the clang of the spring)
To watch you nibble the wondrous cheese,
And stare with his burning eyes at you,
And scowl and laugh, and mock and curse you,
Running up and down in the trap,
Until your misery bores him.

Here is the naturalistic conception of life as a trap, the conception of life being brooded over by great and inexorable forces in comparison with which man's strength is utterly insignificant. Like other analyses of life by naturalists, "Robert Fulton Tanner" imputes no particular intelligence or purpose to the cosmic design.

Tanner, portraying man living in the midst of an indifferent or hostile environment, is representative of a recurrent theme in Spoon River, and his is not a rare or exceptional opinion. In "The Unknown," a boy whose name has been lost believes that life caged him. He tells of wounding a hawk while hunting and of placing the wild bird in a cage; but now, the unknown one says,

Daily I search the realms of Hades
For the soul of the hawk,
That I may offer him the friendship
Of one whom life wounded and caged.

Even if those who have arrived at some analysis of life do not see man actually bound, they perceive that he is waging a losing battle from the beginning. There is Tom Beatty, a lawyer, who tried the rights of property as if by lamp-light. He asseverates that

Life's a gambler
Head and shoulders above us all.
No mayor alive can close the house.
And if you lose, you can squeal as you will;
You'll not get back your money.
He makes the percentage hard to conquer;
He stacks the cards to catch your weakness
And not to meet your strength.

Not all the late citizens of Spoon River are capable of an abstract appraisal of the nature of life; many have interpreted life simply

and in the terms of their own meager experiences. Mrs. Kessler believes that life is a laundress, finding out the secrets of her customers from the patches, stains, and decay which time puts in their lives, and that death is the result of too many washings:

> The laundress, Life, knows all about it.
> And I, who went to all the funerals
> Held in Spoon River, swear I never
> Saw a dead face without thinking it looked
> Like something washed and ironed.

And Widow McFarlane, who wove the carpets and rugs for the village, felt in her own loom the mystery and a symbol for life--life, the weaver of shrouds:

> For the cloth of life is woven you know,
> To a pattern hidden under the loom--
> A pattern you never see!

Each tends to make his own experiences the measure of all things. Griffy, the cooper, thinks of most men's lives as tub-sized in scope:

> You are submerged in the tub of yourself--
> Taboos and rules and appearances,
> Are the staves of your tub.
> Break them and dispel the witchcraft
> Of thinking your tub is life!

But here in "Griffy The Cooper" is struck a new note, and one is led to wonder if it is possible that there is a part of man which is forever untouched by life, as essence inviolable, which could gather strength from desire and burst the onerous confines of life? No, this urge, seemingly divine, is but a part of the diabolical scheme, an _elan vital_ goading man on that he may the more surely be frustrated. It is a part of the ironic joke of cosmic size as Professor Newcomer defines it:

> The urge of nature that made a man
> Evolve from his brain a spiritual life--
> Oh miracle of the world!--
> The very same brain with which the ape and wolf

Get food and shelter and procreate themselves.
Nature has made man do this,
In a world where she gives him nothing to do
After all--(Though the strength of his soul
goes round
In a futile waste of power,
To gear itself to the mills of the gods)--
But get food and shelter and procreate himself!

And in the face of the realities of life, even the sturdy Davis Matlock (Davis Masters in life) cannot but counsel a sort of resignation without surrender:

you must bear the burden of life,
As well as the urge from your spirit's excess--
Well, I say to live it out like a god...

It is evident, I think, from the examples cited, and from other poems such as "Harold Arnett," "Carl Hamblin," "Harmon Whitney," "Shack Dye," and "Many Soldiers," that Masters did follow the naturalistic tendency to show man in society caught in a web of circumstances which conspire to defeat his potential development. Since man's life is visualized in this way, there is, throughout Spoon River Anthology, a strong bias toward pessimism. Franklin Jones might speak for all Spoon River philosophers with this rhetorical question and answer:

For what is it all but being hatched,
And running about the yard,
To the day of the block?
Save that a man has an angel's brain,
And sees the ax from the first!

In addition to defining man's status relative to society and life in general, a sociological treatment, the naturalists tend to advance a chemical-mechanistic explanation of man's actions. This method assumes that man is only a very complex chemical compound reacting incessantly to external stimuli. This tendency to be concerned with the physical construction of the human organism stems from the practices of Zola, and grew out of the nineteenth century interest in the chemical

aspects of human emotions and drives. This variety of analysis also finds a place in the thinking of the late citizens of Spoon River.

Trainor the druggist has observed the calm mixing of certain chemicals in his own mortar and the explosive reaction of others. He has observed the estrangement of Benjamin Pantier and wife; Ben says,

> In the morning of life I knew aspiration
> and saw Glory

and she avers she was "really a lady" and had delicate tastes. Trainor saw both these phenomena and an analogy began to form in his mind:

> Only the chemist can tell, and not always
> the chemist,
> What will result from compounding
> Fluids or solids.
> And who can tell
> How men and women will interact
> On each other, or what children will result?
> There were Benjamin Pantier and his wife,
> Good in themselves, but evil toward each other:
> He oxygen, she hydrogen,
> Their son, a devastating fire.

Unhappy Henry Layton has a graphic mind, and since his "father was gentle" and his "mother was violent," Henry believes that these two component parts of his being are incessantly warring on each other.

> But neither half of me wrought my ruin.
> It was the falling asunder of halves,
> Never a part of each other,
> That left me a lifeless soul.

There are some characters who go so far as to contend that the nature of a man is entirely determined by his heredity. Calvin Campbell points out that no matter how good the soil, poison ivy can become nothing but poison ivy; and, if the human plant grows at all, it will become what it can become, no more, no less:

> You may blame Spoon River for what it is,
> But whom do you blame for the will in you
> That feeds itself and makes you dock-weed,
> Jimpson, dandelion or mullen

> And which can never use any soil or air
> So as to make you jessamine or wistaria?

The bitterest of all the soliloquies on the nature of the human animal is that of Schroeder the fisherman. He has watched the minnows struggle for crumbs in the water, seen hogs jostle each other at the wallow, and seen big farms swallow small ones. He declares acidly,

> And I say if there's anything in man--
> Spirit, or conscience, or breath of God
> That makes him different from fishes or hogs
> I'd like to see it work!

But then, the pleasant Conrad Siever, who gave cider to the school children and is buried in his own orchard rather than on the hill "that feeds no flocks," finds beauty even in the chemical nature of man. One finds in him a man who has derived a life of happiness from a contemplation of the sensuous beauties of nature. He is the only denizen of Spoon River who finds a purpose beyond death; he glories to think that he is

> To move in the chemic change and circle of life,
> Into the soil and into the flesh of the tree,
> And into the living epitaphs
> Of redder apples!

In _Spoon River Anthology_, then, man is portrayed from two perspectives, the sociological and the chemical-mechanistic. In the former he is shown to be dwarfed by his milieu; in the latter, as a chemical animal subject to biochemical law. In either representation his defeat is certain and unavoidable. The reaction of the human being, from whose standpoint most of life seems accidental and aimless, is one of bewilderment and mystification. Adam Weirauch represents this quandary in the _Anthology_. He was deserted by Governor Altgeld for whom he campaigned, and the onslaughts of big business in the form of Armour ruined his slaughter house and butcher shop. So he ran for the Illinois legislature and was elected; there he sold his vote to recoup his finances

and was caught. He finishes his factual statement with this:

> Who was it, Armour, Altgeld or myself
> That ruined me?

This short poem does what few examples of naturalistic literature do. It traces the development of the circumstances which precipitate the final situation, and convinces the reader of the reasonableness and the inevitability of that situation.

Throughout all these epitaphs which illustrate the deterministic interpretation of life, there is an ancient and haunting sense of the poignancy of human disappointment and defeat. The determinism of Spoon River Anthology, however modified by time or embittered by present circumstance, however distant or faint, bears a relationship to this passage in the ninth chapter of Ecclesiastes:

> The race is not to the swift
> Nor the battle to the strong,
> Neither yet bread to the wise,
> Nor yet riches to men of understanding,
> Nor yet favour to men of skill;
> But time and chance happeneth to them all.

Chapter III

Objectivity is the primary attitude of the naturalist toward his subject material. In the words of Parrington, the first criterion of naturalism is "to seek the truth in the spirit of a scientist."[19] The scientist, of course, studies his data with uncompromising objectivity, and the naturalist believes that the writer must be likewise able to study the whole range of human existence without regard to his private prejudices. In Spoon River Anthology, this method results in the revelation of certain discrepancies between what is and what ought to be, and between what people are and what everyone is led to believe they are. These revelations are particularly alarming to some people; the publication of Spoon River precipitated the famed "battle of the village" in which the critics of the small town and its defenders engaged.[20]

The claims of objectivity which I intend to make for Spoon River Anthology rest on three points: First, the characters of the Anthology state all the facts necessary to a delineation of their lives without any concerted effort, considering the whole work, to warp the facts to fit a preconceived, single judgment of life. It is true that I have produced evidence of the deterministic nature of Spoon River, but from the naturalist's standpoint determinism is a concomitant of life itself, of which he is but a reporter; thus, the naturalist thinks that to report life as otherwise than governed by deterministic forces would be to capitulate to a personal bias. Secondly, Masters is willing

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19 Parrington, op. cit., p. 323

20 Cf. Russell Blankenship, American Literature (New York, 1931), pp. 649-680.

to consider, within the limitations of his work, all angles of the human character with its vices, faiths, virtues, comedies, and tragedies. Thirdly, Masters' selection and distribution of types of personalities in his microcosm are evidence of his objectivity. Many critics would not admit this contention, but it is plain, from Masters' other writings, that the distribution of types of people is consistent with his experiences and observations in the Illinois towns which furnish the prototypes of Spoon River.

The characters of _Spoon River Anthology_ speak with frankness and candor. None of the major facts of the person's life are withheld regardless of whether they are socially acceptable facts or not, for objectivity is nonexistent where any of the facts are arbitrarily ignored, glossed over, or repainted. Even though the effect of many of Masters' poems is that of an indictment of Spoon River, Masters himself never denounces the town; many of his characters do, but others praise Spoon River. If there is any indictment, it proceeds from the mind of the reader who perceives in the _Spoon River_ portraits a sharp contrast between life as it is and life as it is supposed to be. The objective method is ruthlessly critical, submitting its subject, the small town in this case, to the bright light and the dispassionate inspection of the laboratory. The objective mind finds in Spoon River the ugly fruits of sexual morbidity, measures the shallow intellectual life, uncovers unscrupulous business practices, and unveils the secrets which the Puritan aversion to life attempts to conceal.

But this is not the whole picture; not all the people on the hill led broken lives. Some were content and found a full measure of happiness; some, like Thomas Rhodes, upset all the moral maxims of the ages

and yet were satisfied with the mean ends for which they strove; some were scarcely noticed by life and made little impression on the town; some were utterly defeated by the ironical unraveling of their destinies; some are bitter, and some are amusing and amused. Petit the poet saw the whole picture and wrote:

> Life all around me here in the village;
> Tragedy, comedy, valor and truth,
> Courage, constancy, heroism, failure--
> All in the loom, and oh what patterns!

It was Masters' purpose to represent life fairly and wholly, to show all the patterns of the loom.

Since each of the epitaphs will usually illustrate more than one of the points mentioned above, and since there are a large number of poems and a larger number of characters, it will be impossible to relegate the examples which I shall cite to a specific category. However, as extensively as is consistent with the scope of this paper, I shall give examples of the quality of objectivity attained by Masters in the <u>Anthology</u>.

In the early pages of <u>Spoon River</u> is "good-hearted, easy Doctor Meyers" who had successfully "raised" his family, managed to find happiness, and helf the approbation of his fellow townsmen:

> And then one night, Minerva, the poetess,
> Came to me in her trouble, crying.
> I tried to help her out--she died--
> They indicted me, the newspapers disgraced me,
> My wife perished of a broken heart.
> And pneumonia finished me.

These are the facts given without bitterness, without regret. Doctor Meyers' fate is a mild form of the naturalistic tragedy. No uncaused volition moved him to his deed of kindness; it flowed from the nature of his being. In spite of the judgment of the villagers, voiced by

Mrs. Meyers, that he must have been fundamentally evil, Doctor Meyers was caught in the web; all the conditioning which on numberless occasions had caused him to go to the relief of suffering, finally, in an extraordinary circumstance, provided no alternative but the route to ruin. One cannot contemplate his fate, however, without a measure of pity and fear. His fate is tragic for one sees the disintegration of his life, and with pity or irony one contemplates him and his fate in the world.[21]

Back of Meyers' tragedy is the pitiable figure of Minerva Jones. She had a "heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk" at which the people of Spoon River jeered as she walked down the street. But within her misshapen body was a flame which burned itself out in newspaper verse. Then "Butch" Weldy raped her, and, with child, she sought Doctor Meyers for an abortion; it meant her death. Her last, strongly personal plea seems to the reader to be the most damning indictment of the stifling life of the small town offered in the collection:

> Will some one go to the village newspaper,
> And gather into a book the verses I wrote?--
> I thirsted so for love!
> I hungered so for life!

No institution or thing is untouchable to the naturalist, and, in "Amanda Barker," the ideal of marriage, as it is represented from the pulpit and in romantic literature, is strikingly contrasted with a particular case. The short statement of Amanda is not teeming with universal implications, but is merely an expression of a miserable woman whose life may not be unique in a village-world. She is not hesitant with her truth, and she reveals that a pregnancy for her

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21 Cf. Parrington, op. cit., p. 326.

meant death, which fact her husband knew:

> it is believed in the village where I lived
> That Henry loved me with a husband's love,
> But I proclaim from the dust
> That he slew me to gratify his hatred.

The next poem likewise punctures a time-honored illusion, the conventional belief that benefactors are always kind and good people. Philanthropic Constance Hately has reared Irene and Mary, her sister's children, and Spoon River has long cited her benevolence as a classic example of generosity, meanwhile casting horrendous eyes on the apparent ingratitude of the children. She admits all this, and adds:

> But praise not my self-sacrifice,
> And censure not their contempt;
> I reared them, I cared for them, true enough!--
> But I poisoned my benefactions
> With constant reminders of their dependence.

This poem demonstrates how much different a fact may appear to a writer who does not idealize but has accurately observed the human animal.

In any consideration of the American small town, it must be remembered that the town and its people had originally but one ideal, utility. All the finer instincts of men were of necessity subordinated to the all-important task of feeding, clothing, and sheltering the group.

> In the early days, a community consisted of a small church, plain and bleakly direct as the Puritan faith; just as small a school house, just as directly fashioned for the purposes of "learning"; stores; and plain, bare, but snugly built houses. These four institutions, old enough in themselves, were reduced to their immediate purposes. So with the whole settlement. A teacher was needed, therefore a teacher was a valuable citizen. A blacksmith was needed, and therefore a blacksmith was valuable. All the folks were welcome because all contributed to the community. Around the community lay wilderness. Bareness characterized the whole--bare needs, bare purposes; immediacy.[22]

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22 Ruth Suckow, "The Folk Idea in American Life," Scribners, LXXXVIII (1930), 248.

When the need for this insistence on utility was past, the psychology did not pass but persisted, gathering to itself the strength of virtue; and, eventually, the mere amassing of things became identified with the good life. From any humane standpoint, the artist and thinker agree, the human organism cannot thrive nor develop fully in such an exacting society.

American naturalists have repeatedly revealed the shallow virtue, the corruption, and the human suffering which may be directly attributed to the American acquisitive ideal, a combination of middle-class idealism and frontier necessity. Among the first of Spoon River's recent citizens to refer to this aspect of American life is "Ace" Shaw, the town gambler. The reasonable tone of his remarks is all the more disturbing when one observes that his defense is really an analogy between business and gambling:

> I never saw any difference
> Between playing cards for money
> And selling real estate,
> Practicing law, banking, or anything else.
> For everything is chance.
> Nevertheless
> Seest thou a man diligent in business?
> He shall stand before Kings!

The last little irony is exquisite, for it is the mere statement of a demonstrable fact; yet, who can read it without wondering if diligence in the pursuit of profits is justification for standing before Kings?

The futility of the acquisitive ideal in life is expressed by Cooney Potter. He had inherited forty acres, and worked his wife, sons, and daughters nearly to death trying to acquire more. Cooney himself, though, is not concerned with the implications of his statement; he resents the statement of one Squire Higbee to the effect

that he died from smoking Red Eagle cigars:

> Eating hot pie and gulping coffee
> During the scorching hours of harvest time
> Brought me here ere I had reached my sixtieth year.

The futility of acquiring things is damned only by Lambert Hutchins. He has two monuments to his life; one is the big house on the hill near Spoon River,

> The other, the lake-front in Chicago,
> Where the railroad keeps a switching yard,
> With whistling engines and crunching wheels,
> And smoke and soot thrown over the city,
> And the crash of cars along the boulevard,--
> A blot like a hog-pen on the harbor...

He helped give Chicago this by his vote in the legislature, and he explains that he wanted "to be at rest" and know security. All of his career apparently was not strictly honest, for, he says,

> I could hear the whispers, whispers, whispers,
> Wherever I went, and my daughters grew up
> With a look as if someone were about to strike them;
> And they married madly, helter-skelter,
> Just to get out and have a change.
> And what was the whole of the business worth?
> Why, it wasn't worth a damn!

One of his married daughters, Lillian Stewart, was forced to return to her father from the wreck of her marriage. Her husband had expected great wealth with the marriage, but apparently the Hutchins family had posed as richer than they were. Her bitter declaration is,

> He taunted me with the spires,
> And called the house a fraud on the world,
> A treacherous lure to young men, raising hopes
> Of a dowry not to be had;
> And a man while selling his vote
> Should get enough from the people's betrayal
> To wall the whole of his family in.
> He vexed my life till I went back home
> And lived like an old maid till I died,
> Keeping house for father.

Then there is the cynical Elliott Hawkins whose composition fitted him perfectly to play the world's game and triumph. He opposed the

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rights of labor, protected the rights of capital, and became rich and popular.

> Dying at last, of course, but lying here
> Under a stone with an open book carved upon it
> And the words "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

He had been a regular attendant at church, and jeers at those who have "mouths stopped with the dust" of his "triumphant career."

No description of the role of the acquisitive ideal in Spoon River would be complete without mention of Thomas Rhodes, the town banker, who never discovered the fruitlessness of the pursuit of profits. His irrefutable apologia, sparkling with a smug good humor, advises the world's idealists:

> 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.

Never in his career had the expediencies of business been subordinated to any humane considerations; yet, he was happy. Revelations such as this do not substantiate the lip service done to the non-commercial career by those who piously mouth the shibboleths of idealism.

Representing that fretting, perspiring type of business man is Batterton Dobyns who does not glimpse the vision of the pleasant life until too late; as he says,

> I was cut down in my prime
> From overwork and anxiety.

And just as he slipped out of this world, in his last delirium, he saw a vision of himself, the dollar slave, neatly buried and his wife enjoying the fruits of his life; he sees her

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sitting by a window
Some place afar overlooking the sea;
She seemed so rested, ruddy and fat,
And she smiled and said to a colored waiter:
"Another slice of roast beef, George.
Here's a nickel for your trouble."

But in spite of the imperious demands of life which require that body and soul of a man be sacrificed for money, there are always a few people who miraculously survive while following the inclinations of their melodious hearts. Such a one was Fiddler Jones whom Masters sketched from life. His is among the finest and most reassuring of all the epitaphs. He queries, half amused by his own bravado in flouting convention,

How could I till my forty acres
Not to speak of getting more,
With a medley of horns, bassoons and piccolos
Stirred in my brain by crows and robins
And the creak of a wind-mill--only these?

What was his fate? Did he grow old and repent of his grasshopper improvidence? No, "I ended up with forty acres," he says.

I ended up with a broken fiddle--
And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,
And not a single regret.

The prevalence of the tendency among Americans to consider most pleasures frivolous, if not absolutely evil, is attributable to America's fundamentally Puritan outlook.

Everywhere in American life one finds evidences of the influence of Puritanism. This conception of life, which assumes many guises, labels all things as either good or devilish. Probably the most obvious evidence of Puritanism among Americans is a widespread tendency to consider anything related to sex to be evil; at the same time these same Americans are particularly easy prey to any stimulus involving sex. These contradictory tendencies cause the Puritan mind to surround sex

with mystery and taboo. The Puritan fears the power of his desires, confident that pleasure in this life is a detraction from the soul energy which ought to be directed to the laying up of treasure in heaven. Consequently, the Puritan hedges the subject which most torments him with stern prohibitions, like Wotan encircling Brynhilde with flame, until the way to the satisfaction of his normal desires is fraught with danger and suffering. Another evidence, of course, is the extreme form of religiosity still extant in many regions and among many sections of society.

In Spoon River Anthology, religion and morals are demonstrably treated fairly. There are some to whom religion is a cloak, some to whom it is the only satisfaction of life, and some to whom it is an illusion blinding men's eyes to the important facts of living. Jacob Godbey rails against the "dreariness of village morality" with the contention that liberty of the mind is more important than liberty of the belly. He speaks of the "wry-faced ascetic" who cannot tolerate "roast beef and ale and good will and rosy cheer." And he asks pointedly,

> How did you feel after I was dead and gone,
> And your goddess, Liberty, unmasked as a strumpet,
> Selling out the streets of Spoon River
> To the insolent giants
> Who manned the saloons from afar?

Then there is Henry Phipps who was progressively disillusioned in life. He was one of Thomas Rhodes' commercial slaves and superintendent of the Sunday school; finally, he developed a cancer and learned that he "was not, after all, the particular care of God!"

Several of these problems are implied in the almost amusing confession of hypocrisy by Deacon Taylor. He was a pillar in the church and a member of the prohibition party. He observes, thinking probably

that confession is good for his soul, that, although the villagers think he died from eating watermelon, he really had a form of alcoholism.

> For every noon for thirty years,
> I slipped behind the prescription partition
> In Trainor's drug store
> And poured a generous drink
> From the bottle marked
> "Spiritus frumenti."

A sadder story is that of the boy, Zenas Witt, who fell victim to the combined ignorance and sexual repression of the village, becoming morbid over some form of autoeroticism. He says,

> I saw Dr. Weese's advertisement,
> And there I read everything in print,
> Just as if he had known me;
> And about the dreams which I couldn't help.

At last his desperation, abetted by the reading of the advertisement of this quack, worried him into the grave, to "the sleep without dreams."

A life worthy of the treatment of an Ibsen is that of Mrs. Charles Bliss. She was a self-sacrificing soul and wanted to do what was best for her four children, so she never got the divorce which her own mind told her to obtain. The Reverend Wiley and Judge Somers advised her that it was her duty to maintain her marriage for the children's sake. The result was that the children took sides, two siding with each parent, and the family peace was permanently disrupted:

> Now every gardener knows that plants grown
>   in cellars
> Or under stones are twisted and yellow and
>   weak.
> And no mother would let her baby suck
> Diseased milk from her breast.
> Yet preachers and judges advise the raising
>   of souls
> Where there is no sunlight, but only twilight,
> No warmth, but only dampness and cold--
> Preachers and judges!

This is indeed a bitter indictment, but one cannot say that the <u>Anthology</u> presents only one aspect of the standard morality when there are statements such as that of Lydia Humphrey.

Lydia Humphrey's whole happiness was in her church. There she found brothers and sisters and children. She was aware that other "eagle souls" laughed at the church, but she philosophizes,

> sweet was the church to me
> It was the vision, vision, vision of the poets
> Democratized!

In the same tone of affirmation, Father Malloy is addressed by the dead of Spoon River. He was a priest but found time and tolerance for the human foibles of his flock:

> You were so human, Father Malloy,
> Taking a friendly glass sometimes with us,
> Siding with us who would rescue Spoon River
> From the coldness and dreariness of village morality.
> You were like a traveler who brings a little box of sand
> From the wastes about the pyramids
> And makes them real and Egypt real.
> You were a part of and related to a great past,
> And yet you were so close to many of us.
> You believed in the joy of life.
> You did not seem to be ashamed of the flesh.
> You faced life as it is,
> And as it changes.
> Some of us almost came to you, Father Malloy,
> Seeing how your church had divined the heart,
> And provided for it,
> Through Peter the Flame,
> Peter the Rock.

Some of the epitaphs are amusing in an ironical way. Masters achieves this effect by juxtaposing two ideas which are in sharp contrast. Probably none is more typical of this humor than the sardonic comment of Daisy Fraser, Spoon River's scarlet woman. She declares that neither Editor Whedon nor the Circuit Judge ever gave any of the money he earned in devious ways to the public treasury.

But I--Daisy Fraser who always passed
Along the streets through rows of nods and smiles,
And coughs and words such as "there she goes,"
Never was taken before Justice Arnett
Without contributing ten dollars and costs
To the school fund of Spoon River!

Equally ironical are the indignant expostulations of A. D. Blood, that stern supporter of Calvinistic morality:

If you in the village think that my work was a good one,
Who closed the saloons and stopped all playing at cards,
And haled old Daisy Fraser before Justice Arnett,
In many a crusade to purge the people of sin;
Why do you let the milliner's daughter Dora,
And the worthless son of Benjamin Pantier
Nightly make my grave their unholy pillow?

He does not mention his crimes, one of which was the killing of Oscar Hummel.

Editor Whedon likewise does not appreciate the ironic justice of his burial spot. He revels in the thoughts of his power as publisher of a paper, scratching "dirt over scandal for money" and exhuming "it to the winds for revenge, or to sell papers." His sorrow is great, to have known such glory, and

Then to lie here close by the river over the place
Where the sewage flows from the village,
And the empty cans and garbage are dumped,
And abortions are hidden.

But the narrowness of the village's sense of humor is demonstrated no more adequately than by Jim Brown. Jim says he was handling Dom Pedro, a stallion, and the village began to buzz.

Rev. Peet and the Social Purity Club,
Headed by Ben Pantier's wife,
Went to the Village trustees,
And asked them to make me take Dom Pedro
From the barn of Wash McNeely, there at the edge
of town,
To a barn outside of the corporation,
On the ground that it corrupted public morals.
Well, Ben Pantier and Fiddler Jones saved the day--
They thought it a slam on the colts.

However within this village where there were tragedy and comedy, courage and failure, where many people grew up with minds all twisted and tortured, there was a remnant whose portraits reveal lives which reached an exalted plane of happiness. It is impossible to quote or mention all the poems which reveal pleasant or contented lives, but none is more famous than that of Anne Rutledge whom Lincoln loved:

> Out of me unworthy and unknown
> The vibrations of deathless music;
> "With malice toward none, with charity for all."
> Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,
> And the beneficent face of a nation
> Shining with justice and truth.
> I am Anne Rutledge who sleep beneath these weeds.
> Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
> Wedded to him, not through union,
> But through separation.
> Bloom forever, O Republic,
> From the dust of my bosom!

In this category belong the blind Lois Spears, who considered herself the happiest of women, and William Jones, who "lived in wonder, worshipping earth and heaven." John and Rebecca Wasson, the pioneer grandparents of Masters in life, make heroic statements, but none of the portraits is as full of a dynamic life quality as the song of power of Lucinda Matlock.

Lucinda, married to Davis Matlock for seventy years, raised twelve children and outlived all but four of them. She led a life of incessant, rigorous activity,

> Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the
> green valleys.
> At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
> And passed to a sweet repose.
> What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
> Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
> Degenerate sons and daughters,
> Life is too strong for you--
> It takes life to love Life.

Some of the statements are poignant in their simplicity and strength. The epitaph of Emily Sparks, the maiden school teacher, is that kind. In life she loved one of her students, Reuben Pantier, and her final injunction is addressed to him:

> My boy, wherever you are,
> Work for your soul's sake,
> That all the clay of you, all of the dross of you,
> May yield to the fire of you,
> Till the fire is nothing but light! . . .
> Nothing but light!

In sharp contrast to those who found salvation in idealism are those like Benjamin Fraser and Edmund Pollard who found life's delights in the sensual.

Particularly Edmund Pollard sought to drain all life of its fragrant essence, to savor life's richest sensations wholly.

> I would I had thrust my hands of flesh
> Into the disk-flowers bee-infested,
> Into the mirror-like core of fire
> Of the light of life, the sun of delight.
> For what are anthers worth or petals
> Or halo-rays? Mockeries, shadows
> Of the heart of the flower, the central flame!
> All is yours, young passer-by;
> Enter the banquet room with the thought;
> Don't sidle in as if you were doubtful
> Whether you're welcome--the feast is yours!
> Nor take but a little, refusing more
> With a bashful "Thank you," when you're hungry.
> Is your soul alive? Then let it feed!
> Leave no balconies where you can climb;
> Nor milk-white bosoms where you can rest;
> Nor golden heads with pillows to share;
> Nor wine cups while the wine is sweet;
> Nor ecstasies of body or soul,
> You will die, no doubt, but die while living
> In depths of azure, rapt and mated,
> Kissing the queen-bee, Life!

He is among the few who suggest their lives as patterns worthy of emulation.

When Spoon River Anthology was first published, adverse criticisms

frequently denounced for [illegible]

occupation with sex. As was previously pointed out, naturalists tend to emphasize sex not because they wish to degrade sex or exalt it but because their observations lead them to believe it to be the strongest and most vital of human instincts. Sex plays a prominent part in _Spoon River_ because Masters is confident that it produces the central, dominating emotion of man, the desire for love and beauty. According to Lewisohn, Masters sees love

> as an expression of the total human personality, no isolated instinct amid others that can thrive while it remains unsatisfied or warped. When man has satisfied hunger and sheltered his body from the winds, love remains--love that is not only procreation but creation, that is the source of contentment, beauty, aspiration, art. But love does not unhappily, like the satisfaction of hunger, come to all. A universal need, it is as rare in its harmonious and full fruition as beauty or genius. That is the pervasive tragedy of human life, inherent and unalterable.[23]

This tragedy is reflected in the _Spoon River_ portraits. Few have found love and beauty in their lives, but those who have are well content.

In any final analysis of the type of characters found in the _Anthology_, it must be admitted that each personality is unique and strongly resists classification. Represented in the work are people from many occupations and strata of society. Still some have said that _Spoon River_ is an unfair treatment of the small town, that the characters are not typical but grotesques; however, even the most superficial reading of the _Anthology_ will demonstrate the wide variety of types used and the remarkable depth and thoroughness of the analysis of small town life. Each character is unique and represents an aspect of life.

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23 Ludwig Lewisohn, _The Story of American Literature_ pp. 492-493.

From my own viewpoint, I cannot believe that anyone is qualified to speak authoritatively on the small town in general or of Masters' opinion of Petersburg and Lewistown in particular. The evidence indicates that Masters attempted to show all sides and to be fair; all statements to the contrary must be relegated to the status of mere opinion or be supported with concrete data which they do not at present possess.

It is evident that Masters conceived of man as preyed upon by inexorable and ineluctable circumstances beyond his control. Masters perceived that man's fate is frequently and ironically tragic. It is further evident that Masters attempted to analyse and develop his material with considerable objectivity. In his Anthology the usual tendency of naturalists to maintain unconsciously a bias toward pessimism in the selection of details is evinced. Since Spoon River Anthology does conform in all major instances to the usual criteria of naturalism, it is further evident that it must be classed with naturalistic literature.

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