“If Edgar Lee Masters had written nothing but this arresting volume, he would have remained the most arresting and vigorous figure in the poetry of his day. *Spoon River Anthology*, by virtue of its extraordinary power and originality, stands unique in the field of literary writing” (Untermeyer 161).

Masters would, if possible, have fought and stood against the urbanisation of America because of his firm conviction that agrarianism is the only congenial and efficacious way of life, the only path leading to perfection and happiness. As we have seen, he was such an ardent and strong supporter of Jeffersonian democracy and agrarianism that he projected them prominently in his literary production. During the forty years of his literary career he never deviated from the theme of literary populism, the strong belief that the greatness and the glory of America lie in its agricultural past. His work, *Spoon River Anthology*, unique in itself, was not actually an indictment of the American small town, on the contrary, it was a lament for its corruption.

It was a work with unquestioned originality, the first to encompass a Mid-western community, and also the forerunner of a series of small-town fictions beginning with Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and Lewis’ *Main Street* and *Babbit*. . . . It unearthed the Spoon River cemetery, brought people back to
life and reburied them. It let people tell truths about themselves they had never spoken while alive. (Kreyemborg 379)

The founding of 'Poetry' in 1912 by Harriet Monroe had a telling influence on the poetic career of Masters, for it provided him the opportunity to read much of the free verse of Sandburg which ultimately helped him to cling to outright radicalism. Also, the influence of William Marion Reedy cannot be minimised; he encouraged him to keep his eyes open to the living world about him and to read the "Greek Anthology." The Greek or Palatine Anthology is a collection of some four thousand short poems—largely epigrams—dating from 700 B.C. to A.D. 1000, from Archilochos to the late Byzantine Christian apologists.

Masters made use of the term 'anthology,' which he gained from "Greek Anthology," (in Greek, "anthologia" means 'a gathering of flowers') as the basic unifying technique in his work. He has also borrowed from the same work the epigrammatic style for his characters permitting them to speak to or about each other. Getting the cue from Reedy, he turned to Southern Illinois for his poetic substance and subjects. A reader will certainly agree that the Spoon River poems owe much of their fascination and brilliance to their brevity.

The Spoon River Anthology is actually an example of the revolt from the village. As Childs has observed, we may look at the poems:

as pictures of common human foibles accentuated by an environment that is essentially unfriendly to the practice of the ordinary Christian virtues. And this accounts for the prevalence
in the village of so many pathetic, even sordid types—
“grotesques.” Masters objects to some of the ways of Spoon River partly because Spoon River has hideously failed to produce the uncontaminated, semi-idyllic life of the small town which Masters believes possible. . . . Spoon River represents to Masters a failure in social justice. (334)

Blemished by the selfishness and vices of a capitalistic society, Spoon River is none other than rural Illinois of the 1890's or it is all America in microcosm set in a village cemetery.

In his autobiography, *Across Spoon River*, Masters, as we have seen in chapter II, speaks about the great influence his teacher Mary Fisher had on him. It is she who, as we have seen, actually encouraged and inspired him with the idea of free thinking, by directing him to study Emerson. The Shelleyan influence on him is also considerable. He took him on wings of flame. He writes:

> This passion for humanity, this adoration for the beautiful, this celebration of the *Awful Shadow of an Unseen Power,* this exquisite music in words, this ethereal imagery—I was carried out of myself. I began to see that, I, too had a passion for humanity, and that: my father's democracy and integrity were the roots out of which this devotion to Shelley's poetry took immediate nourishment. And to what ends Shelley led me! To more metaphysics, to Plato, to the Greek writers. (*Across Spoon River* 77)
Masters, in his personal life, had a severe ego-crisis, the desperate conflict between the two warring factions in him. On the one side there was his father, Petersburg, the South, the law, and on the other side his mother, Lewistown, the North and poetry: each group stood in perpetual opposition to the other. He was able to tolerate his father, who was a democrat, anti-prohibitionist and he admired his vitality and love of life. The unhappy married life of his parents, whose differences were temperamental but irreconcilable, had a telling impact on his life, and so was his relationship with his mother. On the contrary, he witnesses the idyllic home of his grandparents at the foot of the Menard Country Hills. His relation with his sister Madeline too was not smooth as he felt his sister blocking his way: Madeline was not to him what Dorothy was to Wordsworth.

One comes across the eternal conflict between the two towns, Petersburg and Lewistown, 'with all the love going to Petersburg and all the hate going to Lewistown.' Petersburg was rural, Southern, anti-calvinistic and anti-prohibitionistic. On the contrary, Lewistown was urban, Northern, Calvinistic and also stood for prohibition. And, "it was this atmosphere of Northern light and cold winds that clarified my mind at last to the beauty of the Petersburg material and pointed with steel the pen with which I drew the microcosm of the Spoon River country" ("Genesis of Spoon River" 41).

The composition of the Spoon River Anthology was not a mere fancy of the poet, but, it coincided with the most crucial crisis in his life
and the epitaphs are simply the expressions of that crisis. The crisis began with his mother’s visit to him in Chicago in May 29, 1914 though there was a quarrel with his mother over a literary difference of opinion which ended with her hitting him on the head with a rolled window shade and Masters leaving home for good. They spent their time reminiscing about people and events in Petersburg and Lewistown. Born in Kansas, he was fortunate enough to live in Petersburg quite sometime where he received the love and affection of his grandparents and where he enjoyed “the genial neighbourhood of fiddlers, dancers and feasters.” His heart throbbed with sweet memories of the Sangamon river while of Lewistown and Spoon River which were under Calvinism and which stood for prohibition he had only bitter memories. Together with the experiences from Petersburg and Lewistown, he had other cherished memories of the courts, of the theatres, of his exposure to the humdrum life of Chicago and its suburbs, where he spent a few years and also of the experiences from the field of politics: all these helped him to have a vision of the society. Again, the newspapers, the political impasse of the city, the puritanical and pharisaical beliefs and fights, certainly, were topics for a thorough study for Masters and it ultimately enlightened him and he, came to the conclusion that the city banker was no other than the country banker, the city lawyer the same as the country lawyer, the city preacher the same as the country preacher, and the theology, finance, jurisprudence, society, and the antithesis of good and evil the same in both city and country town.
The village of Levistown has furnished me a key which
unlocked the secrets of the world at large. (Yatron 48-49)

To quote James Hurt, the *Spoon River Anthology*, “consists of
epitaphs, so highly personal in nature that they present not just the small
town as world but also the poet himself as small town. It is not an
objective critique of village life but a sustained piece of self-revelation, a
portrait of the artist as the small town” (403).

As already referred to, the immediate cause for his writing the
Anthology was Emma Masters’ visit to him and at her departure, on his
way back, he listened to the church bell which energized his whole being
and as he got back home he wrote “The Hill,” the opening lines of the
Anthology. The poem is composed essentially like the conversation he
had with his mother, i.e., there are two voices, one, inquires about
what has become of the various individuals of the Spoon River and the
other, as response to them saying that they are all “sleeping on the hill.”
Thus the poem “The Hill” has a novel beginning:

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozer, the
fighter?
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.
One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife:
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.
The seeker makes enquiries about the girls whom he knew and is
told of their unfortunate fate:
One died in shameful childbirth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
One of broken pride, in the 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. (SRA 23)

People belonging to all walks of life are given their places in this
opening poem of the Spoon River Anthology so that one comes to realise
the fact that along with these victims of life was buried an American
epoch, a rural epoch. Such is the perfection of “The Hill.”

Masters has sowed the seed of a new genre in writing—graveyard
realism—where the dead speak out the truth with fierce passion. They are
at an advantageous position, for they being dead, could, at ease, converse
with the living and bluntly state the truth about themselves: in other words,
the dead confront the living, the past the present. Really Masters
invokes the dead of Spoon River to record the soundings of a
revolt long since crowned in the tumult of America's material
progress. It is the country's revolt against the city, against the
incursions of the machine into the semi-idyllic landscape of an
isolated small town. In representing this revolt in poetic terms, there, of course, lurked the inevitable hazard of the Anthology teeming with the populist mumbo-jumbo, anachronistic appraisals of the past in the reformist jargon, and worse still, aspersions cast on the present and the living in the outworn romantic idiom. (Chandran 438)

Undoubtedly the small town landscape is the most congenial, most effective background for the *Spoon River Anthology* for the American small town is the most apt and acceptable antithesis to the city. Probably it was the Concord church cemetery that was in his mind while writing the epitaphs and these epitaphs not only upturn all the premises of the country town myth but also prepare the ground for creating a counter myth of a fierce and dreadful small town community. One must be aware of the fact that by the time *Spoon River Anthology* was published, the villages on the American continent had ceased to exist and that the death of Spoon River, sleeping eternally on the hill, truly belonged to distant past. To be precise, the small town gave way to the city, the innocence of the rural population was snatched away by urban-industrial expansion. Masters uses the literary medium to exhibit to the readers how the historical forces have favoured urbanization and industrialization, thought inevitable for the nation’s progress, against the country and nature, the natural innocence. And Masters found the epitaph form to be the most congenial to give vent to all his grudges, indignations, injustices, revelations of life’s mysteries and paradoxes and also to expound his
own philosophic thoughts. Spoon River is the first village to have its shroud of decency violently removed, for along with Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay, Masters was angered at injustice, exploitation and industrialization.

Masters' *Spoon River* is an excellent and truthful rendering of the American small town and no other American book contains a greater luxuriance of varied human material. While writing it, he must certainly have brought to use the reasoning eye of a lawyer, the keenness of a surgeon and the bitter heart of a fellow being. The *Spoon River Anthology* consists of 244 epitaphs of former inhabitants, both real and imaginary. They belong to, according to May Swenson “a Midwestern cemetery and from their graves they speak their own epitaphs; discovering and confessing the real motivations of their lives, they reveal the secret steps that stumbled them to failure, or raised them to illusionary triumphs while alive; it is as if the darkness of the grave granted them revelatory eyes for a recognition of their own souls” (*SRA* 5).

Among the different portraits in the *Spoon River Anthology* the most memorable one is the Pantier sequence, purely a case of marital incompatibility, very much typical of Spoon River and ultimately an example of a foiled marriage. One comes upon Benjamin Pantier, the unhappy lawyer who takes to drinking because of his wife, who has driven him away from house and “with a snare which bled me to death, snared my soul.” It is only after some months that the readers did hear of Mrs. Benjamin Pantier’s version of the incident:
I know that he told that I snared his soul
With a snare which bled him to death
And all the men loved him,
And most of the women pitied him.
But suppose you are really a lady, and have delicate tastes
And loathe the smell of whiskey and onions

................................
And then suppose!
You are a woman well endowed,
And the only man with whom the law and morality
Permit you to have the marital relation
Is the very man that fills you with disgust
Every time you think of it – while you think of it
Every time you see him?
That’s why I drove him away from home
To live with his dog in a dingy room
Back of his office. (SRA 38)

While Mrs. Pantier is so vociferous, Pantier simply tells the reader that their ‘story is lost in silence.’ Certainly the incompatibility of the parents had a telling impact on their son, Reuben Pantier, and it is quite sarcastically portrayed by Trainor the Druggist.

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 towards each other:
He Oxygen, she hydrogen,
Their son, a devastating fire. (SRA 41)

And there is Emily Sparks the school teacher, most probably Mary Fisher, who loves Pantier's son, praying whole-heartedly that the fire kindled in his spirit by the friction between his parents may transform him into a genius,

   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. (SRA 40)

But contrary to her prayers and wishes, Reuben Pantier tells her,

   I pass the effect of my father and mother,
   The milliner's daughter made me trouble
   And out I went in the world,
   Where I passed through every peril known
   Of wine and women and joy of life.
   One night, in a room in the Rue de Rivoli,
   I was drinking wine with a black-eyed cocotte,
   And the tears swam into my eyes.

   And the black-eyed cocotte took the tears for hers,
As well as the deceiving kisses I gave her.

Somehow, from that hour, I had a new vision

Dear Emily Sparks! (SR 39)

An intelligent reader can truly observe an autobiographical element in the Pantier sequence. The most striking comparison is with Masters’ own family, the relationship between the earthy, common country lawyer Benjamin Pantier and his delicate, artistic wife is exactly the duplication of the same that existed between his parents as is described in Across Spoon River, Masters’ autobiography. It being so, Reuben Pantier is none other than Masters himself. Reuben, being a victim to the incompatibilities of his father and mother, goes out into the world and passes through “every peril known, of wine and women and the joy of life.” Emily Sparks, his idealistic teacher, had been a source of inspiration and encouragement in fulfilling Masters’ early literary ambitions and later became a writer herself (ASR 59).

There can be yet another interpretation that the Pantiers could be simply Masters and his wife. It, too, sounds sensible for Mrs. Pantier’s distaste for whiskey, onions and sex reminds one of Helen Jenkins, who had been a hard task mistress and who made Masters undergo a strict term of regency—a year of church-going and abstinence from whiskey, and cigars—before she married him.

Whatever be the reason why Mrs. Pantier sent her husband out, it affected the whole of Spoon River. She, with her reforming zeal and puritanical beliefs, was made the president of the Social Purity Club but
ironically enough the club joined hands with the revivalist Church headed by Thomas Rhodes, a hypocritical banker. Also, there was the battle between the liberal party and the forces of prohibition. Inevitably the bank failed, being ruled by corrupt men, the court house was burned down and a number of men were killed; new graves were dug, on the hill, the dead were buried, each headstone bearing the euphemistic inscription for the posterity.

Lucinda Matlock, the most memorable and admirable of all the epitaphs, is modelled after his own grandmother, and it echoes a past culture that was unified and coherent. The reader feels that there existed a harmony and a sense of fulfilment of work, religion, marriage and social relationship in their lives, bound together by a passionate joy in living. They could find life fulfilment in their own life situations. That is why, after picturing her vigorous and fruitful life of long 96 years, she had nothing but contempt for the poet's generation,

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. (SR4 239)

The Spoon River was especially remembered for its abundance of fresh water clams. It was a delicious dish of the Indians and they used the
clam-shells as spoons and the white men gave that name to the stream, while the Indians had called it ‘Amaquon’ (Havighurst 309).

In the New Spoon River there is her grand-daughter, Rita Matlock Gruenberg who has grown old, exhausted and worn out at forty-nine and who has less faith in life than in death. She, after narrating her hardships in life, prays,

Grandmother! Fold me to your breast again.

Make me earth with you for the blossoms of spring

Grand mother! (NSR 69)

She thus confirms the exasperated accusation made by Lucinda, the sturdy pioneer woman of ninety-six.

Masters hated injustice; he has the social conscience and the mental make up of a lawyer. While writing the Spoon River Anthology the poet “held up injustice to the sight of all by laying the scene of the book in a village cemetery where the dead speak without reticence and where there are no distractions which are allowed to conceal or blur the sharp lines of the indictment” (Blankenship 600). Even before its publication as a book, Reedy was fully conscious of the political implications of the Spoon River poems: “Spoon River is somewhat provincial yes, but out of it came Lincoln and the democratic movement, from greenbackism to the New Freedom” (Yatron 50-51).

Masters was neither indicting the American small town nor criticising Spoon River’s rusticity; instead, he was trying to verbalize real
grief at the corruption of the village. Herbert Ellsworth Childs expresses it precisely in his "Agrarianism and Sex."

We must remember that Spoon River is rural Illinois in the closing years of the last century. As such, it had already been befouled by the selfishness and vices of a capitalistic society. On a foundation of agrarian good feeling had been laid a smothering superstructure of business. The village was controlled by the canning works and the banks, which had as willing servants the courts of justice, the press, the pulpit, and public opinion. It was the selfish destruction of liberty that brought so many Spoon Riverites to regretful graves. Spoon River represents to Mr. Masters a failure in social justice. (334)

The reader has the example of Thomas Rhodes who not only ran the church but also the store and the bank. Quite shamelessly he says:

While we, seekers of earth's treasures,
Getters and hoarders of gold,
Are self-contained, compact, harmonized,
Even to the end. (SRA 127)

The very same Rhodes prosecutes Clarence Fawcett who was fated to be in charge of the store at the death of Eugene Carman—another of Rhodes' slaves—who, realising the truth, committed suicide for stealing some blankets from the store 'for money to pay a doctor's bill for my little girl': Contrary to his word, Rhodes published the news.
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. (SRA 151)

There is a parallel for Eugene Carman in *New Spoon River*, Maurice Schlichter:

Remembering the fate of Eugene Carman
Who confessed to his theft and threw himself
Upon the mercy of Thomas Rhodes,
I turned to the Bible for words of wisdom,
And went to the rivals of Moses Schrimski,
Successor of Thomas Rhodes, whose money
I stole for the needs of life. (NSR 135)

In his epitaph Thomas Wentworth Arlington, the speaker, laments for the son possessing the traits of his mother’s father:

This was my fate who married the daughter
Of Thomas Rhodes, the hypocrite banker
And what could I do but stand aghast
Like a hen that hatches a snake? (NSR 88)

One can comprehend the intensity of the corruption which prevailed in Spoon River when one learns that the same banker and capitalist Thomas Rhodes was exempted by the Circuit Judge from paying
taxes on the water works of Spoon River. The judge was a paradigm of corruption, for he says,

Deciding cases on the points the lawyers scored,
Not on the right of the matter.
O wind and rain, leave my head-stone alone!
For worse than the anger of the wronged,
The curses of the poor,
Was to lie speechless, yet with vision clear,
Seeing that even Hod Putt, the murderer,
Hanged by my sentence, was innocent in soul compared with me. *(SR4 96)*

There is Editor Whedon of Spoon River who, too, is corrupt to the core like Rhodes. He used his paper

To pervert truth, to ride it for a purpose,
To use great feelings and passions of the human family
For base designs, for cunning ends,

To scratch dirt over scandal for money,
And exhume it to the winds for revenge,
Or to sell papers,
Crushing reputations, or bodies, if need be,
To win at any cost, save your own life. *(SR4 149)*

Being mismanaged by Thomas Rhodes and his good-for-nothing son, the bank was wrecked, but instead of the real culprit Editor Whedon helped
send to prison George Reese, really an innocent man, as scapegoat.

One might listen to Mrs. George Reese saying:

   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. (SRA 112)

Olaf Lindbloom of New Spoon River like Whedon, is a hypocritical editor and tool of capitalism. He did everything for his own selfish ends,

   Here am I, an editor of the New Spoon River

   Always feeling my way.
   Publishing Girondist doctrines of the largest acceptance,
   Thereby increasing my circulation;

   Advocating tepid reforms,
   Like just taxation, dodging my own taxes the while.
   Fighting crime waves, and criminals,
   But myself engaged in land thefts,

   A leader of the unions of money,
   A foe of the unions of labor,
Causing them to be jailed and killed.

An advocate of slick laws.

Against the saloons and the gambling house,

But friend to the private cellar, the back room of the bank.

Unknown and elusive,

Insatiable as to money.

A Christian gentleman,

An editor of the new era. (NSR 19)

Deacon Thomas Rhodes, after all string pullings and after his acquittal for the bank failure, attended the Church where Rev. Abner Peet was the pastor. Abner Peet and his colleague Rev. Lemuel Wiley, who knew all the secret affairs of Rhodes, remained silent throughout. It might also be seen as a tirade against the Church. Butch Weldy was given a job in the canning works owned by the very same Rhodes and one day while filling the tank with gasoline someone left a blow-fire going and the tank exploded and the poor Butch Weldy was both crippled and blinded, but the Circuit Judge, who has sold justice to the moneyed powers again ruled in favour of the Rhodes’ family stating that since the cruel act was done by

. . . a fellow – servant of mine, and so

Old Rhodes’ son didn’t have to pay me.

And I sat on the witness stand as blind

As Jack the Fiddler, saying over and over.

“I didn’t know him at all.” (SRA 48)
Editor Whedon denounced the 'populist' Altgeld as the candidate of gamblers and anarchists. And Masters aptly buried him close by the river, "where the sewage flows from the village, and empty cans and garbage are dumped, and abortions are hidden." One finds in Carl Hamblin a real contrast to the corrupt Editor Whedon, for

The press of the Spoon River Clarion was wrecked,
And I was tarred and feathered
For publishing this on the day the anarchists were hanged in Chicago:

“I saw a beautiful woman with bandaged eyes
Staying on the steps of a marble temple
Great multitudes passed in front of her,
Lifting their faces to her imploringly

In her right hand she held a scale;
A man in a black gown read from a manuscript:
‘She is no respecter of persons’
Then a youth wearing a red cap
Leaped to her side and snatched away the bandage
And lo, the lashes had been eaten away
From the oozy eye-lids,
The eye-balls were scared with a milky mucus;
The madness of a dying soul
Was written on her face.
But the multitude saw why she wore the bandage." (SRA 148)
Certainly the 'beautiful lady' is justice, herself. There is Henry Phipps, the Sunday school superintendent who is also,

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. (SRA 218)

Ralph Rhodes, son of Thomas Rhodes, wrecked his father's bank by borrowing money to dabble in wheat. He says:

I was buying wheat for him as well,
Who couldn't margin the deal in his name
Because of his church relationship. (SRA 154)

One comes upon another epitaph, Adam Weirauch, where we see a man who fought for Altgeld and later sold his vote on Charles T. Yerke's street car franchise, but was crushed between Altgeld and Armour. The big businessman, Armour, "started to ship dressed meat to Spoon River/Forcing me to shut down my slaughter-house/And my butcher-shop went all to pieces." He asks:

Who was it, Armour, Altgeld or myself –
That ruined me?
There is John M. Church, the Corporation lawyer who,

... pulled the wires with judge and jury,
And the upper courts, to beat the claims
Of the crippled, the widow and orphan,
And made a fortune thereat.
And probably he gets the reward,
But the rats devoured my heart
And a snake made a nest in my skull. (SRA 105)

Another character, Hiram Scates, reminiscent of Bryan, began his career as a political idealist but finding its futility in the way of the world, sold out, “And out in the cold stood all my followers: Young idealists, broken warriors.” Judge Somers, who was an erudite lawyer, lies buried, forgotten and unmarked, while Chase Henry, the town drunkard, whom the priest denied burial in holy ground, has a marble block topped by an urn erected to his memory.

The circulating library of Spoon River built up and managed by Seth Compton for the good of enquiring minds was, at his death, sold at auction on the public square. He justifies the presence of the various kinds of books in the Library.

That no one knows what is good
Who knows not what is evil;
And no one knows what is true
Who knows not what is false. (SRA 186)
Justice is denied to the poor and the needy and one sees the victim of injustice in Felix Schmidt. He is fated to become Christian Dallman's tenant, who had "many children to feed/ And school and clothe, and a wife who was sick/ From bearing children." He had scarcely five acres of land, which unfortunately as per the deed belonged to Christian Dallman. There is the epitaph of E.C. Culbertson who, to his shock, sees the tablet of bronze containing the embossed faces of Editor Whedon and Thomas Rhodes in the hallway of the New Court House in Spoon River which would not have been built but for him:

And it is a law of the Kingdom of this world
That those who first oppose a good work
Seize it and make it their own,
When the corner-stone is laid,
And memorial tablets are erected. (SRA 193)

Man's greed and inhumanity are most conspicuously pictured, through the epitaph of Schroeder the Fisherman. Dallman's exceeding greed is accurately brought out with the help of animal imagery in the following account.

. . . I saw how Christian Dallman's farm,
Of more than three thousand acres,
Swallowed the patch of Felix Schmidt,
As a bass will swallow a minnow.
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. (SRA 188)

And it is an epitaph that quite emphatically speaks against Christian Dallman’s cruelty and inhumanity.

Alexander Dexter Masters, Master’s brother, died in September 1878 at the age of 5. Masters describes his death: “All at once my mother began to sing, and soon Alex’s eyes grew very wide as though he saw something. That was death. I put something of this tragedy in the epitaph Hamlet Micure in Spoon River Anthology (ASR 29). His brother died of diphtheria and the last moments of him are pictured thus by the poet:

And in a chair sat a man in a dark cloak,
With a face like Euripides,
He had come to visit me, or I had gone to visit him
I could not tell. (SRA 230)

The poet writes in his autobiography about his intimacy with Ann, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister of Lewistown, who was also an invalid. In spite of their being close and intimate, they had to part, but their separation was thoroughly friendly and rationalized. He writes, “We were opposed, on religion, on the politics of the town, for she was a puritan.” In the field of literature their tastes were entirely different and irreconcilable and above all, there was strong objection on both sides to their becoming united. And as he says, Masters drew her in “Skeeter’s Kirby” “with all the fidelity and tenderness that I possessed. My imagination employed the aura
of her personality in “Caroline Branson” and “Amelia Garrick” (“Genesis of Spoon River” 44). He begins the epitaph of Caroline Branson,

    With our hearts like drifting suns, had we but walked,
    As often before, the April fields till star-light
    Silkened over with viewless gauze the darkness
    Under the cliff, our trysting place in the wood
    Where the brook turns: Had we but passed from wooing
    Like notes of music that run together, into winning,
    In the inspired improvisation of love: (SRA 227)

Again in Amelia Garrick he opens up his heart.

    You have succeeded, I have failed
    In the eyes of the world.
    You are alive, I am dead.
    Yet I know that I vanquished your spirit;
    And I know that lying here far from you,
    Unheard of among your great friends
    In the brilliant world where you move,
    I am really the unconquerable power over your life
    That robs it of complete triumph. (SRA 140)

Masters was preoccupied with the problem of sex and private morality and in most of his writings he presents man as a continual victim of sexual maladjustment. He was daring enough to use his Spoon River Anthology as a medium to bring sex out into the open. In his autobiography he lists at least sixteen love affairs and the most shocking
episode in the book is the account of his eighteen month old affair with a woman “he identifies as ‘Deirdre,’ actually Tennessee Mitchell, later the second wife of Sherwood Anderson. Masters was a misogynist and he attributes his capacity for misogyny to having been rejected at the age of eleven by a little girl named Zueline” (Hurt 415).

His own personal sex life, made him bold enough to discuss the problem of sex aloud. He brings to the limelight the fact that there are individuals and families in the world for whom the Biblical system of monogamy is an insufficient solution of the very perplexing question of sex. One notices the fact that the problem of sex is posed everywhere but solved nowhere in the Spoon River Anthology.

Masters dealt with the problem of sex so luxuriantly in his writings that Herbert Ellsworth Childs in his “Agrarianism and Sex” comments, “Man as a social being; man as a sexual being. These are the subjects of Masters, as well as of Dreiser and Anderson” (342). To glance at his Domesday Book, a spiritual census of America, the Coroner Merival gives the reader an account of his investigations on the death of Elenor Murray, a typical Masters’ character, a free-spirited young lady whose life is a series of love affairs. Explicitly Masters blends here sex, religion and politics; there is the spiritual dilemma but no solution. Coroner Merival’s affair with Arielle, the insane, is the prominent story in the volume; he marries her and in her insanity he is forced to look after her for the rest of her life—a real sexual problem in a monogamic society but without an answer. In another of his novel, Nuptial Flight, an Illinois story where he
treats the theme of democracy he presents several tragic marriages among
the second and third generations of the pioneer family of Houghton: it is a
long story of three generations of Illinois people. Masters is greatly
eloquent on sex and marriage in his novel *Mirage*, the later part of
*Skeeters Kirby*. Kirby divorces his first wife to marry a worthless widow.
But in *Mirage* unfortunately she disowns him and he falls in love with his
former secretary who meets with an unfortunate end, instigated by a
feigned infidelity on his part. There are a number of intricacies of love and
sex in this novel. There is a moment when the speaker advises Kirby:

Marriage is not for you. Marriage is for the canaille who have
the job of peopling the world, it is not for the elect who have
the job of thinking for the world, and for the canaille into the
bargain. And what is marriage? Marriage is sex. Marriage is
just a way of providing for that. That's it and nothing else. It's
sex but poor sex, and its bills and boredom, and the dream
and the beauty that leads one on fades out. (Childs 341)

Masters, who knew the pulses of his society, tries to typify the
modern spirit in his writings. The post war (World War I) period has been
that of constant public worry over matters of sexual behaviour. In his
*Spoon River Anthology*, Masters gives life to a number of sexual denizens
probably having in mind his society which confronts the dilemma relating
to sex and morality. One comes upon Lucius Atherton, the village rake,
who was ruined by love and sex. The epitaph of Reason Robb speaks
about the infidelity of his wife who wronged him and ruined him with Lucius Atherton who was thus

Caught, divorced and written up
In Editor Whedon’s paper:

And what were my virtues, pride and character?
And where was my triumph in life?
My soul was steel, but what of that?
Her soul was a force electrolytic
That shattered my soul to crystals. (NSR 110)

There is Lucille Lusk’s epitaph which makes a blunt confession of Spoon River morality. She says:

There is nothing makes me sorrir for men
Than their emotions about virginity:
How they prize it, how they rave for its loss,
And revenge its loss.
Lucius Atherton took my virginity.
And wasn’t I as well off for losing as he for winning?
I married another man afterwards,
And lived happily enough.
And I could name you twenty women in this graveyard,
Spinsters of the church, patricians, grand ladies,
Who secretly and without the consent of the country clerk
Gave up their virginity,
The same as they shed their baby teeth,

And not many years afterward. (NSR 63)

There is Margaret Fuller Slack who would have been a great writer like George Eliot but for her eight children born in her marriage to John Slack, she had no time to write. She tells the readers: “Here me, ambitions souls/ Sex is the curse of life” (SRA 70).

Nellie Clark, the tragic heroine, was raped by fifteen year old ‘Charlie when she was eight and then, though, a widower of thirty-five had married her, he deserted her for her village people agreed that she was not really a virgin.

The unpretentious epitaph of Amanda Barker explodes on us a shell of truth, for she says:

Henry got me with child,

Knowing that I could not bring forth life

Without losing my own.

In my youth therefore, I entered the portals of dust

Traveler, 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 (SRA 31)

Mostly the same predicament is seen in Ollie McGee whose husband “by secret cruelty/ Never to be told, robbed me of my youth and my beauty” Hon. Henry Bennett dies of overexertion on the bed of his young wife. He says:
It never came into my mind
Until I was ready to die
That Jenny had loved me to death, with malice of heart.
For I was seventy, she was thirty five.
And I wore myself to a shadow trying to husband
Jenny, rosy Jenny full of the ardor of life. (SRA 88)

Dora Williams, the indirect victim of the Pantier's conflicts, was wooed and seduced by their son Reuben; later when he rejected her, she went into the world, had a series of rich husbands and she became "a woman/insidious, subtle, versed in the world and rich." Spoon River, which is at no time exempt from the door of evil, can have a view of Dora's milliner mother Mrs. Williams, who quite emphatically expresses her views:

If all the children, born here in Spoon River
Had been reared by the Country, somewhere on a farm:
And the fathers and mothers had been given their freedom
To live and enjoy, change mates if they wished,
Do you think that Spoon River
Had been any the worse? (SRA 94)

There is Daisy Frazer, the town whore with no illusions about the Spoon River public; she knows men like Editor Whedon, the Circuit Judge, Rev. Peet and Rev. Sibley for what they are, for their pretensions; on the contrary, she is honest in her whoredom. She speaks of herself that she:
. . . 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! (SRA 42)

Minnie Lee, Daisy Frazer's own counterpart in *New Spoon River*, is

plain spoken. She asks:

Was I different from any of you women

Of Spoon River?

Did not all of you distract attention with one hand,

While taking money from his pocket with the other hand

Not letting the right hand know what the left hand did,

Nor letting the community know it,

Nor even the victim?

Did it make any difference that you performed the trick in homes,

While I did it in hallways?

Did it make any difference that you did it with your husbands,

While I did it with gawking cattle men,

Wandering the streets after having sold their cattle,

Their pockets stuffed with twenty dollar bills?

Was my spiritual attitude any different from yours?

Did I not use benevolent animal magnetism

The same as you? (NSR 179)
The epitaph of Julia Miller unfolds the truth about her illegitimate pregnancy which she tried to legitimize by marrying an old man of sixty-five while she was only thirty. Then she took a fatal dose of morphine and sat down to read,

Across the blackness that came over my eyes
I see the flickering light of these words even now:
“And Jesus said unto him, Verily
I say unto thee, To-day thou shalt
Be with me in paradise.” (SRA 59)

Another unforgettable character is Minerva Jones the village poetess, who, like Tess in Hardy, falls helplessly into the hands of fate. She was raped by the blird "Butch" Weldy and died from the complications of an illegal abortion done on her by Doctor Meyers and she concludes her epitaph thus:

I thirsted so for love:
I hungered so for life! (SRA 44)

The epitaph of Lulu Kay comments in a matter of fact manner that between the new commercialism and new morals there is no longer any stability even in the oldest profession, for

The equal right of men and women,
And their intimate association,
Made Daisy a useless functionary
In the changing life of Spoon River. (NSR 17)

Again the epitaph of Levy Silver, seller of plated silver, gold filled cases etc. tells the Spoon Riverites that they:
could buy and pretend them real,
As part of your game of fooling each other
With fake morality, hollow customs,
And laws compounded of spurious stuff.
The goods I sold matched something in you:
For some of your souls were only plated;
And some of you put yourself together
To imitate virtues clear and precious:
And some of you were mostly brass
Under a film of gold. (NSR 51)

Willard Fluke goes after other women following his wife's ill-health, but at the same time he pretends to be a follower of Christ. But "Then Christ came to me and said, "Go into the church and stand before the congregation/ And confess your sin." He recognized his responsibility for the blindness of his daughter just at the moment when he was rising in the church to confess his sins of begone days. Mrs. Charles Bliss unfolds in her epitaph her matrimonial distress and pleads from her own experience that divorce is a better solution for the children than an ill-arranged marriage. Rev. Wiley and Judge Somers persuaded her and her husband to live together with the result their children too took sides and blamed their parents. "They grieved for the one they sided with/ And all were torn with the guilt of judging/ And tortured in soul because they could not, admire/ Equally him and me." She continues:
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: (SRA 111)

This is virulent social criticism, a tirade against preachers and judges.

Among the most interesting and captivating epitaphs rank Roscoe Purkapile and Mrs. Purkapile the latter a really comic poem about the ironies of marriage. Purkapile says:

I never had a chance to escape
From the day she first saw me.
But then after we were married I thought
She might prove her mortality and let me out,
Or she might divorce me.
But few die, none resign.
Then I ran away and was gone a year on a lark.
But she never complained. She said all would be well,
That I would return. And I did return. (SRA 158)

Mr. Purkapile fabricated a story about his absence for a year and his wife seemed to believe it. It gave him the enlightenment of the sacramental nature of the marriage which is meant to last unto the grave.
To counter his statement Mrs. Furkapile comes out with her own account that when he told her the silly story of his being kidnapped by pirates in Michigan, she simply pretended to believe the wild invention but that she was fully conscious of his immoral traffic. She asserts:

A promise is a promise
And marriage is marriage,

I refused to be drawn into a divorce
By the scheme of a husband who had merely grown tired
Of his marital vow and duty. (SRA 159)

The epitaph of Elsa Wertman, the peasant girl from Germany, bluntly unfolds the truth that she had been raped and impregnated by Thomas Greene. It was positively received by the barren Mrs. Greene and at the birth of the child the Greenes adopted it. And whenever she saw her son Hamilton Greene gathering crowds around him through his eloquence, she really wanted to tell them that he was her son but she was restrained from telling the truth. Interestingly, there follows the epitaph of Hamilton Greene who is Mr. Greene's child by Elsa Wertman, their maid and who quite blindly and innocently boasts of his valiant and honourable blood. He is really proud of having inherited vivacity, fancy and language from his mother and the whole thing is an indictment on Spoon River.

The readers are given a very good illustration of chance guiding the course of life in the epitaph of Lydia Puckett, a woman of the world.
She says that Knowlt Hoheimer had to run away from home to the war because she had quarrelled with him and warned him never to cross her path.

The Anthology pictures a cross section of Spoon River. Here one comes across illicit love personified in Sarah Brown who considers the love for her husband and that of her lover on an equal footing. There is Louise Smith who is ruined by love for she was deserted by her man Herbert who broke their engagement of eight years “when Annabelle returned to the village/ From the seminary.” Russian Sonia is another wretch. She is the daughter of a learned German professor. She was orphaned at the age of fourteen. It seemed she was fated to become a dancer. She was the mistress of dukes and counts and at the age of forty she met a sixty year old Patrick Hummer who “brought me to Spoon River and we lived here/ For twenty years—they thought that we were married.”

In Georgine Sand Miner we see another sympathetic portrait. She is driven out of home by her step mother; she suffers loss of virginity at the hands of a squaw-man; she is forced to lead a sinful life and the society judges her rather rashly without taking into account the extenuating fact that she was a victim of her circumstances.

It is not only women who are cheated in love. There is Tom Merritt who is a victim of his wife’s faithlessness; realising his wife’s treachery he decided to kill her teenage lover, but before he could do anything, he was shot by her lover.
Paul McNeely, sick and bedridden, reminisces in his epitaph about the caressing love and care of his beloved Jane. He still listens to her soothening words: “You are not so ill—you’ll soon be well,” and he is certain that the whole McNeely fortune could not have bought the care of Jane for him and the epitaph speaks about his passionate love for her.

In the *New Spoon River* there is the epitaph of Minette Henderson who makes a frank and blunt account of her being cheated by her husband and his mistress; she was considered a mere guest in her house. So in her despair she “went to her room and wept and wept/ And wept my heart away!” Blinded by the belief that marriage is for children, for nuptial delight and for a home, Myrtle Recker chose a man who already had a wife at home. Their illicit relationship became public and caused a stir in the Humane society. Her children were locked up in the orphanage by order of court, the man was arrested and was forced to live with his wife. Being disillusioned, Recker took poison to show her hatred of the rotten moral code of her community; her philosophy did not save her.

The moral dilemma confronted by the most miserable Judge Singleton also finds a place in the Anthology. He exonerated Amos Winkler from the charge of perjury when he swore that Charles Winkler who was another man’s son was his son. Singleton too was in the very same predicament, for he loved the daughter of his wife, the child of another man—a fact unknown to the Spoon River men. Gerald Loveman speaks about how his daughter disobeyed him and eloped with the man.
whom he hated, ultimately paving his way to the grave. Quoting God’s own favourite word ‘love’ Father Alan Drinkwater asks:

Did I sin by resigning the ministry  
And marrying the woman I loved?  
Did I cause her to commit adultery? (NSR 245)

The epitaph of Rev. Leonard Hash talks about the distortion of the reality in their homilies, himself entering the pulpit after committing adultery. Belle Dollinger exposes the hypocrisies of the society and is an outright condemnation of everybody’s attempt to hoodwink everybody else. Belle Dollinger asks the married ladies:

Is there only one sin, and that one fornication?  

Are you clean of body  
To say nothing of mind?  
And don’t you have little affairs sometimes?  
Didn’t some of you have them before you were married,  
And fool your bridegrooms with the pretence of virginity?  
And you, the unmarried, leading impeccable lives  
To the outward world,  
Do not some of you have affairs, all so secret,  
And yet cheat the man who thinks himself solely favoured?  
Scared to death of exposure as to the man who loves you,  
Yet willing to have a secret fault as to the man who loves you.  
Pure to the outer world,  
Rotten in the inner world of your soul. (NSR 260)
Cowley Rider tells in his epitaph how he was exploited by his wife and her children—who were not at all his children—and how he was dispossessed of his property which he had earned through hard work. He concludes with the remark, “The wages of goodness is Death.” Mary Borden speaks of the fire of man’s love as something that breaks her heart to smithereens. She says: “The heart that loves you will make you weep.” Selma Lanstrum, a waitress at the Fulton, unveils the story of her affair with a conductor on the electric, and tells us how she cheated her husband about the whole incident.

The failure of love, causing secret murders, is well seen in the epitaph of Searcy Foote. Foote had a rich aunt, Persis, but she would not help him to go to college and he wanted to marry the woman he loved, Delia Prickett, but was helpless with his little earning. But there came a day when he found her sleeping in her chair:

I poured the chloroform on a handkerchief
And held it to her nose till she died:

and the coroner
Said she died of heart failure
I married Delia and got the money
A joke on you, Spoon River? (SR4 172)

There is the epitaph of Rev. Freemont Deadman which informs the reader that he is a man of the world and a believer in materialism. He was not
able to transform the Church with sermons and sacraments and so tried
to save the Church by arranging

. . . suppers at the Pekin Tea Gardens.

Allowed the young to dance square dances

To saxophones, served ginger-ale:

It wouldn't do, for it wasn't real:

We couldn't compete with the children of darkness.

I quit at last and began to lecture:

You see I needed money: (NSR 44)

*Spoon River Anthology* presents a few epitaphs expressing nobility
and also a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Most of them are historical
figures like Lucinda Matlock, the most memorable of all the epitaphs. She
had nothing but contempt for the poet's generation while she lived a very
peaceful and contented life. There is Ann Rutledge and her relationship
with Lincoln is referred to in the Anthology. It was while at New Salem
that Lincoln decided to be a candidate for the state assembly of Illinois.
It was here that "Lincoln met Anne Rutledge, for in 1832 he boarded
at the Rutledge tavern. Ann in Masters' Anthology, "beloved in Life of
Abraham Lincoln, wedded to him, not through union, but through
separation" was buried at Concord cemetery, seven miles North West of
Salem (Hansen 244). The epitaph of Ann Rutledge begins thus,

Out of me unworthy and unknown

The vibrations of deathless music;

With malice toward none, with charity for all. (SRA 229)
There is John Cabanis who deserted the prohibitionist party of law and order and pioneered his liberal party mainly owing to two reasons: one, for love of his free living daughter Flossie (SRA 58) and two, because of his conviction that freedom demands that men like him sacrifice themselves and eventually die; he says:

That every man of the millions of men
Who give themselves to Freedom,
And fail while freedom fails,

Dies in the hope of building earth,
Like the coral insect, for the temple
To stand on at the last. (SRA 143)

There is the epitaph of William H. Herndon, the business partner of Abraham Lincoln and also of Masters' father, who refers to a great tragedy.

O Lincoln, actor indeed, playing well your part,
And Booth, who strode in a mimic play within the play,
Often and often I say to you,
As the cawing crows winged their way to the wood
Over my house-top at solemn sunsets,
There by my window,
Alone. (SRA 233–34)

Masters, undoubtedly, is an expert observer of life and he delights in displaying both sides of it, especially when one side is badly mutilated:
one gets typical specimens in Albert Schirding and Jonas Keene. The heart-rending epitaph of Schirding begins:

Jonas Keene thought his lot a hard one
Because his children were all failures
But I know of a fate more trying than that:
It is to be a failure while your children are successes.

He goes on to say that he spared no effort to rise in the estimation of his children.

I ran for country Superintendent of Schools,
Spending my accumulations to win and lost. (*SRA* 118)

"The feeling that I was not worthy of her finished me." But on the other side there is Jonas Keene who asks,

Why did Albert Schirding kill himself
Trying to be county Superintendent of Schools,
Blest as he was with the means of life
And wonderful children, bringing him honor
Ere he was sixty?
If even one of my boys could have run a new-stand,
Or one of my girls could have married a decent man,
I should not have walked in the rain
And jumped into bed with clothes all wet,
Refusing medical aid. (*SRA* 119)

The Spoon River epitaphs give the lie to the conventional idea that the American small town is a haven of innocence and virtue. The town
has its hypocrites, its whores, its blood sucking capitalists, corrupt editors, wayward judges, religious leaders who are a scandal to the public and wily politicians. Above all there is the vigilant prohibitionist Deacon Taylor, a hypocrite, who confesses,

I belonged to the church.
And to the party of prohibition;
And the villagers thought I died of eating water melon
In truth I had cirrhosis of the liver. (*SRA 80*)

Masters makes use of a considerable amount of symbolism in his *Spoon River Anthology*. One comes upon Mrs. Kessler, the village laundress, who, "learning the secrets of all the people/ From their curtains, counterpanes, shirts and skirts," truly recognizes that Spoon River is no Eden, no paradise. She imagines ‘Life’ too is a laundress, for she says:

Handkerchiefs, napery have their secrets –
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. (*SRA 161*)

There is a parallel to Mrs. Kessler in *New Spoon River*: Edith Bell, who, like Mrs. Kessler, pries into the privacies of Spoon River,

Learned all the secrets of Spoon River
While plugging wires and snapping switches;
Who was happy, and who was wretched;
And who was in love, and who was out of it,
And who was to wed, or have a baby;
And who was meeting who in Chicago;
And who was kind and who was cruel;
And who was a friend, and who a foe;
And who was plotting, hiding, lying,
Making money, or losing the game.
And I say the commandment not to judge

Went out with the telephone: (NSR 7)

There is the epitaph of Abel Melveny who buys every kind of machine that is known, then watches it rust away and it ultimately brings him to the realization that he himself is a good machine unused by life. He saw them as a symbol of himself and regrets the waste of his mechanical efficiency in what is called life.

The false poetic quest of his early years Masters verbalizes in Petit, the Poet. Of course, he had rhythms in his head, little rustling rhythms that tick, tick, tick, like the seeds in a dry pod. These rhythms inspire him to write ballads about the vanished snows of yesteryears and the fading rose of love. He realizes the fact that there is “Life all around me here in the village.”

In his epitaph of The Village Atheist who after a study of the Upanishads and the poetry of Jesus, experiences a sense of revelation:

And they lighted a torch of hope and intuition
And desire which the shadow,
Leading me swiftly through the caverns of darkness.
Could not extinguish.
Listen to me, ye who live in the senses.
And think through the senses only:
Immortality is not a gift.
Immortality is an achievement;
And only those who strive mightily
Shall possess it. *(SRA 259)*

Really the village Atheist hints at the poet’s own strong inclination toward mysticism and his disillusionment. The epilogue of the *Spoon River Anthology* itself ends on a note of pantheistic assertion of the unending reign of infinite life and infinite law.

A few of the *Spoon River* poems are on the theme of love. Masters’ characters look at love from different angles and often expatiates on what it is like to be in love, what the absence of love means and how ennobling love can be when hearts open themselves up to one another. There is the epitaph of George Gray on whose marble we read:

A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor:
In truth it pictures not my destination
But my life.
For love was offered me and I shrank from its disillusionment:

To put meaning in one’s life may end in madness
But life without meaning is the torture
Of restlessness and vague desire

It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid. (SR4 87)

There are a number of other characters like Lucius Atherton, Louise Smith, Nancy Knapp and Mabel Osborne who experience great loneliness and sorrow in the absence of love. Mabel Osborne craves for the love of others. She realizes that love is for human beings what water is for plants.

The epitaph of Oaks Tutt is a fine example of the vanity of human knowledge. Oaks Tutt the idealist whose mother was for woman's rights, in order to reform the world, travelled through distant places and finally when he is back to Spoon River, he is really shocked and confused by the cynicism of the poet Jonathan Swift Somers who not only ridiculed his pretensions to be a prophet but also challenged him to debate,

The subject, (I taking the negative);

"Pontius Pilate, the greatest philosopher of the World"

And he won the debate by saying at last,

"Before you reform the world, Mr. Tutt,

Please answer the question of Pontius Pilate:

What is Truth? (SR4 180)

The human society consists of men belonging to different walks of life. Masters, in his Anthology, does not forget to include soldiers too. During his Chicago years Masters came across a young man who was the son of a rich woman living in Michigan Avenue. His mother, however, did not care for him. There was real friendship between Masters and this man and then this friend went to Philippines as a soldier. On his return he
reached Chicago, called on Masters and during their talk he told him of
the pathetic life of a soldier and Masters used this material for the epitaph
Harry Wilmans in *Spoon River Anthology*. This epitaph tells us about the
hardships and sufferings he had to bear simply because he happened to
be a soldier. Receiving inspiration from the words of Henry Phipps, the
Sunday school superintendent, that “The honor of the flag must be
upheld,” he goes to war even against the will of his father and at last,

Following the flag,
Till I fell with a scream, shot through the guts.
Now there’s a flag over me in Spoon river:
A flag: A flag: (*SRA* 221)

But there is the epitaph of Godwin James who compares himself
with Harry Wilmans. While Harry went to Manila, Godwin enlisted himself
in the army of divine youths.

According to Waller Havighurst, Masters lived in his two prairie
towns, Petersburg and Lewistown at the right time. He says:

There were still some early settlers, old Bill Piersol who had
traded with the Indians, and the Revolutionary soldier John
Wasson, who came by oxcart to Spoon River and cut the
buffalo grass on the prairie and helped build the old Concord
church on the ridge. In his boyhood Masters saw them sitting
under the trees in the town square. (*Heartland*, 308)

And the same John Wasson appears in the Anthology. He speaks about
the most tearful farewell from his wife Rebecca and their four little
children while he went off to war and then how on his return he finds two children dead; he moves to Spoon River with his wife only to embrace poverty, disgrace and death.

In the *New Spoon River*, in poems like Unknown Soldiers Masters expresses his abhorrence of war and his suspicion of jingoistic leadership.

Stranger: Tell the people of Spoon River two things;  
First that we lie here, obeying their words;  
And next that had we known what was back of their words  
We should not be lying here. (*NSR* 27)

One comes across epitaphs which complain about Spoon River ignoring men who hated compromises and lived up to their ideals. The severe indifference shown by the Spoon River to their struggles is well reflected in Harry Carey Goodhue. Harry has real contempt for the "dullards of Spoon River" who denied him recognition and support during his fights for public good. He asks, "Do you remember when I fought/ The bank and the court house ring/ For pocketing the interest on public funds?"

Some of the characters in *Spoon River Anthology* are disguised presentations of actual persons in Petersburg or Lewistown. It might be that they were still living while Masters put them among the denizens of the 'underground.' According to a critic the "Ragged, mud-stained ‘Dow Kritt’ was still walking around Lewistown with his shovel on his shoulder when he spoke from the grave: ‘... I did not need to die to learn about roots/ I, who dug all the ditches about Spoon River’ " (Quoted in Heartland 309).
Again there is Doctor Strode, who was still making his village
downs, satchel in hand, and returning to his office with its collection of
stuffed birds, gophers and snake skins when Masters put him in the
cemetery as “William Jones” (Heartland 309). He speaks about himself,

I, lover of Nature, beloved for my love of her,

Held such converse afar with the great:

Who knew her better than I?

Oh, there is neither lesser nor greater,

Save as we make her greater and win from her keener delight.

With shells from the river cover me, cover me.

I lived in wonder, worshipping earth and heaven.

I have passed on the march eternal of endless life. (SRA 252)

And the same is the case with simple-minded Charley Metcaff, who was
“still living in the livery stable, sleeping in a stall, talking to the horses,
when Masters gave his memories to “Willie Metcaff” (Heartland, 309).
The village idiot Willie Metcaff quite naively speaks about the intimacy
with the different species of animals. He talks not only to animals but even
to toads and snakes.

Hannah Armstrong, in her epitaph in the Anthology, makes a
reference to her meeting with Abraham Lincoln and to her intimacy with
him. She went to Washington to request Abe (Abraham Lincoln) to
discharge her boy from the army. She tells the guard:

Please say it's old Aunt Hannah Armstrong

From Illinois, come to see him about her sick boy
In the army.
Well, just in a moment they let me in:
And when he saw me he broke in a laugh.
And dropped his business as president,
And wrote in his own hand ‘Doug’s discharge,
Talking the while of the early days,
And telling stories. (SRA 238)

There is Fiddler Jones whose music seizes the vibrations of the earth and thus brings joy and peace. Masters, as he writes this epitaph, might be recalling Fiddler Jones, a brother to Hannah, who was “reputed to be the best of all the Menard county fiddlers” (“Genesis of Spoon River” 41).

The earth keeps some vibration going
There in your heart. and that is you.
And if the people find you can fiddle,
Why, fiddle you must, for all your life. (SRA 83)

The life in the countryside and on the farm also figures in the poems of the Spoon River Anthology. In this connection, Dr. Narayana Chandran has observed:

Masters cautiously underplays the alarming implications of this social transformation (urbanization) while composing the epitaphs lest the Spoon River dead sound like his populist mouthpieces. This does not preclude a couple of remarkably pointed references to the menacing neighbourhood of
Chicago, the vanishing countryside, and the uneasy lives of Spoon River farmers. (444)

The epitaph of Rutherford McDowell the photographer is quite typical of the generation to which he belongs. He senses the lost unity in the photographs of the old pioneers and studies their faces to understand their secrets. And he contrasts the faces of the pioneers in the old ambrotypes with those of the present:

Truly did my camera record their faces, too,
With so much of the old strength gone,
And the old faith gone,
And the old mastery of life gone,
And the old courage gone,
Which labors and loves and suffers and sings
Under the sun: (SRA 237)

He laments the vanishing of the dream that men like McDowell cherished.

In the New Spoon River there is the epitaph of Howard Lamson who is averse to looking back at the past, which is a profitless act through which one is robbed of one's peace. He expresses his philosophy through a series of pragmatic images which reveal a determination to find advantage in adversity. It was read at Masters' funeral in Petersburg. Lamson speaks:

Ice cannot shiver in the cold,
Nor stones shrink from the lapping flame
Eyes that are sealed, no more have tears;
Ears that are stopped hear nothing ill;
Hearts turned to silt are strange to pain:
Tongues that are dumb report no loss.

There are epitaphs which depict for the reader the colour and feel of the American countryside of his day. Hare Drummer asks:

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?

He also expresses nostalgia for the past. The epitaphs of Dillard Sissman, Charles Webster and others give a lyric description of the American landscape. Alfonso Churchill, a professor of astronomy at Knox college, is laughed at as “Prof. Moon”: he however possesses an astronomer’s vision of the stars and considers stars as images of unity.

through the stars

I preached the greatness of man
Who is none the less a part of the scheme of things
For the distance of Spica or the Spiral Nebulae;
Nor any the less a part of the question
Of what the drama means. (SRA 262)

The same philosophical breadth can be seen in the observations of widow Mcfarlane who is only a weaver by profession. She sees life as a loom which weaves the patterns of life. The last thing one weaves then is one’s own shroud.
Yee Bow in his epitaph speaks about the punishment meted out to him by Harry Wiley, the minister's son, for being a non-believer. Oscar Hummel is more sinned against than sinning. He is the town drunkard. Irritated by his drunken ravings A.D. Blood, the unrelenting prohibitionist, shoots him point blank. Mr. Blood, who is now the occupant of an unquiet grave asks:

Why do you let the milliner's daughter Dora,
And the worthless son of Benjamin Pantier
Nightly make my grave their unholy pillow. (SR4 91)

Masters abhorred war and every misery attached to it. He learned from his grandfather that every war was wicked and unnecessary, an insight that came to him as a result of the rivalry between the South and the North. And World War I was, to Masters, essentially an imperialist war; for "Money wants war, and war must have for friend money." He was of the firm conviction that any war is against the people and as such to be detested. The anti-war theme is projected prominently in some of his epitaphs: there is KnowIt Hoheimer who laments his untimely, meaningless death.

When I felt the bullet enter my heart
I wished I had staid at home and gone to jail
For stealing the hogs of Curl Trenary,
Instead of running away and joining the army. (SR4 49)

And Jacob Goodpasture decries the war-mongers who are responsible for the loss of his son in war:
and the war came

I cried out in bitterness of soul:

"O glorious republic now no more":

When they buried my soldier son

To the call of trumpets and the sound of drums

My heart broke beneath the weight

Of eighty years, and I cried:

Oh, son who died in a cause unjust:

In the strife of freedom slain:

And I crept hereunder the grass. (SRA 68)

The epitaph of Dick Sapper tells the readers that when the war came on, he opposed it only to be put in prison where he was to die for his ideals. And Zorbaugh Zwenen in nineteen eighteen "stood with the multitude, viewing the procession of the soldiers" and lifted "his hat to the flag in procession," but soon a German sympathizer rushed over to him and killed him outright. The epitaph Diamandi Viktoria bluntly admits that modern man is materialistic to the core and that it was for money that Viktoria and her people came to the United States:

To live in a land of liberty

But I grew up in the U.S.A.

In metropolized Spoon River.

And I saw that the thing is money, money

And the gift of the gab for liberty. (NSR 39)
Sarah Dewitt is a vehement tirade against materialism. Sarah mistook her man to be a man of God, a man of honour, but it dawns upon her that he is a thief, a traitor and a perjurer, conspicuously so because of his pride and his greed for wealth.

The change that comes upon Spoon River consequent upon industrial development is indeed phenomenal. It changes the small town beyond recognition, values change, relationships are redefined: urbanization brings on the destruction of the old simplicity of life. One who comes back to Spoon River after having been away for many years will find it difficult to believe one's eyes. In "Martin Venable" we find this situation.

Did you ever destroy a bird's nest,
So there was not a vestige of it left in the tree?
Then have you watched the bird when it returned,
And flew about and about the place where the nest had been,
Wondering what had become of the nest,
Or wondering if this be the tree of the nest?
It was even so with me and Spoon River.
I returned to find the old town
And found it not;
And drifted about wondering
If Spoon River had ever been my home,
And if so, what had become of Spoon River (NSR 92)

Is Spoon River a typical American small town of the early decades of the 20th century? The answer to this question, whether it is 'yes' or 'no'
is ultimately a question of opinion. The representation of Spoon River cannot be far from the truth and yet it is possible that certain features of the town have been exaggerated. When the writer’s aim is condemnation, he tends to make his subject worse than it really is. Steinbeck’s representation of the United States in his *Grapes of Wrath*, particularly the depiction of the subhuman living conditions in the ‘Okie’ camps, is an example of how the claims of art might tempt the author to distort or exaggerate a feature. But that is not to suggest that Masters has been misrepresenting the American small town in his *Spoon River Anthology*. The point to remember is that there is some playing up of the negative aspects of American life in the *Spoon River Anthology*.

In Robinson it is often the kinky nature of the character that determines his destiny. If Flammonde does not achieve anything in material terms, the reason has to be sought in the “small satanic sort of kink” that the creator has infused into his character. It is true that the hostile ethos of Tilbury stands in the way of some of the characters coming into their own but, by and large, here the society is much less responsible for ‘failures’ than is the case in Masters. There is something in Spoon River that encourages the iniquitous and causes the righteous to droop or drop out. All path to high places—here is through a winding stair. It is so corrupt that one despairs of ever setting things right. The judiciary, the press and the church are equally corrupt. The circuit judge who exempts Thomas Rhodes from paying taxes on the Spoon River water works is a paradigm of all corrupt judges. Judges and editors alike
think nothing of the wrong man being punished. As we have seen, Editor Whedon plays a significant role in sending George Reese to prison though he knows very well that the real culprits are Thomas Rhodes and his wastrel son. Olaf Rindbaum of *New Spoon River* is another corrupt editor who fights crimes while engages in crimes himself. Michael Gallagher is yet another corrupt editor. The church too is a party to the corrupt practices in that it connives at what the rascals do. Rev. Abner Peet and Rev. Lemuel Wiley remain silent though they are convinced of the crimes of Rhodes.

Politics is dirty everywhere, it is particularly so in Spoon River. The nexus between the politicians and the criminals is all too obvious. The protection extended to the criminals emboldens them and they go about their act of depredation with impunity.

*Spoon River* like Tilbury is materialistic to the core. The dollar is the reigning monarch in either place. Political and other issues generate a kind of tension which manifests itself often in undesirable ways. The prohibitionist campaign, which was hijacked by the hypocritical leaders led to conflicts between its supporters and opponents.

To answer the question, how so many lives came to be blighted, one has to take into account the character of the person concerned as well as the social environment. Miniver Cheevy’s plea that he would not have been the failure he has become if he had not been born into the wrong age cannot hold water because such people would necessarily be failures irrespective of the age they are born into. But in the case of Masters
characters, as we have already suggested at least half the blighted lives would have spared themselves the tragedy had it not been for the Spoon River milieu.

As we go through the gallery of blighted lives in Spoon River, we are struck by the number as well as the variety of these portraits. The lure of money lays quite a few characters low. Some fall victims of exploitation and greedy capitalists like Thomas Rhodes suck them dry. The hostile environs cause some characters to be driven in upon themselves. In some cases over sensitivity is the cause of their undoing. Marital discords drive some to seek solace in the peacefulness of death. Some end up as drunkards. Some quit Spoon River when it grows too hot for them. Some come to Spoon River to live down their past. In short, it is a strange world that we see in Spoon River. And according to James Hurt, “The shadows are gathering fast in the last pages of the Spoon River Anthology, and Webster Ford’s last words are a race against the spreading numbness of death, that goal toward which the entire collection has been increasingly directed, a death which is the only real release from the painful conflicts of life” (429).

Thus the Spoon River Anthology is an unveiling of the human panorama, which is comic, tragic and grotesque.

The life of Spoon River and its men and women, its boys and girls possesses a microcosmic completeness. One hears the self spoken life histories of village belles and grocer’s clerks, farmers and farmer’s wives, travelling salesmen, lawyers,
blacksmiths, schoolgirls, politicians, tramps, doctors, bank presidents, druggists, the village poetess, the village dandy, deacons, school teachers, saloon keepers, preachers, adulteresses and Sunday school superintendents, hired girls and circuit judges, newspaper editors, whores, bullies, grafters, crooks, murderers, gamblers, wantons, drunkards, ne'er-do-wells, dreamers, idealists, wastrels, and paupers and prudes. Here are tragedies, sordid or touching, horrible or grim: pitiful romances, scandals, little histories of violence and tenderness, of patient waiting and rebellious enduring; grotesque comedies, preposterous melodramas, a humanity that is universal. (Poetry Criticism, 271-2)

One can truly state that *Spoon River Anthology* is a highly personal and subjective vision of small town life as viewed by the poet and to quote Masters himself, "For myself, now that I am writing about the book, I may say that if I had any conscious purpose in writing it and the New *Spoon River* it was to awaken that American vision, that love of liberty which the best men of the Republic strove to win for us, and to bequeath it to time" ("Genesis of *Spoon River*" 55).