

Discussion Questions, *Spoon River Anthology*, Edgar Lee Masters

1. What is your first response of reading "Spoon River Anthology?" Did you like it? Is the introduction poem ("sleeping on a hill") helpful in setting the mood for this somber book? What words can you use to describe this book's theme, mood, style?
2. "Spoon River Anthology" was Masters' most remembered work. It sold a lot of copies in its time, but some libraries banned it for its negative portrayals of small-town life. Why do you think it was banned? Does Masters demythologize the idyllic small-town image? Would you describe it as unsentimental, painfully honest, realistic, exaggerated, critical? Why do you think it sparked a controversy? What makes *Spoon River Anthology* so appealing to the readers who appreciate this book?
3. "Spoon River" is spoken by voices of the dead, and fate and tragedy are central to the book's message. How many causes of demise and death can you name from this book and its characters? How does this shape your opinions of these characters? Would you say their reputations are tarnished? Are you sympathetic or repulsed by these characters?
4. How many characters can you name in which fates and lives are interconnected? Would you compare *Spoon River Anthology* to a city or town of today in its depictions of tragic problems: crime, abortion, bullying, standards, alcoholism, suicide, adultery?
5. Although Masters grew up in small towns in Illinois (Lewistown and Petersburg), Masters lived and worked in Chicago as a lawyer. In Chicago, he remembered his walks through the town cemeteries and the names he saw there as he was writing this book. One of those graves was Ann Rutledge's grave in Petersburg. Ann was a very real person and her poem is very patriotic. Would you consider this irony compared to the rest of the book? Is this book "gossip" or "unpatriotic" for its frank, truthful, sometimes cruel descriptions?
6. How does the epilogue in voices shape your response to this book? Is it unethical to know too much about these people and their suffering? Should we as an audience, aware of tragic news reports, feel obligated to be aware of the tragedies of the world? Does this tragic awareness change us, make us wiser, make us want to get involved to change society for the better?