

# An American Tragedy

VACHEL LINDSAY: *A Poet in America.*  
By Edgar Lee Masters. New York:  
Charles Scribner's Sons. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by HAZELTON SPENCER

MANY books will be written about Lindsay. There is his life simply as a story of success and failure, the boy off Main Street who heard the ranchers' children and the Oxford dons chant back his refrains, and killed himself when poverty and misunderstanding broke him. The mere chronicle of his physical activity, the names of the towns he slept in, would like Napoleon's fill a volume. Then there is his life as prophet of the non-existent America likewise proclaimed by Emerson and Whitman, which Lindsay announced no less boldly, though he had experienced these States more completely than either. There is also his inner life, for the reconstruction of which voluminous materials are available. There is his verse—the exquisite lyricism of a poet of the machine age who, says Mr. Lewisohn, “has kept the heart of a little child and has written the purest American poetry since Poe.” There is also the poetry that is not naive, not purely lyric, but high-explosively serviceable for every agrarian revolt, labor-union advance, socialist or internationalist program, New-Freedom crusade, or New-Deal presidential campaign. There are the dance poetry and the children's poetry. There is the poetic source-book for the historian who will seek to understand the Mississippi Valley. There is, finally, the earliest and most influential figure in the renaissance which gave our national literature the second of its great poetic epochs.

Not yet have we any right to expect that in one book account can be taken of all these factors. It is high praise to say that in this first biography an admirable beginning has been made. The book moves over a wide range and is full of acute generalizations that go far beyond the immediate subject. Nor is it likely ever to be wholly superseded. For Mr. Masters is himself a man of genius. He has written a sensitive and understanding, almost tender, book; but not one of adulation nor of sentimentality. He is aware of how often Lindsay failed to obtain requisite altitude and crashed a few lines after his take-off. But he also knows that every great artist is entitled to be judged, and in the long run is in fact inevitably judged, by his best work. This book will have to be read not only by admirers of Lindsay and of Masters but by everyone who cares anything at all about the future of American culture and the plight of the American artist, and by everyone who is interested in the most fascinating and baffling of literary, perhaps of all human, problems, the mys-

terious processes by which the mind of a genius is formed. Lindsay's diaries are in part a sort of prose *Prelude*. Mr. Masters draws on them for much of his book.

What of Lindsay's mind, then, and what was its tragedy? Mr. Lewisohn calls him “an English lyrist of almost Elizabethan sweetness and magic and country charm,” and then accuses him of not using his mind at all. Recent critics have taken a similar view of a greater Elizabethan lyrist than Lindsay, forgetting that the applicability of the argument from design is not limited to God. The existence of the *First Folio* refutes the charge that Shakespeare was a gifted chuckle-head. Mr. Masters lists the twenty-eight “best” poems of Lindsay, says they “constitute the most considerable body of imaginative lyricism that any American has produced,” compares them with Poe's best twelve with insistence on the reader's recognizing “how greater Lindsay's intellectual and emotional scope was,” and then adverts to his “inherent incapacity to reason and to think,” asserting that “he was never to know the truth about anything, for the reason that he scarcely knew the facts about anything.” “What he did see,” and never has the poetic insight been more justly described, “was that the outer appearance of things, the garb of nature, the language and the inarticulateness of human beings, and the inexplicable shadows and filaments which clothe the life of man, have something back of them of which these are in a way the hieroglyphics. . . . These he tried to penetrate; these he sang; these he sought

to fathom with unwearied patience. . . . He took the journey of the soul by the inner ascent.”

In the light of what he proclaimed and what he achieved, wherein lay Lindsay's tragedy? Mr. Masters may be right in holding that its roots were intellectual; it seems otherwise to me. Disparity between the poet's vision and the real America does not bring tragedy, for if all is well the prophet's occupation is gone. Perhaps Lindsay's tragedy was due like Napoleon's to flagging vitality before fifty. There were several contributory causes. As Mr. Masters notes, one was “that weakness which resulted from the magnitude of the dream, leaving no strength to execute the plan.” Another factor was the relative indifference of the East, and the uncertainty of the West about a western artist till he had been accepted in New York.

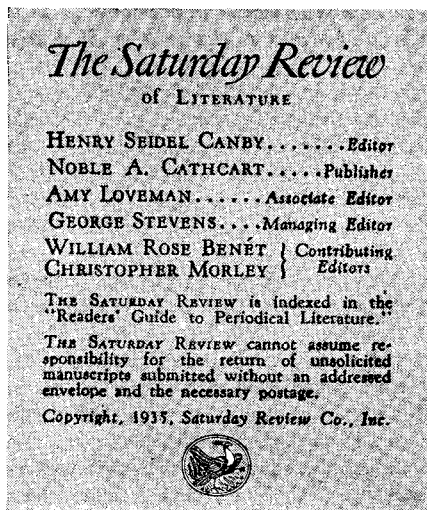
But a third and probably the major factor in the collapse was poverty—not genteel indigence but destitution always imminent and sometimes actual. It drove him onto the lecture platform, which in turn by its absorption of his energy chained him from composition. “I have,” he told me shortly before his death, “to go up and down repeating the thoughts I was thinking in 1912 instead of writing the thoughts I am thinking in 1931.”

That its greatest poet since Whitman should go but seldom recognized as such is a disgrace to American criticism. That, on the other hand, his dependents sometimes lacked bread to eat is a national shame that no amount of posthumous honor, like the dedication of the Springfield bridge this summer, can ever atone for.

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The house at Springfield, Ill., where Lindsay was born and where he died.



## Give Us Peace in Our Time

VERY few issues are what they seem to be on the surface. For example, recovery versus reform, a headline which has exercised editorial machine guns and books of larger calibre ever since Roosevelt came into office. We all know that recovery is indispensable for a still distressed country; we all should know that with the ratio between production and distribution radically altered and other less tangible ratios violently upset, reform is equally indispensable, if by reform one means an adaptation of the technique of an industrial civilization to new facts. The issue as to whether reform or recovery should have precedence is a confused issue, because no one knows accurately how much one is involved in the other; perhaps it is a false issue, since it is quite probable that recovery is impossible without reform, and that reform which retards recovery will be automatically eliminated by its failure, without recourse to argument. The true issue is whether essential, indisputable reshaping of our technique of management will be allowed to continue, or whether it will be stifled by external circumstances. It is the issue of war or peace; it is the issue of orderly evolution or disorderly crisis and calamity.

Many historians, James Truslow Adams among them, have noted that the evolution of American institutions, under the pressure of a changed environment, has been interrupted in the past by cataclysms, not always of our own making. The Civil War was one such cataclysm, which left as heritage the disorderly sixties and seventies, with their political and economic regressions. It was the World War which interrupted the confused, but well-meaning, and sometimes successful, attempts at adaptation in the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. And now we are again on the high road of a political and economic evolution which was well under way, as Mr. Lippmann has recently said, in the time of Hoover. Whether the man-made measures called forth by the need of evo-

lution are happy or unhappy, hastily improvised or sagacious, is not the question in this argument. The issue is the need itself, and whether the times will allow it to be satisfied, even if the men and measures prove to be right. A foreign war, a domestic calamity, a division of the country, as in the fifties, into a house divided against itself, will stop readaptation because such a crisis calls for resistance not construction. There can be no advance in architecture while builders are on strike.

Reform, as the word is used here, means practical effort, an enlightened use of the method of trial and error, action not speculation; but behind such reform lies, and must lie, ideas. Use and wont keep men working in the old tracks. Ideas—from somewhere—are indispensable for change. And ideas are born, not in periods of agitation and violence, but before them, or after them. The generation that vividly remembers the war will remember also how fertile in ideas those years seemed. But how many of them were bad ideas, and so proved since! How many of them were merely new ideas, new to us, but long since hatched from study and reflection in a quieter age!

The bored man craves turbulence, but never the mind concerned with the way of life, never the thinker, and never the reformer, unless he is a Meddlesome Maggie, or an exhibitionist, as, one supposes, three out of every four little reformers are from birth. The genuine article wants peace in his time as badly as do the Russians for their cropful experiment. Peace—so that his own war upon decayed institutions can go on.

And the issue is broader than politics or economics, for it involves those organs of change by which culture advances toward civilization, when it advances at all, which, be it remembered, is not often. Peace in our time, or at all events a peace which will allow this country to play off its championship series between the lefts and the rights, collectivists and the individualists, the big man and the little men, the government and business, is as indispensable for the creative artist, the literary interpreter, and for all masters in the game of the intellect, as for the A.A.A. or Republican reorganization. There are many who believe that the virile American literature—poetry and satire particularly—of the twenties has already been sadly warped from its best direction by the social obsessions of the thirties. Artists are but men, scholars are but men; if the house begins to burn they will drop everything and fight the flames, or feed the flames, or gape at them. A generation of writers was killed or mentally maimed on the Western front, so that no one can now say what French and English literature was on its way to become in the next decades. There is no time to reflect in a train off the tracks.

Another kind of recovery, the restoring of that love of good reading which many feel has increasingly failed since

the war, is also highly important. But here again, such a recovery is dependent upon an increasing production of good books, which is in turn dependent upon a better adaptation of the art of literature to the changes in our way of life. And this is impossible in an atmosphere of danger, violence, and calamity. For we can spiral downward, the distractions of conflict stifling fertile reflections which might have given birth to ideas in whose absence anarchy moves on toward chaos. Whether it is the creation of literature or the replanning of the state, or just the chores on Mr. Casey's farm, no work can be done in a blizzard.

## Books and War

In a review on page 10 in this issue Mr. Frank Simmonds deplores the unwillingness of our legislators to face the facts by reading the books that contain them. The full documentation of just how our slide into the war of 1914-1918 was accelerated by interested friends and the inevitable results of decisions not inevitable, is recorded in Walter Millis's "The Road to War." We wonder how many Congressional Committeemen responsible for our neutrality policy, and how many Senators ultimately responsible for our foreign relations, have read that book. The facts are there—nor is it impossible, or even difficult, to draw conclusions from these facts as to some of the "musts" of the troublous present. Indeed, one of the most exasperating aspects of the world situation of 1935 is how much that is being done, and left undone, by governments is directly counter to the studies of cause and effect in like circumstances which have piled up since 1914 in whole libraries of books. The dosage of "war books" seemed only yesterday too heavy. But the disease would not yield to one purging.

## Ten Years Ago

In the issue for September 26th, 1925, The Saturday Review recommended "The Professor's House" by Willa Cather. Henry Seidel Canby wrote in his review: "This is the age of experiment in the American novel. . . . Miss Cather, I suspect, is wearying of broad pioneer movements and sharp contrasts between flaming emotion and commonplace environment. She is going deeper. . . ."

## Today

Willa Cather's latest novel, "Lucy Gayheart," was published in August. Howard Mumford Jones, who reviewed the book a month ago, pointed out that "the American novel is in danger of becoming a prose pamphlet" and that Willa Cather is one of the few who still hold "to the simple and perdurable principle that the primary business of the novelist is to create a work of art."