

Sonnet 18: ["Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones"]

On the Late Massacre in Piedmont

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones  
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,  
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old,  
When all our fathers worshipp'd stocks and stones;  
Forget not: in thy book record their groans  
Who were thy sheep and in their ancient fold  
Slain by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd  
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans  
The vales redoubl'd to the hills, and they  
To Heav'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow  
O'er all th' Italian fields where still doth sway  
The triple tyrant; that from these may grow  
A hundred-fold, who having learnt thy way  
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

FROM BRITISH WIKI | Analysis of "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont"

*Analysis and Notes by John Young*

"On The Late Massacre in Piedmont" is a sonnet with the theme of good, pious people trapped in a dark world. It is about the struggle of good and evil, freedom and oppression. Piedmont is a region of Italy, which especially at that time was a strongly Catholic country. Milton calls on God to avenge the martyrs, the subjects of the sonnet who are brutally murdered in Piedmont by its people. The victims are martyrs because they have been killed for their Protestant faith. This massacre is a real event that Milton is commenting on. Milton invokes images of nature to set a grim tone in the beginning of the poem, but by the end the blood of the martyrs transforms the nature around it and makes it fertile. It is an interesting transition, and Milton is not speaking of literally making the ground more fertile for plants to grow, but people.

1. The Alpines are a rigid mountain range. Their peaks are often covered in snow. The bones scattered on the cold mountains creates a grim tone, a dark world.
2. Pious people were not spared. Milton sees this event as made even more tragic because the victims were religious. The use of "pure" identifies the victims as people of light, undeserving of their fate.
3. The attack was barbaric. Innocent, pure people have become bones scattered on stone. Women and children are not spared. Milton's style here mimics the rolling of the people. This thought ends with a period, a crafted absolute stopping point, the way the mother and infant have died, their own lives terminated.
4. A "vale" is a valley. The valleys "redouble" or grow into hills. In this image of nature, the low point of the land has become the high point, and the people whose lives have ended so tragically have been raised to heaven..
5. The ground has been made fertile by the blood of the martyrs. What grows from this event and bloodied ground will not be plants. Milton believes news of this tragedy will bring new believers to the Lord. It is the idea that when one believer dies for his or her faith, a hundred more will take his or her place. Their deaths have transformed the image of Piedmont from a bone-covered rigid and cold mountain range to a fertile field.
6. The Babylonian Exile is an infamous event of Jewish and Judeo-Christian history. The Babylonians invaded and destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem, but the religion endures. This allusion to the Babylonians' taking advantage of the temple and the land is reflected here in the destruction of the bodies of the martyrs. Most Christian faiths hold the belief that a person's body is a temple, sacred and to be well-kept. Additionally, many Protestants of Milton's time identified the Catholic Church with Babylon and the Whore of Babylon in the book of Revelation.

MARILYN NELSON (born 1946, Cleveland, Ohio, USA)

From *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

Rosemary for remembrance, Shakespeare wrote:  
a speech for poor Ophelia, who went mad  
when her love killed her father. Flowers had  
a language then. Rose petals in a note  
said, *I love you*; a sheaf of bearded oat  
said, *Your music enchants me*. Glodenrod:  
*Be careful*. Weeping-willow twigs: *I'm sad*.  
What should my wreath for Emmett Till denote?  
First, heliotrope, for *Justice shall be done*.  
Daisies and white lilacs, for *Innocence*.  
Then mandrake: *Horror* (wearing a white hood,  
or bare-faced, laughing). For grief, more than one,  
for one is not enough: rue, yew, cypress.  
Forget-me-nots. Though if I could, I would.

#### NOTES:

This is the first sonnet in *A Wreath for Emmett Till* by Marilyn Nelson, a sequence of fifteen interlinked sonnets, with each sonnet in a Petrarchan rhyme scheme: the entire series constitutes an heroic crown. In a crown of sonnets, the last line of each sonnet becomes the first line (with some possible modifications of the wording) of the next sonnet in the sequence. A crown of sonnets consists of fourteen sonnets; for an heroic crown, the poet adds a fifteenth sonnet that is composed of the first lines of the preceding fourteen sonnets (in the same order in which they occur). Nelson does not assign numbers or give titles to the individual sonnets comprising her heroic crown. The sequence, with illustrations by Philippe Lardy, was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, in 2005.

Nelson dedicates the book, "For innocence murdered. For innocence alive." In her Preface, "How I Came to Write This Poem," she tells her audience that she chose to write these sonnets in the Petrarchan rhyme scheme and describes why she decided to write an heroic crown, saying this about the choice she made:

When I decided to use this form, I had seen only one heroic crown of sonnets, a fantastically beautiful poem by the Danish poet Inger Christensen. Instead of thinking too much about the painful subject of lynching, I thought about what Inger Christensen's strategy must have been. The strict form became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter, and a way to allow the Muse to determine what the poem would say. I wrote this poem with my heart in my mouth and tears in my eyes, breathless with anticipation and surprise.

EMMETT LOUIS TILL was born in 1941 in Chicago, Illinois; he died in 1955, Money, Mississippi (cause of death: lynching). In August 1955, during his summer vacation, Emmett Till visited relatives in the Mississippi Delta who lived near the town of Money; he was accused of whistling or flirting with Carolyn Bryant, the young married daughter of a grocery store owner (Bryant later retracted part of her statement). Three days after the grocery store "incident," Bryant's husband and his half-brother abducted Emmett Till from his great-uncle's house, then brutally beat and murdered him. His killers were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury (women were not allowed to serve as jurors at the trial). Till's mother, Mamie Carthan Till-Mobley, insisted on a public funeral for her son, and that there be an open casket. The funeral was covered widely by the American press. The horror of Emmett Till's death, its effect on the American public and the civil rights movement, has been written about extensively over the years. See the Wikipedia entry: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett\\_Till](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett_Till)