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Matthew 2:16–18—Slaughter of the Innocents in English Literature

Matthew's Gospel reports a horrible aftermath to the visit the magi paid to Jesus. Having heard from those Eastern visitors that a child had been born who was destined to be "king of the Jews" (2:2), Herod decided to take matters into his own hands:

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

(Matt. 2:16–18)

The event is typically referred to as "the slaughter of the innocents" and it is often likened to the killing of Hebrew babies by the pharaoh of Egypt in the days preceding the exodus (Exod. 1:15–22). The parallel is especially pronounced since Joseph must rescue Jesus by taking him to Egypt: in the past, Jews fled from Egypt to the

Promised Land to escape a baby-killing monarch; now, that situation is reversed.

Numerous writers have offered allusions to the biblical story.¹

Henry V by William Shakespeare (1600): King Henry demands the surrender of Harfleur and assures its defenders that the horrors of war will come upon them if they do not relent:

Your naked infants spitted upon pikes
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.

(Act 3, Scene 3, lines 38–41)

Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain (1876): When the title character of this novel tricks his friends into whitewashing a fence for him, the novelist engages in a bit of bizarre hyperbole, comparing Sawyer's victims to those of Herod: "While Ben [Tom's friend] worked and sweated in the sun, the retired artist [Tom] sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, munched his apple and planned the slaughter of more innocents."

"The Innocents' Day" by John Keble (1887): Keble, an English poet, published poems on various days in the church year. He juxtaposes the beauty of Luke's Christmas scene (with a baby in a manger) with the sadness that accompanies the same event in

Matthew's story, and from that juxtaposition he draws curious morals regarding the blessedness of people today:

Bethlehem, above all cities blest!
Th' Incarnate Saviour's earthly rest,
Where in His manger safe He lay,
By angels guarded night and day.
Bethlehem, of cities most forlorn,
Where in the dust sad mothers mourn,
Nor see the heavenly glory shed
On each pale infant's martyr'd head.

“Waking and Sleeping: Christmas” by Margaret Avison: The

Canadian poet Margaret Avison (1918–2007) wrote a poem that, like the one by Keble above, sought to juxtapose the typically peaceful image of Christmas with its horrible aftermath mentioned only by Matthew:

But hard on the manger vigil
came Herod's massacre . . .
. . . and Rachel's
heart then broke.

1. See David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 717–18.