**Epitaph -**Literature Notes

**Please note that the information given on this poem is not meant to replace any material given in the classroom setting. It is a very BASIC giude to enable a literal understanding of the poem. Metaphorical interpretations should be sought in the classroom.**

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| **The physical structure of this poem has been altered from the original layout in the text.**   They hanged him on a 4.clement morning,5.swung between the falling sunlight and the women's breathing, 1.like a black apostrophe to pain. All morning while the children 2.hushed their hopscotch joy and 6.the cane kept growing 3.he hung there sweet and low.                        At least that's how they tell it. It was long ago and 7.what can we recall of a dead slave or two except when we 8.punctuate our island tale 1.they swing like sighs across 9.the brutal sentences, and 10.anger pauses till they pass away.  Scott, Dennis. 'Epitaph' in A World of Prose. Edited by Mark McWatt and Hazel Simmonds McDonald. Pearson Education Ltd, 2005. | **This is the OPINION of one individual, which might not coincide with the views of others.**  LITERAL MEANING The poem is an [epitaph](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epitaph) to a slave that was hanged in the past. The first stanza explains that the nameless slave was hanged in the morning, and while some respect was paid to his memory, in the form of the children's actions, life essentially went on. In stanza two, the persona makes it clear that this slave's death has little relevance in the present, except as a passing memory when islanders think about what has influenced their up to the present.  Picture |

LITERARY DEVICES  
1. SIMILE

* Stanza 1, line 4: The swinging body of the slave is compared with an apostrophe to pain. This comparison is very powerful because, in English grammar, an apostrophe represents ownership. Therefore, it is implying that the pain of the black race is so palpable that it is almost something that they own. It emphasizes the painful nature of their history.
* Stanza 2, line 14: The dead slave's body's swing is compared to sighs. A sigh is an exhalation of breathe that can signal many feelings; relief, agitation, joy, etc., with the major quality being brevity. Therefore, the emphasis is not necessarily on the feeling that the dead slave elicits, upon being remembered, but the brevity with which he is remembered.

2. METAPHOR  
This metaphor emphasizes the fun that the children paused, out of respect for the swinging body of the dead slave.  
  
3. ALLUSION  
This line alludes to the Negro Spiritual '[Swing Low](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swing_Low,_Sweet_Chariot)'. This spiritual speaks of an individual's journey to heaven. This relates to this poem because it carries the implication that the slave's soul has gone to heaven. He hung 'sweet and low' and the chariot came for him, his soul is at rest.

IMPORTANT WORDS/ PHRASES  
4.'clement morning'   
The slave was hung on a clear, mild and pleasant morning. This highlights the fact that there is no regard for this human being and emphasizes the sadness of this fact. Not even nature cares to coincide with the sadness of this hanging.  
5.'swung'  
'This is a visual image of the hanging slave. One can literally see the slave swinging.  
6.'the cane kept growing'   
Despite the death of this slave, life literally went on, as chronicled by the growth of the cane.  
7.'what can we recall of a dead slave or two'  
This highlights the disregard shown towards the slave. This line also contributes to the sarcastic tone of the poem.  
8.'punctuate our island tale'  
To punctuate a sentence is to insert commas, full stops etc, in order for the sentence to make sense. Therefore, in this context, when the slave is inserted, or acknowledged in the island's history, it implies that he has an important place in it.  
9.'the brutal sentences  
'This refers to the actual history of the island. 10.'anger pauses till they pass away.'  
The reaction to the recollection of the dead slave and his contribution to the island's history is anger. However, this anger is put on hold until the memory of the slave passes away.

MOOD/ ATMOSPHERE  
The [mood](http://www.bulbsoup.com/ln-comprehension.html) of the poem is reflective  
  
TONE  
The [tone](http://www.bulbsoup.com/ln-comprehension.html) of the poem is reflective and slightly sarcastic.