

# SNOWBOUND

## A Winter Idyll

*John Greenleaf Whittier*

The sun that brief December day  
Rose cheerless over hills of gray,  
And, darkly circled, gave at noon  
A sadder light than waning<sup>1</sup> moon.  
5 Slow tracing down the thickening sky  
Its mute and ominous prophecy,  
A portent<sup>2</sup> seeming less than threat,  
It sank from sight before it set. **A**  
A chill no coat, however stout,  
10 Of homespun stuff could quite shut out,  
A hard, dull bitterness of cold,  
That checked, mid-vein, the circling race  
Of lifeblood in the sharpened face,  
The coming of the snowstorm told.  
15 The wind blew east; we heard the roar  
Of Ocean on his wintry shore,  
And felt the strong pulse throbbing there  
Beat with low rhythm our inland air.

Meanwhile we did our nightly chores,—  
20 Brought in the wood from out of doors,  
Littered the stalls, and from the mows  
Raked down the herd's grass for the cows:  
Heard the horse whinnying for his corn;  
And, sharply clashing horn on horn,  
25 Impatient down the stanchion rows<sup>3</sup>

### **A MOOD**

Think about the mood of these first eight lines. What imagery helps to set this mood?

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1. **waning**: lessening in intensity.

2. **portent**: omen.

3. **stanchion** (stăn'chən) **rows**: lines of devices that fit loosely around the necks of animals such as cows in order to limit their motion.

### **ANALYZE VISUALS**

To what senses does this photograph appeal, in addition to sight?

The cattle shake their walnut bows;  
While, peering from his early perch  
Upon the scaffold's pole of birch,  
The cock his crested helmet bent  
30 And down his querulous<sup>4</sup> challenge sent.

Unwarmed by any sunset light  
The gray day darkened into night,  
A night made hoary with the swarm  
And whirl-dance of the blinding storm,  
35 As zigzag, wavering to and fro,  
Crossed and recrossed the winged snow:  
And ere the early bedtime came  
The white drift piled the window frame,  
And through the glass the clothesline posts  
40 Looked in like tall and sheeted ghosts. **B**

So all night long the storm roared on:  
The morning broke without a sun;  
In tiny spherule<sup>5</sup> traced with lines  
Of Nature's geometric signs,  
45 In starry flake, and pellicle,<sup>6</sup>  
All day the hoary meteor fell;  
And, when the second morning shone,  
We looked upon a world unknown,  
On nothing we could call our own.  
50 Around the glistening wonder bent  
The blue walls of the firmament,  
No cloud above, no earth below—  
A universe of sky and snow! **C**  
The old familiar sights of ours  
55 Took marvelous shapes; strange domes and towers  
Rose up where sty or corncrib stood,  
Or garden wall, or belt of wood;  
A smooth white mound the brush pile showed,  
A fenceless drift what once was road;  
60 The bridle post an old man sat  
With loose-flung coat and high cocked hat;  
The well curb<sup>7</sup> had a Chinese roof;

**B MOOD**

A simile is a figure of speech comparing two things using the words *like* or *as*. What mood does the poet create with the simile in lines 39–40?

**C PARAPHRASE**

How has the world been transformed by snow in lines 50–53?

4. **querulous** (kwēr'ə-ləs): complaining.

5. **spherule** (sfīr'ool): a little sphere.

6. **pellicle**: a thin film or skin.

7. **well curb**: framing around the neck of a well.

And even the long sweep,<sup>8</sup> high aloof,  
In its slant splendor, seemed to tell  
65 Of Pisa's leaning miracle.<sup>9</sup>

A prompt, decisive man, no breath  
Our father wasted: "Boys, a path!"  
Well pleased, (for when did farmer boy  
Count such a summons less than joy?)  
70 Our buskins<sup>10</sup> on our feet we drew;  
With mittened hands, and caps drawn low,  
To guard our necks and ears from snow,  
We cut the solid whiteness through.  
And, where the drift was deepest, made  
75 A tunnel walled and overlaid  
With dazzling crystal: we had read  
Of rare Aladdin's wondrous cave,<sup>11</sup>  
And to our own his name we gave,  
With many a wish the luck were ours  
80 To test his lamp's supernal<sup>12</sup> powers.  
We reached the barn with merry din,  
And roused the prisoned brutes within.  
The old horse thrust his long head out,  
And grave with wonder gazed about;  
85 The cock his lusty greeting said,  
And forth his speckled harem led;  
The oxen lashed their tails, and hooked,  
And mild reproach of hunger looked;  
The horned patriarch of the sheep,  
90 Like Egypt's Amun<sup>13</sup> roused from sleep,  
Shook his sage head with gesture mute,  
And emphasized with stamp of foot. **D**

All day the gusty north wind bore  
The loosening drift its breath before;  
95 Low circling round its southern zone,  
The sun through dazzling snow-mist shone.  
No church bell lent its Christian tone

**D MOOD**

Identify examples of figurative language and imagery in lines 66–92. What is the mood created by this language?

8. **sweep**: a long pole connected to a bucket, used for raising water from a well.

9. **Pisa's leaning miracle**: the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Italy.

10. **buskins**: high leather boots.

11. **Aladdin's wondrous cave**: In *The Thousand and One Nights*, the boy Aladdin used a magic lamp to discover a treasure in a cave.

12. **supernal**: heavenly; supernatural.

13. **Amun** (ä'män): the supreme god of the ancient Egyptians, often represented as having a ram's head.

To the savage air, no social smoke  
 Curled over woods of snow-hung oak.  
 100 A solitude made more intense  
 By dreary-voiced elements,  
 The shrieking of the mindless wind,  
 The moaning tree boughs swaying blind,  
 And on the glass the unmeaning beat  
 105 Of ghostly fingertips of sleet.  
 Beyond the circle of our hearth  
 No welcome sound of toil or mirth  
 Unbound the spell, and testified  
 Of human life and thought outside. **E**  
 110 We minded that the sharpest ear  
 The buried brooklet could not hear,  
 The music of whose liquid lip  
 Had been to us companionship,  
 And, in our lonely life, had grown  
 115 To have an almost human tone.

As night drew on, and, from the crest  
 Of wooded knolls that ridged the west,  
 The sun, a snow-blown traveler, sank  
 From sight beneath the smothering bank,  
 120 We piled, with care, our nightly stack  
 Of wood against the chimney back,—  
 The oaken log, green, huge, and thick,  
 And on its top the stout backstick;  
 The knotty forestick laid apart,  
 125 And filled between with curious art  
 The ragged brush; then, hovering near,  
 We watched the first red blaze appear,  
 Heard the sharp crackle, caught the gleam  
 On whitewashed wall and sagging beam,  
 130 Until the old, rude-furnished room  
 Burst, flowerlike, into rosy bloom;  
 While radiant with a mimic flame  
 Outside the sparkling drift became,  
 And through the bare-boughed lilac tree  
 135 Our own warm hearth seemed blazing free.  
 The crane and pendent trammels showed,  
 The Turks' heads on the andirons<sup>14</sup> glowed;

**E PARAPHRASE**

Reread lines 106–109.  
 What effect does the  
 snowstorm have on the  
 family's sense of itself and  
 the world outside?

14. **The crane . . . the andirons:** The crane was the movable arm on which the trammels, or adjustable pothooks, hung. The andirons, or metal supports holding the fireplace wood, were topped with turbanlike knots.

While childish fancy, prompt to tell  
 The meaning of the miracle,  
 140 Whispered the old rhyme: "*Under the tree,  
 When fire outdoors burns merrily,  
 There the witches are making tea.*" **F**

The moon above the eastern wood  
 Shone at its full; the hill range stood  
 145 Transfigured in the silver flood,  
 Its blown snows flashing cold and keen,  
 Dead white, save where some sharp ravine  
 Took shadow, or the somber green  
 Of hemlocks turned to pitchy black  
 150 Against the whiteness at their back.  
 For such a world and such a night  
 Most fitting that unwarming light,  
 Which only seemed where'er it fell  
 To make the coldness visible.

155 Shut in from all the world without,  
 We sat the clean-winged hearth<sup>15</sup> about,  
 Content to let the north wind roar  
 In baffled rage at pane and door,  
 While the red logs before us beat  
 160 The frost line back with tropic heat; **G**  
 And ever, when a louder blast  
 Shook beam and rafter as it passed,  
 The merrier up its roaring draught  
 The great throat of the chimney laughed;  
 165 The house dog on his paws outspread  
 Laid to the fire his drowsy head,  
 The cat's dark silhouette on the wall  
 A couchant<sup>16</sup> tiger's seemed to fall;  
 And, for the winter fireside meet,  
 170 Between the andirons' straddling feet,  
 The mug of cider simmered slow,  
 The apples sputtered in a row,  
 And, close at hand, the basket stood  
 With nuts from brown October's wood.

**F MOOD**

In lines 116–142, what techniques does the poet use to create a mood of security and warmth in the midst of nature's cold and snow?

**G MAKE INFERENCES**

Reread lines 155–160. Why is the north wind baffled?

15. **clean-winged hearth:** Hearths were commonly swept with a turkey wing.

16. **couchant** (kou'chant): lying down, but with head raised.