

# from SNOWBOUND

John Greenleaf Whittier

## A Winter Idyll

The sun that brief December day  
Rose cheerless over hills of gray,  
And, darkly circled, gave at noon  
A sadder light than waning moon.  
5 Slow tracing down the thickening sky  
Its mute and ominous prophecy,

A portent seeming less than threat,  
It sank from sight before it set.  
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<sup>1</sup> rows  
The cattle shake their walnut bows;  
While, peering from his early perch

1. stanchion (stan' chen) restraining device fitted around the neck of a cow to confine it to its stall.

### Vocabulary Builder

ominous (äm' e nes) adj.  
threatening



### Reading Check

What signals the coming of the snowstorm?

Upon the scaffold's pole of birch,  
The cock his crested helmet bent  
30 And down his querulous 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.

So all night long the storm roared on:  
The morning broke without a sun;  
In tiny spherule<sup>2</sup> traced with lines  
Of Nature's geometric signs,  
45 in starry flake, and pellicle,<sup>3</sup>  
All day the hoary meteor fell;

2. spherule (sfer' ōōl) small sphere.

3. pellicle (pel' i kel) thin film of crystals.

**Vocabulary Builder**  
querulous (kwer' ə les) adj.  
complaining

**Literary Analysis**  
Meter The pattern of the  
meter changes at lines 35  
and 36. In what ways does  
this change correspond  
with the action described  
in these lines?



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!  
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 wellcurb had a Chinese roof;  
And even the long sweep,<sup>4</sup> high aloof,  
In its slant splendor, seemed to tell  
65 Of Pisa's leaning miracle.<sup>5</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>6</sup> on our feet we drew;  
With mittened hands, and caps drawn low,  
To guard our necks and ears from snow,

4. sweep pole with a bucket at one end, used for raising water from a well.

5. Pisa's leaning miracle famous leaning tower of Pisa in Italy.

6. buskins high-cut leather shoes or boots.

### Literary Analysis

**Meter and Mood** What mood is conveyed in the morning light? Which words create this mood?

### Reading Strategy

**Summarizing** Why are the boys so excited by their father's order to make a path through the snow?



### Reading Check

What does the family discover on the second morning?

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<sup>7</sup> wondrous cave,  
 And to our own his name we gave,  
 With many a wish the luck were ours  
 80 To test his lamp's supernal 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 hornèd patriarch of the sheep,  
 90 Like Egypt's Amun<sup>8</sup> roused from sleep,  
 Shook his sage head with gesture mute,  
 And emphasized with stamp of foot.

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  
 To the savage air, no social smoke  
 Curled over woods of snow-hung oak  
 100 A solitude made more intense  
 By dreary-voicèd 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.  
 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.

7. Aladdin's referring to Aladdin, a boy in *The Arabian Nights* who found a magic lamp and through its powers discovered a treasure in a cave.

8. Amun Egyptian god with a ram's head.

### Vocabulary Builder

patriarch (pā' trē ärk') *n.*  
 the father and ruler of a  
 family or tribe

### Reading Strategy

**Summarizing** How do the  
 sounds of the world  
 change as a result of the  
 snowstorm?

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:  
And ever, when a louder blast  
Shook beam and rafter as it passed,  
The merrier up its roaring draft  
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 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.

## Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Would you find it pleasant to be isolated, like the narrator and his family, by a powerful snowstorm? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** What weather conditions forewarn the narrator of the approaching snowstorm? (b) **Connect:** In what way do these "previews" build suspense in the poem?
3. (a) **Recall:** In what ways does the family prepare for and cope with the storm? (b) **Draw Conclusions:** What do these responses to the storm suggest about the family's relationship with nature?
4. (a) **Recall:** Which details in the poem convey a sense of warmth, security, and family closeness? (b) **Analyze:** Which descriptive details in lines 47–80 convey the narrator's sense of wonder upon viewing the snow-covered landscape? (c) **Infer:** What are the family's feelings about being snowbound?
5. (a) **Assess:** In what ways has life changed since *Snowbound* was written in 1865? (b) **Extend:** Today, influenced as we are by modern technologies, how would people cope with the consequences such a storm could pose? (c) **Take a Position:** Are people still at the mercy of nature, as they were in Whittier's day? Explain your answer.

### Go Online Author Link

For: More about John  
Greenleaf Whittier  
Visit: [www.PHSchool.com](http://www.PHSchool.com)  
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