Meet the Authors

John Greenleaf Whittier
1807–1892

John Greenleaf Whittier embodied the idealism of his age, which combined social activism and literary activity. He devoted most of his waking hours to the abolition of slavery, even risking his own life for the cause. Yet he also managed to write hundreds of poems. Many express an idyllic view of rural life and a profound moral aversion to slavery.

Rural Childhood  Whittier’s social consciousness derived from his modest background. Born to devout Quakers, Whittier was taught to believe in the equality of all people, the immorality of war, and the importance of thrift. Working long days on his family’s farm in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Whittier also learned about nature.

Poet and Politician  Unlike most of his literary contemporaries, Whittier received little formal schooling. He was, however, an avid reader, devouring the poetry of John Milton, Robert Burns, and other poets. When Whittier was 19, his poetry was discovered by the abolitionist and editor William Lloyd Garrison. In later years, Whittier contributed poems to various newspapers.

James Russell Lowell
1819–1891

To his contemporaries, James Russell Lowell was the quintessential New England man of letters. He wrote poetry that stirred the emotions, newspaper editorials that influenced public opinion, and literary criticism.

Rebel with a Cause  Lowell was born into a prominent New England family. In 1834, he entered Harvard, where he exasperated his teachers with his spoiled, immature behavior. His flouting of school rules and his disregard for his studies eventually led to his suspension. In 1844, Lowell married Maria White, who set her husband on the path to more mature behavior. In later years, Lowell published several volumes of verse and numerous articles in support of the abolitionist movement. He opposed slavery, the Mexican War, and corruption in politics.

Poet and Diplomat  Lowell’s talents were not limited to writing. He served as editor of The Atlantic Monthly, as an American diplomat in Spain, and as ambassador to Great Britain. While he enjoyed much public success in these roles, Lowell is today best remembered for his poetry.
LITERARY ANALYSIS: MOOD

Mood is the feeling or atmosphere that a writer creates for the reader. Although it may seem that mood is simply inherent in a piece, it is actually achieved through the use of various devices, such as the following:

- **figurative language**: language that communicates ideas beyond the literal meaning of words
- **imagery**: descriptive words and phrases a writer uses to re-create sensory experiences
- **meter**: repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in a line of poetry
- **rhyme**: similarity of sound between two words

Notice, for example, how Lowell uses all four devices in the following stanza from “The First Snowfall”:

_I stood and watched by the window_  
The noiseless work of the sky,  
And the sudden flurries of snowbirds,  
Like brown leaves whirling by._

As you read the poems by Lowell and Whittier, look for the devices that help to create a different mood in each poem.

READING STRATEGY: PARAPHRASE

Sometimes, the surest way to get through a difficult passage is to **paraphrase** it, or restate the ideas in simpler words. To paraphrase a line or stanza in a poem, determine its main idea and replace difficult words with easier ones. In some cases, footnotes will help you clarify meaning. Consider the following lines from Lowell’s poem “The First Snowfall”:

_And the poorest twig on the elm-tree_  
 _Was ridged inch deep with pearl._

Here is a paraphrase of the lines above in simpler language:

_An inch of snow covered the slender twig on the elm tree._

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record difficult words or phrases and how you might paraphrase them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Word(s)</th>
<th>My Paraphrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Review: Make Inferences

What can NATURE teach us?

What lessons about life have you learned from nature? Perhaps waiting out a thunderstorm taught you something about patience. Or maybe watching monkeys at the zoo helped you to understand group behavior. The selections that follow describe kernels of wisdom two poets gleaned from the natural world.

**QUICKWRITE** In your notebook, list some insights you have gained from nature. How could you apply these insights to your own life? Write down your thoughts and ideas in a short paragraph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene or Event</th>
<th>Insights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thunderstorm</td>
<td>Nature puts things in perspective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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\(^1\) moon.

5 Slow tracing down the thickening sky
Its mute and ominous prophecy,
A portent\(^2\) seeming less than threat,
It sank from sight before it set. \(\text{A}\)

A chill no coat, however stout,
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.

10 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,—
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,

20 Impatient down the stanchion rows\(^3\)

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1. *waning*: lessening in intensity.
2. *portent*: omen.
3. *stanchion* (stän’chən) *rows*: lines of devices that fit loosely around the necks of animals such as cows in order to limit their motion.
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
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,
As zigzag, wavering to and fro,
Crossed and recrossed the wingèd snow:
And ere the early bedtime came
The white drift piled the window frame,
And through the glass the clothesline posts
Looked in like tall and sheeted ghosts.

So all night long the storm roared on:
The morning broke without a sun;
In tiny spherule traced with lines
Of Nature’s geometric signs,
In starry flake, and pellicle,
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.

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
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;
The bridle post an old man sat
With loose-flung coat and high cocked hat;
The well curb had a Chinese roof;

4. querulous (kwér’ə-las): complaining.
5. spherule (sfîr’ə-lə): 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, high aloof,
In its slant splendor, seemed to tell
Of Pisa’s leaning miracle.9

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?)

Our buskins10 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
A tunnel walled and overlaid
With dazzling crystal: we had read
Of rare Aladdin’s wondrous cave,11
And to our own his name we gave,
With many a wish the luck were ours
To test his lamp’s supernal12 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;
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,
Like Egypt’s Amun13 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;
Low circling round its southern zone,
The sun through dazzling snow-mist shone.
No church bell lent its Christian tone

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 (ā’man): 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.

A solitude made more intense
By dreary-voicéd elements,
The shrieking of the mindless wind,
The moaning tree boughs swaying blind,
And on the glass the unmeaning beat

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.

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
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,

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,

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,

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

Our own warm hearth seemed blazing free.
The crane and pendent trammels showed,
The Turks’ heads on the andirons\textsuperscript{14} glowed;

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\textsuperscript{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,
Whispered the old rhyme: “Under the tree,
When fire outdoors burns merrily,
There the witches are making tea.”

The moon above the eastern wood
Shone at its full; the hill range stood
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
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.

Shut in from all the world without,
We sat the clean-winged hearth about,
Content to let the north wind roar
In baffled rage at pane and door,
While the red logs before us beat
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 draught
The great throat of the chimney laughed;
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,
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.

**Language Coach**

**Word Definitions** At the end of line 155, you might read the word *without* and think “without what?” Here, *without* means “outside.” In lines 155–160, how does the world *within* differ from the world *without*?

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

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**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?

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

16. **couchant** (kou’chant): lying down, but with head raised.
The First Snowfall

James Russell Lowell

The snow had begun in the gloaming,¹
And busily all the night
Had been heaping field and highway
With a silence deep and white.

Every pine and fir and hemlock
Wore ermine² too dear for an earl,
And the poorest twig on the elmtree
Was ridged inch deep with pearl.

From sheds new-roofed with Carrara³
Came Chanticleer’s⁴ muffled crow,
The stiff rails softened to swan’s-down,
And still fluttered down the snow.

I stood and watched by the window
The noiseless work of the sky,
And the sudden flurries of snowbirds,
Like brown leaves whirling by.

I thought of a mound in sweet Auburn⁵
Where a little headstone stood;
How the flakes were folding it gently,
As did robins the babes in the wood.

Up spoke our own little Mabel,
Saying, “Father, who makes it snow?”
And I told of the good All-father
Who cares for us here below.

Language Coach

Synonyms Often the word dear (line 6) is used as a term of affection. However, dear can also mean “high-priced.” Other words with similar meanings, or synonyms, of dear include costly, valuable, and precious. Read lines 5–8, and write down the words related to wealth or luxury.

MOOD
Reread lines 1–16. How would you describe the mood created by the poet’s use of rhyme and meter? Explain your answer.

PARAPHRASE
Paraphrase lines 17–20. How does the mood shift in these lines?

1. gloaming: twilight.
2. ermine: the expensive white fur of a type of weasel.
3. Carrara: Carrara marble, a white marble named after the Italian city where it is mined.
4. Chanticleer’s: a rooster’s.
5. Auburn: Mount Auburn Cemetery, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Again I looked at the snowfall,
And thought of the leaden sky
That arched o’er our first great sorrow,
When that mound was heaped so high.

I remembered the gradual patience
That fell from that cloud like snow,
Flake by flake, healing and hiding
The scar that renewed our woe.

And again to the child I whispered,
“The snow that husheth all,
Darling, the merciful Father
Alone can make it fall!”

Then, with eyes that saw not, I kissed her;
And she, kissing back, could not know
That my kiss was given to her sister,
Folded close under deepening snow.
After Reading

Comprehension

1. **Recall** In what ways does the family in “Snowbound” prepare for and cope with the storm?

2. **Clarify** How does the family in “Snowbound” feel about being snowed in?

3. **Summarize** How does the snowfall transform the landscape in lines 1–14 of “The First Snowfall”?

4. **Clarify** In “The First Snowfall,” what has happened to the family?

Literary Analysis

5. **Make Inferences** How do the people in “Snowbound” react to the storm? What do their responses say about their relationship to one another?

6. **Interpret Figurative Language** Reread lines 29–32 of “The First Snowfall.” What does the figurative language in this stanza suggest about the family’s grief and the relation of their sorrow to the natural world?

7. **Paraphrase to Draw Conclusions** Review the paraphrases you made in your chart as you read Lowell’s poem. Describe Lowell’s religious beliefs. How do they help the poet cope with his pain?

8. **Analyze Mood** Poets can use a variety of devices to establish mood, including figurative language, imagery, rhyme, and meter. In each of the poems, identify two devices used to create mood, giving examples. For each poem, which device would you say is the more important? Explain.

9. **Associate Ideas** In these poems and elsewhere, snow is often referred to as having a quieting effect. What are some common metaphors or images used to express our associations with other kinds of weather, such as downpours, torrid heat, windstorms, and Indian summers?

Literary Criticism

10. **Historical Context** Whittier and Lowell were two of a group known as the Fireside Poets. (See page 310.) This name refers to a popular family pastime of the period: reading poetry aloud in front of the fireplace after dinner. The poems of the group were very popular and read as entertainment not only in homes but also in schools. Why might the poetry of this group have played such an important role in people’s lives? Support your opinion.

What can **NATURE** teach us?

In “The First Snowfall,” the speaker draws a parallel between a natural weather event and the healing of a great grief. How does nature speak to you? Can you think of a natural object or event that has held special meaning for you?
Fireside Poets in Perspective

The Fireside Poets were extremely popular in their day. Indeed, they were so beloved that many families read their works aloud by the fire as a form of nightly entertainment. They were respected as well, becoming the first poets to be considered on equal footing with their British counterparts. Over the years, however, the group’s works fell out of favor with critics, who began to look upon them with more affection than respect. Only in recent years have critics again begun to appreciate the craft of the Fireside Poets.

Writing to Evaluate

With a group of classmates, come up with several criteria for evaluating the poems on pages 344–363. Then use your criteria to write a brief evaluation of the work of the Fireside Poets as a whole.

Consider

• what elements (vivid imagery, precise word choice, or thought-provoking themes) you think distinguish “good” poetry from “bad”
• whether the poems contain those elements
• whether your opinion of the poems changed upon rereading

Extension

LISTENING & SPEAKING Perform an oral interpretation of one poem from this group of Fireside Poets’ work. Let your opinion of the Fireside Poets in general and of this work in particular inform your reading. For example, if you admire a particular poem, you may wish to read it in a lively and engaging voice. If, on the other hand, you found a poem too sentimental, let your reading reflect this judgment.

WRITING 13 Use elements of the writing process to compose text. LISTENING AND SPEAKING 25 Speak clearly and to the point, using the conventions of language. Give a formal presentation that employs eye contact, speaking rate, volume, enunciation, purposeful gestures, and conventions of language to communicate ideas effectively.