

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Mystic's Christmas

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

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Christmas in America can seem like two distinct holidays. One is a religious holiday, centered on the remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ. The other is a winter festival, centered on gift-giving and good cheer. To this latter holiday belong many of the outward trappings of the season, which some worry overshadow its true significance. In this 1882 poem, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–92), a New England Quaker poet, considers the proper place of symbols and traditions in celebrating Christmas.

Why does the old monk not join in the Christmas celebrations? What does he say of the “outward symbols” of Christmas—the yule fire, feasts, songs, and festivities that mark the holiday? Do these symbols (or “signs”) enhance the celebration of Christmas, or do they obscure the true meaning of the holiday? How is the old monk a “mystic”? Is it possible (or desirable) for everyone to mark the holiday as he does? Why or why not? How do you think Christmas should be celebrated?

“All hail!” the bells of Christmas rang;
“All hail!” the monks at Christmas sang.
The merry monks who kept with cheer
The gladdest day of all their year.

But still, apart, unmoved thereat,
A pious elder brother sat
Silent, in his accustomed place,
With God’s sweet peace upon his face.

“Why sitt’st thou thus?” his brethren cried,
“It is the blessed Christmas-tide;
The Christmas lights are all aglow,
The sacred lilies bud and blow.

“Above our heads the joy-bells ring;
Without the happy children sing,
And all God’s creatures hail the morn

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On which the holy Christ was born!

“Rejoice with us; no more rebuke
our gladness with thy quiet look.”
The gray monk answered: “Keep, I pray,
Even as ye list, the Lord’s birthday.

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“Let heathen yule-fires flicker red
Where thronged refectory* feasts are spread;
With mystery-play and masque and mime,
And wait-songs speed the holy time!

“The blindest faith may haply save;
The Lord accepts the things we have;
And reverence, howsoe’er it strays,
May find at last the shining ways.

“They needs must grope who cannot see;
The blade before the ear must be;
As ye are feeling I have felt,
And where ye dwell I too have dwelt.

“But now, beyond the things of sense;
Beyond occasions and events,
I know, through God’s exceeding grace,
Release from form and time and place.

“I listen, from no mortal tongue,
To hear the song the angels sung;
And wait within myself to know
The Christmas lilies bud and blow.

“The outward symbols disappear
From him whose inward sight is clear;
And small must be the choice of days

* *A room used for communal meals, especially in religious institutions*

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To him who fills them all with praise!

“Keep, while you need it, brothers mine,
With honest zeal your Christmas sign;
But judge not him who every morn
Feels in his heart the Lord Christ born!”

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