



## **Snowflakes**

Hawthorne, Nathaniel

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**Type(s):** Short Fiction

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## About Hawthorne:

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts, where his birthplace is now a museum. William Hathorne, who emigrated from England in 1630, was the first of Hawthorne's ancestors to arrive in the colonies. After arriving, William persecuted Quakers. William's son John Hathorne was one of the judges who oversaw the Salem Witch Trials. (One theory is that having learned about this, the author added the "w" to his surname in his early twenties, shortly after graduating from college.) Hawthorne's father, Nathaniel Hathorne, Sr., was a sea captain who died in 1808 of yellow fever, when Hawthorne was only four years old, in Raymond, Maine. Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College at the expense of an uncle from 1821 to 1824, befriending classmates Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and future president Franklin Pierce. While there he joined the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. Until the publication of his *Twice-Told Tales* in 1837, Hawthorne wrote in the comparative obscurity of what he called his "owl's nest" in the family home. As he looked back on this period of his life, he wrote: "I have not lived, but only dreamed about living." And yet it was this period of brooding and writing that had formed, as Malcolm Cowley was to describe it, "the central fact in Hawthorne's career," his "term of apprenticeship" that would eventually result in the "richly meditated fiction." Hawthorne was hired in 1839 as a weigher and gauger at the Boston Custom House. He had become engaged in the previous year to the illustrator and transcendentalist Sophia Peabody. Seeking a possible home for himself and Sophia, he joined the transcendentalist utopian community at Brook Farm in 1841; later that year, however, he left when he became dissatisfied with farming and the experiment. (His Brook Farm adventure would prove an inspiration for his novel *The Blithedale Romance*.) He married Sophia in 1842; they moved to *The Old Manse* in Concord, Massachusetts, where they lived for three years. There he wrote most of the tales collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Hawthorne and his wife then moved to Salem and later to the Berkshires, returning in 1852 to Concord and a new home *The Wayside*, previously owned by the Alcotts. Their neighbors in Concord included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Like Hawthorne, Sophia was a reclusive person. She was bedridden with headaches until her sister introduced her to Hawthorne, after which her headaches seem to have abated. The Hawthornes enjoyed a long marriage, often taking walks in the park. Sophia greatly admired her husband's work. In one of her journals, she writes: "I am always so dazzled and bewildered with

the richness, the depth, the... jewels of beauty in his productions that I am always looking forward to a second reading where I can ponder and muse and fully take in the miraculous wealth of thoughts." In 1846, Hawthorne was appointed surveyor (determining the quantity and value of imported goods) at the Salem Custom House. Like his earlier appointment to the custom house in Boston, this employment was vulnerable to the politics of the spoils system. A Democrat, Hawthorne lost this job due to the change of administration in Washington after the presidential election of 1848. Hawthorne's career as a novelist was boosted by *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, in which the preface refers to his three-year tenure in the Custom House at Salem. *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) followed in quick succession. In 1852, he wrote the campaign biography of his old friend Franklin Pierce. With Pierce's election as president, Hawthorne was rewarded in 1853 with the position of United States consul in Liverpool. In 1857, his appointment ended and the Hawthorne family toured France and Italy. They returned to *The Wayside* in 1860, and that year saw the publication of *The Marble Faun*. Failing health (which biographer Edward Miller speculates was stomach cancer) prevented him from completing several more romances. Hawthorne died in his sleep on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire while on a tour of the White Mountains with Pierce. He was buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Massachusetts. Wife Sophia and daughter Una were originally buried in England. However, in June 2006, they were re-interred in plots adjacent to Nathaniel. Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne had three children: Una, Julian, and Rose. Una was a victim of mental illness and died young. Julian moved out west, served a jail term for embezzlement and wrote a book about his father. Rose married George Parsons Lathrop and they became Roman Catholics. After George's death, Rose became a Dominican nun. She founded the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne to care for victims of incurable cancer. Source: Wikipedia

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There is snow in yonder cold gray sky of the morning, and through the partially-frosted window-panes I love to watch the gradual beginning of the storm. A few feathery flakes are scattered widely through the air and hover downward with uncertain flight, now almost alighting on the earth, now whirled again aloft into remote regions of the atmosphere. These are not the big flakes heavy with moisture which melt as they touch the ground and are portentous of a soaking rain. It is to be in good earnest a wintry storm. The two or three people visible on the sidewalks have an aspect of endurance, a blue-nosed, frosty fortitude, which is evidently assumed in anticipation of a comfortless and blustering day. By nightfall—or, at least, before the sun sheds another glimmering smile upon us—the street and our little garden will be heaped with mountain snowdrifts. The soil, already frozen for weeks past, is prepared to sustain whatever burden may be laid upon it, and to a Northern eye the landscape will lose its melancholy bleakness and acquire a beauty of its own when Mother Earth, like her children, shall have put on the fleecy garb of her winter's wear. The cloud-spirits are slowly weaving her white mantle. As yet, indeed, there is barely a rime like hoar-frost over the brown surface of the street; the withered green of the grass-plot is still discernible, and the slated roofs of the houses do but begin to look gray instead of black. All the snow that has yet fallen within the circumference of my view, were it heaped up together, would hardly equal the hillock of a grave. Thus gradually by silent and stealthy influences are great changes wrought. These little snow-particles which the storm-spirit flings by handfuls through the air will bury the great Earth under their accumulated mass, nor permit her to behold her sister Sky again for dreary months. We likewise shall lose sight of our mother's familiar visage, and must content ourselves with looking heavenward the oftener.

Now, leaving the Storm to do his appointed office, let us sit down, pen in hand, by our fireside. Gloomy as it may seem, there is an influence productive of cheerfulness and favorable to imaginative thought in the atmosphere of a snowy day. The native of a Southern clime may woo the Muse beneath the heavy shade of summer foliage reclining on banks of turf, while the sound of singing-birds and warbling rivulets chimes in with the music of his soul. In our brief summer I do not think, but only exist in the vague enjoyment of a dream. My hour of inspiration—if that hour ever comes—is when the green log hisses upon the hearth, and the bright flame, brighter for the gloom of the chamber, rustles high up the chimney, and the coals drop tinkling down among the growing heaps of ashes. When the casement rattles in the gust and the snowflakes or the

sleety raindrops pelt hard against the window-panes, then I spread out my sheet of paper with the certainty that thoughts and fancies will gleam forth upon it like stars at twilight or like violets in May, perhaps to fade as soon. However transitory their glow, they at least shine amid the darksome shadow which the clouds of the outward sky fling through the room. Blessed, therefore, and reverently welcomed by me, her true-born son, be New England's winter, which makes us one and all the nurslings of the storm and sings a familiar lullaby even in the wildest shriek of the December blast. Now look we forth again and see how much of his task the storm-spirit has done.

Slow and sure! He has the day—perchance the week—before him, and may take his own time to accomplish Nature's burial in snow. A smooth mantle is scarcely yet thrown over the withered grass-plot, and the dry stalks of annuals still thrust themselves through the white surface in all parts of the garden. The leafless rose-bushes stand shivering in a shallow snowdrift, looking, poor things! as disconsolate as if they possessed a human consciousness of the dreary scene. This is a sad time for the shrubs that do not perish with the summer. They neither live nor die; what they retain of life seems but the chilling sense of death. Very sad are the flower-shrubs in midwinter. The roofs of the houses are now all white, save where the eddying wind has kept them bare at the bleak corners. To discern the real intensity of the storm, we must fix upon some distant object—as yonder spire—and observe how the riotous gust fights with the descending snow throughout the intervening space. Sometimes the entire prospect is obscured; then, again, we have a distinct but transient glimpse of the tall steeple, like a giant's ghost; and now the dense wreaths sweep between, as if demons were flinging snowdrifts at each other in mid-air. Look next into the street, where we have an amusing parallel to the combat of those fancied demons in the upper regions. It is a snow-battle of schoolboys. What a pretty satire on war and military glory might be written in the form of a child's story by describing the snow-ball fights of two rival schools, the alternate defeats and victories of each, and the final triumph of one party, or perhaps of neither! What pitched battles worthy to be chanted in Homeric strains! What storming of fortresses built all of massive snow-blocks! What feats of individual prowess and embodied onsets of martial enthusiasm! And when some well-contested and decisive victory had put a period to the war, both armies should unite to build a lofty monument of snow upon the battlefield and crown it with the victor's statue hewn of the same frozen marble. In a few days or weeks thereafter the passer-by would observe a

shapeless mound upon the level common, and, unmindful of the famous victory, would ask, "How came it there? Who reared it? And what means it?" The shattered pedestal of many a battle-monument has provoked these questions when none could answer.

Turn we again to the fireside and sit musing there, lending our ears to the wind till perhaps it shall seem like an articulate voice and dictate wild and airy matter for the pen. Would it might inspire me to sketch out the personification of a New England winter! And that idea, if I can seize the snow-wreathed figures that flit before my fancy, shall be the theme of the next page.

How does Winter herald his approach? By the shrieking blast of latter autumn which is Nature's cry of lamentation as the destroyer rushes among the shivering groves where she has lingered and scatters the sear leaves upon the tempest. When that cry is heard, the people wrap themselves in cloaks and shake their heads disconsolately, saying, "Winter is at hand." Then the axe of the woodcutter echoes sharp and diligently in the forest; then the coal-merchants rejoice because each shriek of Nature in her agony adds something to the price of coal per ton; then the peat-smoke spreads its aromatic fragrance through the atmosphere. A few days more, and at eventide the children look out of the window and dimly perceive the flaunting of a snowy mantle in the air. It is stern Winter's vesture. They crowd around the hearth and cling to their mother's gown or press between their father's knees, affrighted by the hollow roaring voice that bellows adown the wide flue of the chimney.

It is the voice of Winter; and when parents and children hear it, they shudder and exclaim, "Winter is come. Cold Winter has begun his reign already." Now throughout New England each hearth becomes an altar sending up the smoke of a continued sacrifice to the immitigable deity who tyrannizes over forest, country-side and town. Wrapped in his white mantle, his staff a huge icicle, his beard and hair a wind-tossed snowdrift, he travels over the land in the midst of the northern blast, and woe to the homeless wanderer whom he finds upon his path! There he lies stark and stiff, a human shape of ice, on the spot where Winter overtook him. On strides the tyrant over the rushing rivers and broad lakes, which turn to rock beneath his footsteps. His dreary empire is established; all around stretches the desolation of the pole. Yet not ungrateful be his New England children (for Winter is our sire, though a stern and rough one)—not ungrateful even for the severities which have nourished our unyielding strength of character. And let us thank him, too, for the sleigh-rides cheered by the music of merry bells; for the crackling and

rustling hearth when the ruddy firelight gleams on hardy manhood and the blooming cheek of woman: for all the home-enjoyments and the kindred virtues which flourish in a frozen soil. Not that we grieve when, after some seven months of storm and bitter frost, Spring, in the guise of a flower-crowned virgin, is seen driving away the hoary despot, pelting him with violets by the handful and strewing green grass on the path behind him. Often ere he will give up his empire old Winter rushes fiercely buck and hurls a snowdrift at the shrinking form of Spring, yet step by step he is compelled to retreat northward, and spends the summer month within the Arctic circle.

Such fantasies, intermixed among graver toils of mind, have made the winter's day pass pleasantly. Meanwhile, the storm has raged without abatement, and now, as the brief afternoon declines, is tossing denser volumes to and fro about the atmosphere. On the window-sill there is a layer of snow reaching halfway up the lowest pane of glass. The garden is one unbroken bed. Along the street are two or three spots of uncovered earth where the gust has whirled away the snow, heaping it elsewhere to the fence-tops or piling huge banks against the doors of houses. A solitary passenger is seen, now striding mid-leg deep across a drift, now scudding over the bare ground, while his cloak is swollen with the wind. And now the jingling of bells—a sluggish sound responsive to the horse's toilsome progress through the unbroken drifts—announces the passage of a sleigh with a boy clinging behind and ducking his head to escape detection by the driver. Next comes a sledge laden with wood for some unthrifty housekeeper whom winter has surprised at a cold hearth. But what dismal equipage now struggles along the uneven street? A sable hearse bestrewn with snow is bearing a dead man through the storm to his frozen bed. Oh how dreary is a burial in winter, when the bosom of Mother Earth has no warmth for her poor child!

Evening—the early eve of December—begins to spread its deepening veil over the comfortless scene. The firelight gradually brightens and throws my flickering shadow upon the walls and ceiling of the chamber, but still the storm rages and rattles against the windows. Alas! I shiver and think it time to be disconsolate, but, taking a farewell glance at dead Nature in her shroud, I perceive a flock of snowbirds skimming lightly through the tempest and flitting from drift to drift as sportively as swallows in the delightful prime of summer. Whence come they? Where do they build their nests and seek their food? Why, having airy wings, do they not follow summer around the earth, instead of making

themselves the playmates of the storm and fluttering on the dreary verge of the winter's eve? I know not whence they come, nor why; yet my spirit has been cheered by that wandering flock of snow-birds.

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