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## Revisiting the work of Whittier

By **Kevin Doyle**/ kdoyle@cnc.com

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Spoken word artist Michael Maglaras makes a bold assertion when discussing the importance of the writings of John Greenleaf Whittier, and most especially his master work "Snowbound."

"I think 'Snowbound' is the finest poem written in the 19th century in the English language. It is a masterpiece of unequalled quality. None of the poetry of (Henry Wadsworth) Longfellow or (Ralph Waldo) Emerson comes close," said Maglaras, who has released a CD of the poem. "I think Whittier is both underrated and overlooked and it's time we take a long look at this poet and his impact."

Maglaras, a native of Dover, N.H. and the founder of Two17 Records in Greenwich, Ct. will perform a live reading of the poem tonight at The Cultural Center (7 o'clock), coinciding with the 140th anniversary of the Feb. 17, 1866 publication of the epic, which Whittier penned in the library of his home on 86 Friend St.

Maglaras said his New Hampshire roots drew him to perform "Snowbound."

"Whittier's mother was born in Dover and, much like Amesbury, there are a number of things in town named after him. I remember at about age 16 reading 'Snowbound' for the first time and being really enchanted. But it wasn't until a couple of years ago when I re-read it that I understood how the passion and depth of the human experience resonates," Maglaras said.

"There's a tendency to think of him as this grizzled old Quaker guy without much of a viewpoint when he was anything but," he said.

### **A work of considerable impact**

Upon publication, "Snowbound" sold 20,000 copies on its first printing and an additional 25,000 copies in a second release..

"Think about that for a minute and put it into perspective. This was before the age of mass production. Obviously there was no internet. Word of mouth sold that book, 45,000 copies in just a few months. Those are amazing numbers and Whittier became a national hero. By any measure, in his day, he was the most popular poet in America,," said Maglaras, who owns an engraved second edition of the book.

A true story, "Snowbound" is set at the Whittier family farm in Haverhill during Whittier's youth. The family and their guests huddle together around the fireplace as a blizzard approaches and, while the storm rages, Whittier observes each person, and listens to their stories. Decades later, he recounts their tales while revealing the depth of their personalities.

"At the time this poem was written, the Civil War had just ended and the nation was grieving the assassination of President Lincoln and the enormous loss of the countless soldiers who fought. 'Snowbound' captures that sense of loss through the personal reminiscences the family members share with one another," Maglaras said.

Whittier experienced that loss on multiple levels. A devout Quaker and avowed abolitionist he felt a need to somehow help the nation heal from the brutality of the Civil War. And, he was also mourning the death of his sister Elizabeth in 1864.

"She was his muse and he was devastated by her death," Maglaras pointed out.

### **Words which still ring true**

According to Maglaras, Whittier was "an occasional poet."

"For example, say the mayor was going to open a shopping mall back in 1866. He would ask Whittier to write a poem for the occasion. He would write it and deliver it orally. There was a great tradition of the spoken word at that time. Whittier wrote hundreds of those poems and many of them were masterpieces," said Maglaras.

It is a tradition all but lost. Poems delivered by Maya Angelou and Robert Frost at the inaugurations of Presidents Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy, respectively, stand as fleeting glimpses of the power of the spoken word..

"The work of Robert Frost, for example, would be unthinkable without Whittier. He was Frost's single biggest influence and Frost owes everything to Whittier," said Maglaras.

Does Whittier still connect with today's society?

"Yes and no. He did write a lot of poems that make you scratch your chin and ask, 'Okay, John, where were you going with that one?' But others like 'Maud Muller', 'The Barefoot Boy' and 'School Days' are just timeless," said Maglaras.

Maglaras praised town officials for embracing tonight's performance.

"I approached the town and they could not have been more cooperative. We were determined to launch (the CD) with a public reading and felt there would be no better place to do it than Amesbury, where the poem was written. We received enormous help from the mayor's office and have had great dealings with the Whittier Society," said Maglaras.

Those attending tonight's reading will view Maglaras alone on stage, accompanied by the piano piece "A Conquered Sonata" by 19th century composer Charles Ives.

"The performance is 53 minutes long and it will be an intimate experience. I also plan to do 'The Frost Spirit' which is a short poem that is positively demonic," said Maglaras. "If we don't raise consciousness and awareness of Whittier, a treasure trove right in our own backyard, then we've lost something very important."

### **About The Artist**

Trained as an opera singer and in theater, Michael Maglaras is a graduate of the University of New Hampshire with a degree in voice. He did graduate work at Yale University and in Europe and founded his recording company, Two17 Records, in 2000.

"I'm 56 going on 25," he said with a chuckle. "I had met the woman (singer Terri Templeton) who is now my wife in 2000. She was about to begin recording and I felt it was a good chance to get into the business and to produce my first album."

"Snowbound" is Maglaras's second live spoken word performance.

"I trained in opera and on stage but I gave a lot of that up, went into business and did a lot of the things you need to make money. Now I'm coming back to my training. I now understand that, to fully appreciate it, poetry is meant to be read aloud," he said.

For more information, or to listen to a recording of "Snowbound", visit the Web site [www.two17records.com](http://www.two17records.com).

### **If You Go**

**What:** A live reading of John Greenleaf Whittier's masterpiece "Snowbound", performed by spoken work artist Michael Maglaras.

**When:** Tonight, 7 to 9 p.m.

**Where:** The Amesbury Cultural Center, located in the Upper Millyard.

**Cost:** Tickets are \$5 apiece.