Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



Christmas Bells

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Grades 8–10 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

Longfellow wrote "Christmas Bells" during the American Civil War, around 1863–64. His wife had died in a fire in 1861, and his son Charles had been badly wounded fighting for the Union. The poem has seven five-line stanzas (35 lines), and every stanza ends with the same refrain about peace on earth, with only one word changed in the last. The stanzas about cannon fire (lines 16–25) are the ones usually left out of the carol version, so many people know only the hopeful parts. Watch how the refrain sounds different each time you reach it.

THE POEM

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"

VOCABULARY

carols — joyful songs, especially for Christmas

Christendom — the Christian world

belfries — bell towers

accursed — cursed; hateful

rent — tore apart

hearth-stones — the stones of a fireplace; a symbol of home

forlorn — lonely and wretched

mocks — makes fun of

pealed — rang out loudly

doth — does (an older form)

prevail — win out; triumph

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first three stanzas, how does the speaker describe the sound of the bells? Use details such as “wild and sweet” and “A voice, a chime, / A chant sublime” to describe the mood.

2. Stanza 4 begins “Then from each black, accursed mouth / The cannon thundered in the South.” What happens to the carols, and how do the sound words in this stanza differ from “ringing, singing” earlier in the poem?

3. In lines 21–25 the speaker says it was “as if an earthquake rent / The hearth-stones of a continent.” What is being compared to an earthquake, and what does the phrase “households born / Of peace” suggest about the war’s effects?

4. The speaker bows his head and says “There is no peace on earth” because “hate is strong, / And mocks the song / Of peace on earth, good-will to men!” What does the refrain mean here, and how is it different from its meaning in the first stanza?

5. In the last stanza the bells “pealed … more loud and deep” and answer with “God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!” How does the final refrain change, and how does the poem answer the speaker’s despair?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short poem or paragraph about a sound that sounds different depending on how you feel when you hear it (a song, a bell, a voice, a siren). Like Longfellow, repeat one line or phrase at least three times and let its meaning change as your mood changes.

Christmas Bells — Answer Key

1. The bells are joyful and familiar: their "old, familiar carols play," and the sound is "wild and sweet." Stanza 3 piles up phrases ("A voice, a chime, / A chant sublime") to show the song spreading over the whole world as it "revolved from night to day." The mood is warm, hopeful and full of wonder.

2. The cannon "thundered," and "with the sound / The carols drowned" the song of peace. Earlier verbs such as "ringing, singing" are musical and flowing, while "thundered" and "drowned" are loud and violent, so war literally overpowers the bells.

3. The war is compared to an earthquake that splits "The hearth-stones of a continent." Hearth-stones stand for homes, so the war is shattering whole families all over the nation. The "households born / Of peace" were created in peaceful times and are now left "forlorn."

4. Because "hate is strong," the speaker feels the song of peace is being laughed at, so the refrain sounds like a hollow joke. In the first stanza it was a joyful message from the bells; now it is something the speaker thinks is false ("There is no peace on earth").

5. The last refrain begins "With peace on earth" instead of "Of peace on earth," so the line now says peace will come along with the triumph of right: "The Wrong shall fail, / The Right prevail." The bells themselves answer the speaker, and the poem ends with hope and trust that wrong will not win, though it does not say when peace will arrive.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/christmas-bells-henry-wadsworth-longfellow/