

SATIRE



Howard Nemerov

(1920-1991)

Santa Claus (1960)

Somewhere on his travels the strange Child
Picked up with this overstuffed confidence man,
Affection's inverted thief, who climbs at night
Down chimneys, into dreams, with this world's goods.
Bringing all the benevolence of money,
He teaches the innocent to want, thus keeps
Our fat world rolling. His prescribed costume,
White flannel beard, red belly of cotton waste,
Conceals the thinness of essential hunger,
An appetite that feeds on satisfaction;
Or, pregnant with possessions, he brings forth
Vanity and the void. His name itself
Is corrupted, and even Saint Nicholas, in his turn,
Gives off a faint and reminiscent stench,
The merest soupcon, of brimstone and the pit.

Now, at the season when the Child is born
To suffer for the world, suffer the world,
His bloated Other, jovial satellite
And sycophant, makes his appearance also
In a glitter of goodies, in a rock candy glare.
Played at the better stores by bums, for money,
This annual savior of the economy
Speaks in the parables of the dollar sign:
Suffer the little children to come to Him.

At Easter, he's anonymous again,
Just one of the crowd lunching on Calvary.

ANALYSIS

The commercialization of Christmas symbolically means the corruption of love into greed, and so Howard Nemerov depicts it. Christ ("the strange Child") incarnates love, willing to suffer and even to die for mankind; Santa Claus, for Nemerov, represents the commercial corruption of love. Like Christ he is a "savior," not of mankind but of the economy; like Christ he speaks in parables, not of divine wisdom but of the dollar sign; like Christ he suffers the little children to come unto him, not to be blessed but to receive presents of "this world's goods." He teaches the innocent "to want" (they write him letters, in fact, listing their wants). "Goodies" replace goodness; a "rock candy glare" replaces the radiance of the Child; the spirit of "gimme" replaces the spirit of sacrifice. Santa Claus is, in fact, a phony; he is "Played at the better stores by bums, for money" in a fake beard and a "red belly of cotton waste" which conceals his "essential hunger." Even his name is a corruption: it comes from St. Nicholas; and the name Nicholas suggests Old Nick, the devil, lord of Hell.

In the second verse paragraph the verb "suffer" is used in three different senses: to undergo pain, to endure patiently, and to allow. Christ, unlike Santa Claus, underwent bitter pain for mankind, endured the sinful world sadly but patiently, and allowed the little children to come to Him. At Christmas, celebrating the birth of Christ, the commercial spirit appears as Santa Claus. At Easter, commemorating Christ's death and resurrection, the commercial spirit is anonymous, "Just one of the crowd lunching on Calvary," picnicking while Christ is crucified. Nemerov's astringent satire closes by showing the commercial spirit as indifferent to love or sacrifice under any guise.

Laurence Perrine
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