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## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: The Sonnet

#### VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*The Cross of Snow*”:

**Martyrdom**, *n.*

Extreme suffering for a cause

**Repose**, *n.*

A state of restfulness

**Benedight**, *adj.*

Blessed

In the poetry of western Europe and America, the sonnet has attracted more noteworthy poets than any other fixed form. A sonnet is a fourteen-lined poem with a prescribed rhyme scheme and specific structure. Originally an Italian form (*sonnetto*: “little song”), the sonnet owes much of its prestige to Petrarch (1304–1374), who often wrote about his love for the unattainable Laura. Soon after English poets imported the sonnet in the middle of the sixteenth century, they worked out their own rhyme scheme—one easier for them to follow than Petrarch’s—often called the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet.

#### ?? Discussion Activities

A posthumously published sonnet, “The Cross of Snow” centers upon a beloved woman who has died. One might assume this sonnet refers to the death of Longfellow’s first wife—as “Mezzo Cammin” does—except for two phrases: “here in this room she died” and “these eighteen years.” Mary died in a hotel in Holland, but his second wife and the mother of their six children, Fanny Appleton, died from a fire in their Massachusetts home, Craigie House, in 1861. Longfellow’s failed attempt to save Fanny, as well as her horrific death, absolutely incapacitated him. He wrote “The Cross of Snow” on July 10, 1879, exactly 18 years after her death. The poet never remarried, and remained devoted to poetry and to their five children (one daughter died as an infant) until the end of his life in 1882.

“Mezzo Cammin” and “The Cross of Snow” are both Italian sonnets, also known as Petrarchan sonnets. This kind of sonnet follows the rhyme scheme *a b b a, a b b a* in the octave, or first eight lines. The sestet, or last six lines, adds new rhyme sounds in various patterns. It may rhyme *c d c d c d, c d e c d e, c d c c d c* or in almost any other variation that doesn’t end in a couplet. This two-part organization helps the poet organize the poem’s argument or ideas. For example, the octave will often state the problem, and the sestet may offer a resolution. Often a turn comes in line 9 that may or may not be solved by line 14. Ask your students to identify each sonnet’s turn. This is one way to trace a sonnet’s main idea as it moves through the octave to the sestet.

#### Writing Exercise

Write a one-page essay on how the sonnet form lends meaning to the poem “The Cross of Snow.” Or, if you have covered other poetic forms in your class, have students re-write the poem using another poetic form. Does this allow students to understand the ideal use of the sonnet form? Why or why not?

#### Homework

Read “Introduction to Longfellow’s Poetry” (p. 3) and “Longfellow and Other Arts” (pp. 14–15) from the Reader’s Guide. Then read two of Longfellow’s ballads, “The Children’s Hour” and “The Bells of San Blas.” Pay attention to each poem’s literal meanings.