

**The Cross of Snow**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Longfellow's wife died tragically when an ember from the fireplace caught her dress on fire and burnt her so badly that she died a few days later. Longfellow tried to put out the fire, and it is said that his face was so badly disfigured that he grew the familiar long beard to hide the scars.

Mount of the Holy Cross is located in the Colorado Rockies and was named for the thin white cross that appears on the side of the mountain as snow melts away in the summer.

Eighteen years later he was looking at a book with pictures of the far west and the mountains when he came across a picture much like the one reproduced here. The poem that resulted is "The Cross of Snow," one of his most poignant and touching sonnets.

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The phrase “**watches of the night**”usually refers to the rounds made by a guard. What does the phrase mean in this line?

**The Cross of Snow**

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,  
  A gentle face--the face of one long dead--  
 Looks at me from the wall, where round its head  
  The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.  
Here in this room she died; and soul more white  
  Never through martyrdom of fire was led  
  To its repose; nor can in books be read  
  The legend of a life more benedight°.  
There is a mountain in the distant West  
  That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines  
  Displays a cross of snow upon its side.  
Such is the cross I wear upon my breast  
  These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes  
  And seasons, changeless since the day she died.

What is Longfellow suggesting about his wife’s character by using the powerful image “**martyrdom of fire**”?

How does the poet relate this to his *own* feelings of grief?

Why might Longfellow have chosen to use a cross as the **symbol** of his grief?

Explain how “**sun-defying”** suggests conditions of weather and geology that might actually produce a permanent cross of snow on the side of a mountain.

What other images in the poem reinforce the characterization of his wife as saintly?