**‘Excelsior’ by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1841)**

**QUICK QUESTIONS (answer orally or in short prompt form):**

1. Where and at what time of day does the poem take place?  
2. What does the youth of the poem hold?  
3. What does the youth say throughout the poem?  
4. Why does the old man advise the youth not to try the Pass?  
5. What does the maiden want the youth to do?  
6. To which great danger does the peasant alert the youth?  
7. How do the monks know to look for the youth at daybreak?  
8. Who finds the youth and what is he holding?  
9. What two adjectives are used to describe the youth’s appearance in the final stanza?  
10. What simile is used to describe the sound of the voice in the final stanza?

**CONTEXT:** Briefly explain the definitions of these words and their relationship to the poem’s heroic / Arthurian atmosphere: *falchion / clarion / spectral / tempest / torrent / serene.*  
**TECHNICAL AWARENESS – match the following poetic techniques to the quotations:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Technique** | **Quotation** |
| 1. Creation of mystery around the youth | *A. “Excelsior!”* |
| 2. Simile (with internal alliteration) | *B. “the startled air”* |
| 3. Dialogue to increase tension / foreboding | *C. “strange device” / “unknown tongue”* |
| 4. Personification for dramatic effect | *D. “fell like a falling star”* |
| 5. Use of exclamation / repetition | *E. “Try not the Pass!”* |

**CRITICAL APPRECIATION: How does Longfellow achieve these effects?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A. | Stanzas 1 – 2 | The youth’s mysterious appearance and sense of purpose |
| B. | Stanzas 3 – 6 | The grave danger faced and his knowledge of what he faces |
| C.\* | Stanzas 7 – 9 | The drama of his demise while applauding his noble sacrifice |

**CREATIVE WRITING / STRUCTURE:** The poem’s mystical mood is created in part by its strongly rhythmical structure: iambic tetrameter in rhyming couplets with the fifth line repeating the call of *Excelsior!* Design another stanza to insert into the narrative. State where it should be placed (e.g. between stanzas six and seven).

**THEMES:** How does this poem fit in with the themes around aspiration and role models? Do you think that it is inspirational or do you find anything problematic with its perspective?

**Excelsior**

By [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/henry-wadsworth-longfellow)

The shades of night were falling fast,

As through an Alpine village passed

A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,

A banner with the strange device,

      Excelsior!

His brow was sad; his eye beneath,

Flashed like a falchion from its sheath,

And like a silver clarion rung

The accents of that unknown tongue,

      Excelsior!

In happy homes he saw the light

Of household fires gleam warm and bright;

Above, the spectral glaciers shone,

And from his lips escaped a groan,

      Excelsior!

"Try not the Pass!" the old man said;

"Dark lowers the tempest overhead,

The roaring torrent is deep and wide!"

And loud that clarion voice replied,

      Excelsior!

"Oh stay," the maiden said, "and rest

Thy weary head upon this breast! "

A tear stood in his bright blue eye,

But still he answered, with a sigh,

      Excelsior!

"Beware the pine-tree's withered branch!

Beware the awful avalanche!"

This was the peasant's last Good-night,

A voice replied, far up the height,

      Excelsior!

At break of day, as heavenward

The pious monks of Saint Bernard

Uttered the oft-repeated prayer,

A voice cried through the startled air,

      Excelsior!

A traveller, by the faithful hound,

Half-buried in the snow was found,

Still grasping in his hand of ice

That banner with the strange device,

      Excelsior!

There in the twilight cold and gray,

Lifeless, but beautiful, he lay,

And from the sky, serene and far,

A voice fell like a falling star,

      Excelsior!