



# Critical Analysis of The Highway Man - Alfred Noyes

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# Central Idea of the Poem

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This poem is an attempt to demonstrate that real love never dies. This is not the type of love that may elicit envy, as it did in Tim. Jealousy, according to Noyes, is a negative feeling because it can result in the kinds of tragedies he portrays.

However, the kind of love that can motivate someone to make self-sacrifice for the sake of their cherished is priceless and will never be forgotten, regardless of the outcome.

# Summary of The Highwayman

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**‘The Highwayman’ is a narrative poem. It is like a story and contains all of the characteristics of a story. It has –**

- a beginning, middle and end**
- characters, setting and plot**
- problems and solutions**

**This poem begins with a highwayman paying a visit to his girlfriend Bess at her father’s inn. He is on the run (apparently there is some robbing to be done), which means he just has time for one kiss. He promises to return by the next night at the latest.**

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- The following evening, rather than the highwayman, some British soldiers arrive. These men are absolute jerks. They consume a large amount of beer, tie up Bess, and then wait at the windows to shoot the highwayman when he returns. Bess is tied up with a gun to her chest and wriggles around until her finger is on the trigger. When she hears the highwayman's horse approaching, she discharges the rifle and sacrifices herself to warn him of the trap.
  - The highwayman attempts to flee, but is unsuccessful. He is mowed down in the middle of the road by soldiers and dies in a pool of blood. His ghost still drives down the highway on some winter evenings to meet Bess.



# Critical Analysis

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- Noyes conjures a world in this poem in which laws do not appear to have much of a role. For one thing, the highwayman does not appear to be a rare sight. As a result, robberies are rather common, and robbers are not particularly despised. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that Noyes was quite friendly toward robbers, even portraying them positively in his Robin Hood.
- Returning to the poem, Tim also does not appear to consider that telling the patrolmen about Bess and the highwayman's secret is a form of betrayal. The patrolmen, for their part, believe that torturing a young girl is acceptable.
- Finally, the highwayman never contemplates enlisting the assistance of the law to punish the patrolmen for Bess's death, thereby shifting the burden of vengeance upon himself. This is then a world that is diametrically opposed to our own. Nonetheless, the poem continues to appeal to current readers, as the stanza is charmingly constructed and the poem's romanticism is unavoidable.

# Poetic Devices of The Highwayman

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- **Metaphor:** This rhetorical device is used when a covert comparison is made between two different things. Noyes uses the device of metaphor when he compares the moon to a ship sailing through the clouds, which are again compared to stormy seas. Noyes also compares the narrow road to a ribbon. He makes these comparisons in the first and sixteenth stanzas.
- **Simile:** This rhetorical device is used when an overt comparison is made between two different things. Noyes uses this device when he says that Tim's hair looks as rough as hay in the fourth stanza.
- **Synecdoche:** This rhetorical device is used in many ways to represent one thing with the help of an entirely different one. Noyes uses the word "moonlight" to mean "nightfall" in his application of synecdoche in the fifth stanza, or the word "perfume" to mean "sweet-smelling hair" in the sixth stanza.

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**Onomatopoeia:** This rhetorical device is used when a word is used to describe a sound. Noyes uses onomatopoeia when he writes the words “tlot-tlot” to describe the sound made by horses’ hooves in the twelfth and thirteenth stanzas.

# Tone of the Poem

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- This poem has a strong sense of adventure and suspense running through it.
- However, closer examination reveals an underlying tone of romance, which should not be overlooked in order to fully appreciate Noyes's poetic ability.



# Themes

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- **Sacrifice:** Noyes appears to be advocating for acts of self-sacrifice in the name of love. While the highwayman is eventually slain, Bess' suicide actually saved him from the patrolmen the night he returned. The highwayman does not die until the following day, and then only through his own rash actions.
- **Revenge:** Without lawlessness, no one can approach the authorities for assistance. Then one must take matters into one's own hands and exact revenge. This is particularly obvious in early modern English literature, for example, in Hamlet. The highwayman also seeks vengeance here, as he hails from a time before to ours, when civic rules had not yet been created and abetment to suicide was not a serious offence.
- **Picaresque:** The picaresque novel was a subgenre of fiction that focused on the exploits of highwaymen and other such outlaws. Indeed, the term 'picaresque' derives from the Spanish 'pícaro,' which means thief or robber. Noyes's poem incorporates themes from the picaresque novel.

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# Thank You