



THE HIGHWAYMAN -ALFRED

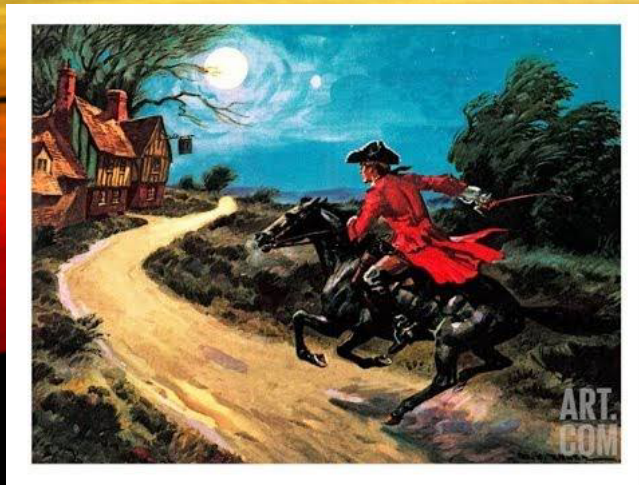
NOYES

Asst. Prof. Samina Khan



AUTHOR

- Born to Alfred and Amelia Adams Noyes on September 16, 1880, Alfred Noyes grew up in Wolverhampton, England.
- His father, a grocer and a teacher, taught Noyes Latin and Greek.
- Noyes attended Exeter College, Oxford, but left before he earned a degree.
- At the age of twenty-one he published his first collection of poems, *The Loom Years* (1902), which received praise from respected poets such as William Butler Yeats and George Meredith.
- Between 1903 and 1908, Noyes published five volumes of poetry including *The Forest of Wild Thyme* (1905) and *The Flower of Old Japan and Other Poems* (1907).
- His books were widely reviewed and were published both in Britain and the United States. Among his best-known poems from this time are "The Highwayman" and "Drake." "Drake," which appeared serially in *Blackwood's Magazine*, was a two-hundred page epic about life at sea. Both in style and subject, the poem shows a clear influence of Romantic poets such as Tennyson and Wordsworth.



ABOUT THE POEM

- **"The Highwayman"** is a romantic ballad and narrative poem written by Alfred Noyes, first published in the August 1906 issue[1] of *Blackwood's Magazine*, based in Edinburgh, Scotland.
- The following year it was included in Noyes' collection, *Forty Singing Seamen and Other Poems*, becoming an immediate success.
- In 1995 it was voted 15th in the BBC's poll for "The Nation's Favourite Poems."

THE HIGHWAYMAN LINE TO LINE ANALYSIS

Line 1

“The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,”

- The speaker of this poem opens strong, with three big metaphors all in a row.
- First he compares the wind to a "torrent of darkness." We imagine that "torrent" being like a black river, rushing and swirling along.

LINE 2

“The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,”

- The next big metaphor compares the moon to a "ghostly galleon." A galleon is a big old ship, the kind that would have carried Spanish gold across the seas.
- So the moon is like a ship sailing through the sky. You see the mood he's aiming for here? This is a spooky nighttime scene, a good setting for a sad, scary story.

LINE 3

“The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,”

- Now he introduces the road, which is a major location in this poem.
- On this dark, windy night, it shines bright and white, a thin strip of light like a "ribbon of moonlight." The bright road runs through a purple "moor" (those are the open, grassy fields that you find a lot in England).
- They aren't really purple of course, but the night and the moonlight must be making them look that way.

LINES 4-6

*“And the highwayman came
riding-- Riding--riding--*

The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.”

- Here comes our main guy – the highwayman. All these lines tell us is that he's riding up to the old door of an inn. Of course they do it with a little more style than that.
- They especially emphasize the repetitive rhythm of his "riding--riding--riding." You'll notice that this is a pretty simple story, but the speaker works hard to make it gripping for the reader.

LINES 7-8

*He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace
at his chin,*

A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin;

- This highwayman is a snappy dresser. He's got a French hat on, and a bunch of lace tucked into the top of his shirt.
- His coat is made of velvet and it's claret-colored (that's a deep red wine color). His breeches (pants) are made of doe skin (really soft leather made from deer hide).

LINE 9

“They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh.”

- Apparently the pants fit tight, with no wrinkles, and his boots are thigh high. Now if a man today tried to impress the ladies by wearing thigh high boots and tight pants and lace, it probably wouldn't work out so well.
- His clothes give us a little hint of when this poem was set. We'd guess that it takes place some time in the eighteenth century, but definitely a long time before it was written (in 1906).

LINES 10-12

*And he rode with a jeweled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.*

- This guy is dressed up so fancily that he seems to twinkle like a jewel.
- These lines also let us know that he's heavily armed, with pistols and a rapier (a long thin sword).
- Plus the sky is "jeweled" too. Everything in this stanza is glittering with beauty and excitement.

LINES 13-14

*Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
He tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and
barred;*

- The highwayman comes into the dark courtyard of the inn, making a lot of noise on the paving stones ("the cobbles").
- He taps on the shutters that cover the windows, but everything is locked up, so he doesn't get any response.

LINES 15-18

*He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her black hair.*

- Trying again, he gives a whistle, and the landlord's daughter Bess shows up.
- Apparently she's pretty good looking too, and the speaker spends some time telling us about her black eyes and long black hair.
- When the highwayman shows up, Bess is braiding ("plaiting") a "love-knot" into her hair. This love-knot would be some kind of ribbon, tied in a knot to symbolize her love for (you guessed it!) the highwayman.
- The knot is dark-red, a color associated with love and passion, but also, of course, blood. More on that later.

LINES 19-21

And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked

Where Tim the ostler listened; his face was white and peaked;

His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like moldy hay,

- Now, all of a sudden, we turn away from the couple we just met, and meet a third character. First we hear the creaking sound of a "stable-wicket" (that means a door or gate in a stable).
- Apparently someone is eavesdropping on the two lovers. It turns out to be Tim, the ostler (the guy who takes care of the horses at an inn).
- Tim's a crazy-looking guy, with a pinched white face, insane eyes, and hair that looks like moldy hay.

LINES 21-23

*But he loved the landlord's daughter,
The landlord's red-lipped daughter,
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say—*

- Crazy Tim is also in love with Bess, although it's hard to imagine he has much of a chance.
- The speaker mentions her "red lips" which helps to emphasize her beauty and the contrast with poor Tim's white face.
- As Tim listens to the highwayman, the speaker tells us he is "dumb as a dog." In this case "dumb" just means silent, but the comparison to a dog is no accident.
- We're definitely supposed to notice the difference between the beautiful lovers and this pathetic, ugly servant.

LINES 25-26

"One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize tonight,

But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light;

- Now it's back to the highwayman, who tells his "bonny [pretty] sweetheart" that he's headed off to do some robbing tonight.
- He promises her that he'll be back by morning, with gold in hand.

LINES 27-30

Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,

Then look for me by moonlight,

Watch for me by moonlight,

I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way."

- But...(and this is important) the highwayman warns Bess that he might be chased, that the law might "harry" (bother and harass) him all day. In that case, he tells her to wait for nighttime ("moonlight").
- Then he promises he'll come see her, no matter what, even if "hell should bar the way" (we might say "come hell or high water").

LINES 31-33

*He rose upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair in the casement. His face burnt like a brand
As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;*

- Now we hear about the kiss goodbye, which is a pretty romantic moment in the poem. The highwayman stands up in his saddle, and reaches up (Bess must be leaning out of a high window), just barely grabbing her hand.
- Then she lets her hair down from the window (the casement), a little like Rapunzel. He blushes bright red, like hot iron ("a brand") when her sweet smelling hair tumbles over him.

LINES 34-36

And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,

(Oh, sweet black waves in the moonlight!)

Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the West.

- The highwayman kisses Bess's hair, and the speaker makes a big deal about its "sweet black waves."
- "Notice that he also mentions the moonlight three times in three lines – it's a big part of the atmosphere of this poem."
- Then the highwayman grabs the reins of his horse and takes off to do some robbing. That ends the first scene in this poem.

LINES 37-39

He did not come in the dawning; he did not come at noon;

And out of the tawny sunset, before the rise of the moon,

When the road was a gypsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor

- Now we cut to the next day. The highwayman isn't back by dawn, or even by noon. Now the sun is setting, and he still isn't back.
- The speaker takes a moment to notice the landscape again, and he brings us back to the image of the road being like a ribbon across the purple moors, almost the same words as he used in line 3

LINES 40-42

*A red-coat troop came marching—
Marching—marching—*

- King George's men came marching, up to the old inn-door.

- Then, a nasty surprise! Instead of the highwayman, a troop of British soldiers comes marching up to the door. The speaker gives us a few useful details about the soldiers. He calls them "red-coats" and "King George's men."
- This lets us know for sure that we are somewhere in England (or at least the UK). It also lets us know that this poem is set sometime before 1830 (when George IV died).

LINES 43-44

*They said no word to the landlord, they drank his ale instead,
But they gagged his daughter and bound her to the foot of her narrow
bed;*

- Even though they're on the side of the law, these guys are clearly a bunch of jerks.
- They don't even talk to Bess's dad (the innkeeper), but they do drink his beer. On top of that, they gag Bess and tie her to the bed.

LINE 45

Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets at their side.

- Now the soldiers set up an ambush for the highwayman. They wait up in Bess's window (our speaker seems to really like using the word "casement" instead of window), with their muskets ready.
- This is a dangerous trap for the highwayman – these guys will shoot to kill.

LINES 46-48

*There was death at every window;
And hell at one dark window;
For Bess could see, through her casement, the road that he would
ride.*

- The highwayman could be shot and killed from any window. The worst thing of all though, is that Bess can see the road through the window from where she's tied up.
- That's why there is "hell at one dark window." The cruelty of the soldiers and the pain of her situation have put Bess in a private hell.

LINES 49-50

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest.

They had bound a musket beside her, with the barrel beneath her breast.

- Not only do the soldiers tie Bess up "at attention" (as if she was a soldier standing up at attention), they make fun of her too. They make "sniggering jests" (mean little jokes)
- Then they tied up a gun next to her, with the barrel pointing right at her chest. Maybe they did this to scare her, to keep her in line, although the speaker doesn't exactly say.

LINES 51-54

"Now keep good watch!" and they kissed her. She heard the doomed man say-

- Look for me by moonlight;

Watch for me by moonlight; I'll come to thee by moonlight,

though hell should bar the way! Then they tell her to "keep good watch,"

- which is a pretty cruel joke, since she'll be watching her boyfriend get murdered. Then they kiss her, just to be sleazy as well as mean. If these guys were in a cartoon, they'd be twirling their mustaches and laughing maniacally.
- Bess can think only of her "doomed" highwayman, and she remembers his promise to come back by moonlight. The speaker repeats lines 28-30 just to remind us what the highwayman said.

LINES 55-60

She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held good.

She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or blood.

They stretched and strained in the darkness, and the hours crawled by like years

Till, now, on the stroke of midnight,

Cold, on the stroke of midnight,

The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at least was hers!

- We think this scene feels like it's straight out of an action movie. The bad guys have the heroine tied up, and she struggles to get free. At first it seems impossible, but eventually she manages it and slips out of the ropes.
- That's what happens here, except Bess isn't trying to escape. She's reaching for the trigger of the gun. She strains and struggles and the speaker really makes it seem like it's taking forever. Finally, at midnight, she grabs the trigger.

LINES 61-62

The tip of one finger touched it. She strove no more for the rest.

Up, she stood up to attention, with the muzzle beneath her breast.

- She just gets the tip of her finger on the trigger, and she stops there. She stands up, at attention, with the tip of the gun under her breast.
- By now we should be pretty curious about what Bess is up to. She's clearly got a plan, but we don't know what it is yet.

LINES 63-66

*She would not risk their hearing; she would not strive again;
For the road lay bare in the moonlight;
Blank and bare in the moonlight;
And the blood of her veins, in the moonlight,
throbbed to her love's refrain.*

- She doesn't want the soldiers to hear, so she holds still. Besides, there's nothing to do now but wait. From what Bess can see, the road is empty and "bare in the moonlight."
- "See that moonlight cropping up again? It's *everywhere* in this poem. All Bess feels is the blood in her veins, throbbing "to her love's refrain."
- Refrain is an interesting word there. It's a term for a repeated phrase in a poem, and there are plenty of those here. It could also be any repeated sound, say the sound of Bess's heart, or maybe the pounding of hooves. Stay tuned...

LINES 67-68

Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot! Had they heard it? The horse-hoofs ringing clear;

Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did not hear?

- Right after hearing about love's refrain, we hear (at the same time as Bess) an actual refrain, the steady repeating sound of horses' hooves.
- That's bad news, because it means the highwayman is coming back. It's not clear right away if the soldiers have heard the tlot-tlot sound of the hooves.
- The tension is high.

LINES 69-72

*Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
The highwayman came riding,
Riding, riding!*

The red-coats looked to their priming! She stood up, straight and still!

- Now the highwayman comes riding along the road ("the ribbon of moonlight") and appears over the top of the hill.
- There's a little refrain, an echo of lines 4-5 with that "riding, riding" stuff.
- Now the soldiers have heard for sure, and they start getting their guns ready ("looking to their priming").

LINES 73-74

*Tlot-tlot, in the frosty silence! Tlot-tlot, in the echoing night!
Nearer he came and nearer! Her face was like a light!*

- The speaker really draws out the highwayman's approach. We hear the sound of the hooves again and again, the only sound in the cold night.
- He comes closer and closer, and Bess's face shines in the darkness. We're not totally sure why it's shining. Scared? Sweaty?

LINES 75-78

*Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath,
Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
Her musket shattered the moonlight,
Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned
him--with her death.*

- Now Bess makes her move. She opens her eyes, takes a breath, pulls the trigger, and shoots herself in the chest.
- It's a desperate move, but she did it for love, to warn the highwayman about the waiting soldiers. She gave her life to try to save him.

LINES 79-80

*He turned; he spurred to the west; he did not know who stood
Bowed, with her head o'er the musket, drenched with her own red
blood.*

- The highwayman hears the warning, even though he doesn't know where it came from, and he takes off back to the west.
- The speaker takes a moment to focus on the tragic scene of Bess, bent over the musket, soaked in blood. Pretty grim, huh?

LINES 81-84

*Not till the dawn he heard it, his face grew gray to hear
How Bess, the landlord's daughter,
The landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Had watched for her love in the moonlight, and
died in the darkness there.*

- Finally, the highwayman does hear what happened, although it's not clear how he finds out.
- His face goes gray when he hears the news. We get another short review of poor Bess's death.
- A lot of this poem's impact is based on repetition.

LINES 85-86

Back, he spurred like a madman, shouting a curse to the sky,

With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high!

- When he hears how Bess died, the highwayman makes a dumb move. He goes back.
- The speaker makes it clear that he's almost crazy with sadness and anger. He curses and rides as fast as he can, swinging his sword as he goes.

LINES 87-90

*Blood-red were his spurs in the golden noon;
wine-red was his velvet coat, When they shot him down on the highway,
Down like a dog on the highway,
And he lay in his blood on the highway,
with the bunch of lace at his throat.*

- Then (you guessed it) the highwayman dies. He gets shot down by the British soldiers. We get lots more little refrains in these lines including reminders of what the highwayman is wearing (like in lines 7-9).
- We also hear that he is shot "down like a dog." Sharp poetry detectives will remember that the speaker used that same word to describe Tim, the crazy ostler, in line 24.
- Maybe there's a connection there. Maybe Tim had something to do with the highwayman's death?

LINE 91-101

And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,

When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,

When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,

A highwayman comes riding—

Riding--riding--

A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.

Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard;

He taps with his whip on the shutters, but all is locked and barred;

He whistles a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there

But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,

Bess, the landlord's daughter,

Now we get the neat little ghost story ending. Even though Bess and the highwayman are dead, their spirits come back to haunt the night and play out this scene again and again.

The speaker drives this home by repeating the first stanza (lines 1-6) and the third stanza (lines 13-18) almost word for word.

The big difference is that now it's in the present tense. This really adds to the feeling of repetition. This isn't just a thing that happened once, it happens again and again, and could even be happening right now.

LINE 102

Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

- We end with the image of Bess braiding her hair. In a way, it's almost like she never died, like she has a new life in this spooky ending.
- It takes the edge off the tragedy. The ghost story becomes almost comforting.