

The Highwayman

By Alfred Noyes

Part One

I

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight, over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding-
Riding-riding-
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

II

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;
They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!
And he rode with a jewelled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

III

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
And he tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred;
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 long black hair.

IV

And dark in the 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 mouldy hay,
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-

V

"One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize to-night,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light;
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."

VI

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

Part Two

I

He did not come in the dawning; he did not come at noon;
And out o' the tawny sunset, before the rise o' the moon,
When the road was a gipsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,
A red-coat troop came marching-
Marching-marching-
King George's men came marching, up to the old inn-door.

II

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;
Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets at their side!
There was death at every window;
And hell at one dark window;
For Bess could see, through the casement, the road that he would ride.

III

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest;
They bound a musket beside her, with the barrel beneath her breast!
"Now keep good watch!" and they kissed her.
She heard the dead 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!

IV

She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held good!
She writhed her hands till here 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!

V

The tip of one finger touched it; she strove no more for the rest!
Up, she stood up to attention, with the barrel beneath her breast,
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.

VI

Flot-flot; flot-flot! Had they heard it? The horse-hoofs
ringing clear;
Flot-flot, flot-flot, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did
not hear?
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 strait and still!

VII

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

VIII

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!
Not till the dawn he heard it, his face grew grey 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.

IX

Back, he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high!
Blood-red were his spurs i' 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 a bunch of lace at his throat.

* * * * *

X

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.

XI

Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard,
And 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,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

About the Author

Alfred Noyes was born in Staffordshire in 1880 and began writing poetry while he was attending Oxford University. His first book, 'The Loom of Years', was published during his final year there and so Alfred decided he would leave immediately without taking his degree.

Most famous for his poems about the sea, Alfred also wrote about the lives of Voltaire and William Morris. Obviously fascinated by highway robbery, he not only wrote 'The Highwayman' but also 'Dick Turpin's Ride', which chronicles Turpin's epic journey to York on his famous horse, Black Bess.

Alfred Noyes died in 1958.

About the Poem.

'The Highwayman' is what we call a narrative poem, which means it is a poem that tells a story. That being the case, we can read it like a story and it has all the features of a story. It has -

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

Tricky Vocabulary

You might have noticed that there are some tricky words in this poem and ones that you might never have heard before. Words such as 'casement', 'torrent', 'rapier hilt', and 'writhed'. Sometimes it is very tempting just to skip over these words, ignore them, and hope they are not the important ones, but to understand any text properly it's best to take special care of these tricky words. So, have a look through the poem again and make a note of any words you're not familiar with. Then, take your honest and very long list and look up the words. Find a dictionary, ask members of your family, your teachers, your friends - and then, once you know what the words mean, impress everyone by using them in your own writing!

We can tell from some of the words in the poem that it is set a long time ago. See if you can find modern day words for the following -

casement
rapier
harry

breeches
wicket
jest

Similes and Metaphors

You might remember that in Issue 1, we looked at similes and metaphors and there are plenty of both to be found in 'The Highwayman'. One of the most memorable metaphors of the poem is Alfred Noyes saying, 'The road was a ribbon of moonlight'. It is a metaphor because it makes a comparison between two things, the road and a piece of a ribbon, without using the words 'as' or 'like'.

Take a look at these photographs. How could you describe them, using a metaphor?



Now that we've reminded ourselves of what a metaphor is, how about searching out those similes! Remember - a simile is a comparison between two things that DOES use the word 'like' or 'as'. Can you find two examples of similes?

Well done!

'The Highwayman' also has examples of alliteration and personification. Here's what those two words mean.

Alliteration - is where a consonant sound is repeated in a sentence. For example -

'Up, she stood to attention, with the barrel beneath her breast.'

The words barrel, beneath and breast all start with the same letter.

Personification - is a figure of speech in which an object that is not human is given attributes of a human. For example -

'There was death at every window;
And hell at one dark window;'

Here 'death' and 'hell' are given form as though they are actually standing at the windows. Why do you think hell was at one window in particular?

See if you can personify these nouns! We'll give you an example -

The sea was sighing.

The tree

The blanket

The motorbike

Narrative Poetry

Now that we know what a narrative poem is, we can think about how we might read or perform it. We can think about what we might need to do without voices. We will need to think about -

- expression
- body language
- facial expression
- intonation

How does Alfred Noyes, and other authors like him, help us to understand the building of tension and prepare us to perform it so others understand it too? Take a look at this section of the poem...

*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?*

The first line, by asking a question, suggests the noise is so far away it can only just be heard. But by the second, the sound is so loud the soldiers must hear it. Then the author takes us on a journey...

Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
...before returning to the rhythm of the horses hooves, gaining speed.

Tlot-tlot in the frosty silence! Tlot-tlot in the echoing night!

How will your voice sound as you read this section? And how will it change as you guide the unsuspecting audience toward the tragedy that is the silence being broken?

Here are some more drama activities you might like to have a go at -

- Mime the part of the poem where Bess is trying to reach for the trigger of the musket. Imagine the fear she must have been feeling. Imagine how much she must love the Highwayman to sacrifice herself for him. Show her watching death approach every window and let us guess from your expression which window will frame him approaching in the moonlight.
- Dissect each verse in turn and note down the key events in each. Then act out each verse using the poem as your script.
- Create a dance based around the ribbon of moonlight and her relationship with the moor. How does the ribbon change when the highwayman travels upon it?

Setting and Characters

Setting

The Moors - Moors are dangerous places. Barren, rough, and prone to extreme and unpredictable weather changes, Dartmoor, Exmoor and the North Yorkshire moors are not for the faint hearted!

And this is where Alfred Noyes seemingly sets his scene.

Except very few highwaymen would have stalked the moors; they preferred the main routes in and out of London. Hampstead Heath was a well-known spot for Highwaymen. Now a wide-open space in the centre of the city, the Heath was originally part of the countryside and consisted of woodland, meadows, and heathland. It is probable that this is where Alfred Noyes set his story.

The Inn - The Inn featured in 'The Highwayman' has been identified as the Spaniard's Inn on Hampstead Heath. Legend has it that the most famous of all Highwaymen, Dick Turpin, was born there. Like so many Legends, the story is not true and is no doubt due to Dick Turpin's father owning the Bell Inn in *Hempstead*, Essex. Still, the Spaniard's Inn was a favourite haunt of highwaymen. *Why not look the Inn up on the Internet? It's still there and would make a great setting for any Highwayman story or poem you might be writing.*

Characters

The main characters in this poem are the unnamed Highwayman and Bess, the landlord's daughter. But there are other characters too. How many more can you find?

The Highwayman – So, what exactly is a highwayman?

Well, to be a highwayman was to be a robber. They were usually mounted on a horse and robbed travellers as they passed along unprotected highways or roads. Highwaymen first became a serious nuisance after the English Civil War (1649) and several of them were old soldiers who had been unable to return to a 'normal' life. That same year, Parliament offered a £10 reward for the arrest of a highwayman who could be successfully convicted.

Lots of highwaymen were well educated - it took an intelligent man to know which coaches were best to rob and how to get away with robbing it. Some were disgruntled card players who had lost all their money during a night at the Inn and had decided to lie in ambush and steal from those who had been more successful. Others were servants who wanted the life of their masters. These servants were ignored by the rich men they worked for and so could easily listen in on who had the most money and by which road they would be leaving their master's home. These kind of highwaymen were rarely violent, some didn't even bother with masks, but there were those, of course, who simply liked robbing people and they could be more dangerous. The most famous of all the highwaymen is still Dick Turpin, whose ride to York on his entirely fictional Black Bess, has become the stuff of Legend.

Highwaymen operated throughout the age of coach travel in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. By 1830 they had ceased to exist, cast aside by better policing and improved roads.

The Highwaymen had a famous phrase they shout at their victims. Do you know what it is? Here's an anagram to help you - *dasnt dan vedilre*

Which of these are famous highwaymen?

Mary Frith

George Beckwith

Jack Shephard

Frank Steal

Dick Turpin

Jane Smith

The Ostler - What do you think an ostler is? What kind of work did he do? Well, if you are not sure, have a look at the poem and see if there are any clues.

And dark in the old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim the ostler listened;...

Yes, and ostler was a stable hand at an inn, or a pub. It was his job to look after the horses of the men who came to the inn to have a drink.

Look at some of these old-fashioned job titles and see if you can match them to their job description.

Wheelwright

Town Crier

Farrier

Footman

Nob thatcher

Haberdasher

a seller of clothing

a male servant

a tin pot and pan seller, repairer and knife sharpener

a wig maker

a maker of barrels

a blacksmith, horse doctor, or officer in charge of horses

Hillier

Tinker

a public announcer

a roof tiler

We are led to believe that it was the ostler who betrayed the Highwayman to King George's cruel soldiers. Why do you think he did that? Can you find the passage in the poem that supports your answer?

Here are some more activities for you -

- Write a poem from the point of the view of Tim the ostler. How was he feeling when he realized Bess was dead? Is that what he wanted?
- Highlight words in the text that describe the ostler and use them to write an advert for him for the local newspaper's lonely hearts column.
- Write a short play containing the conversation between the ostler and one of King George's soldiers.

King George's men - Over time, there have been six English Kings by the name of George, so which one is Alfred Noyes talking about?

Well, we know Alfred Noyes died in 1958, six years after the reign of George VI ended, but during his reign fighting highwaymen was never a threat to him and although the King was indeed ruling the country during the Second World War, his soldiers were not wearing red uniforms but colours better suited to camouflage. We had perhaps look further back than Alfred's own King George VI.

In the 1600's, when the New Model Army was born, it was not really necessary to be camouflaged. The weapons they were using were not yet developed enough to fire over long distances, and much of the fighting was done close up. This being the case, the soldiers wore bright colours to dazzle their opponents and prove themselves the most worthy of winning the battle. The New Model Army all wore Venetian Red uniforms from 1645 onwards.

Most of the British soldiers were still wearing red uniforms during the Napoleonic wars and wore them for the last time at the Battle of Gennis on 30th December 1885. The red uniforms were then replaced with khaki ones.

There are other clues in the poem as to which King George was being referred to. Alfred Noyes states that the redcoats were carrying muskets and that, when they finally heard the highwayman coming, each of them *'looked to their priming'*. What does that mean?



The flintlock musket was loaded differently to firearms today. The soldiers would have had a paper cartridge containing some powder and a lead ball. First, they would have bitten off the end containing the ball and poured half the powder down the barrel of the musket. Then the ball would have been spat down the barrel and the paper rammed down after it to stop the ball from rolling out. Finally, the remaining powder was poured into the priming pan which, when the hammer struck the flint, caused a mini explosion that resulted in the musket firing. When the redcoats looked to their priming, they were making sure their muskets were ready to be fired.

Muskets have been described as 'the weapon of the world's infantry' and were used from about 1670 to 1840.

So... Which King George do you think Alfred Noyes was referring to in his poem? You may need to look up the dates of the reigns of most or all of the King Georges.

Why not find, make, or improvise some musical instruments and tell The Highwayman poem through music. Create a soundscape, or a score, hitting all the highs, lows, excitement, treachery, tragedy and ghostly goings on of the story.

If you are interested in technical things, you may like to find out about the following two interesting ideas:

1. When someone changes something completely we say they changed everything, lock, stock and barrel. Where does the expression 'lock, stock and barrel' come from?
2. When eventually the muskets were replaced by better long barreled guns, they were called rifles because they used something called rifling. What is rifling and how does it help to improve the gun?

Tools of the Highwayman

Now that we have looked at Alfred Noyes' poem, perhaps you would like to write your own story or narrative poem about highwaymen.

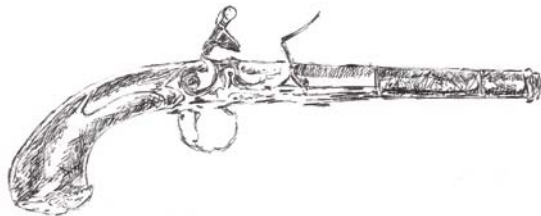


Highwaymen often wore smart clothes and long coats. Some wore their old army uniforms.

A mask helped them escape without being recognised. Traditionally, these masks only covered the top half of the face.

Horses were important to the Highwayman. They needed to be capable of travelling long distances and run fast over uneven ground.

The three cornered hat was a favourite with the Highwayman and was worn by the most famous of them all, Dick Turpin.



The pistol was easy to carry and fitted inside pockets. They were used by both the Highwayman and by those who were trying to stop him. Pistols were loaded in the same way as the flintlock musket.

This is the kind of carriage the Highwaymen would have targeted. Drawn by a team of horses, the carriages were often full of travellers with fat purses, ripe for stealing.

