

Exploring 'The Highwayman' Answers

What three adjectives would you choose to describe this poem?

Accept any relevant adjectives, e.g. sad, tragic, melancholic, spooky, eerie.

How does Alfred Noyes describe the moon?

He describes the moon as a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.

Why do you think the poem is written in two parts?

The first part of the poem describes the meeting between Bess and the highwayman, them falling in love and their excitement at the chance of seeing each other again soon; the second part describes the tragic events that led to the death of Bess (and subsequently the highwayman) upon the return of the highwayman.

The two parts have very different moods, from happy and hopeful to sad and tragic.

How many words can you find that describe the highwayman riding his horse?

- Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed
- Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the west.
- Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot!
- He spurred to the west
- A highwayman comes riding
- Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs

What features tell us that this poem is not set in the present day?

Old fashioned descriptions and words, e.g.

The highwayman riding his horse and his clothing: French cocked-hat, a bunch of lace at his chin, breeches, boots up to the thigh; his gun: a jewelled pistol and a rapier hilt (sword).

The inn: cobbles, shutters, stable-wicket (gate), ostler (man employed to look after horses at an inn), casement (window).

King George's men (red-coat troop marching) are mentioned with their muskets (guns).

What do you notice about the fourth and fifth lines in each stanza?

The fifth line repeats, or further describes, the fourth line.

Which two stanzas of the poem are written in present tense?

The final two (sixteenth and seventeenth) which describe the ghosts of Bess and the highwayman.

Why did Bess kill herself?

To warn the highwayman that the King's troops were waiting for him to arrive.

The poem describes the road as a 'ribbon of moonlight'. What does this tell us about the road?

It tells us that the road is lit by the moonlight and it is narrow and winding.

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Why do you think King George's men came to the inn?

Accept any reasonable inference, for example: Tim the Ostler told them that the highwayman was going to return and, as a highwayman is a robber, they came to arrest him.

What do these three phrases have in common?

- 'The road was a ribbon of moonlight'
- 'There was death at every window'
- 'When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas'
- They are all metaphors.

What type of figurative language is used in this phrase?

'His hair like mouldy hay'

This is a simile.

Can you name any onomatopoeic words in the poem?

Accept any relevant words, e.g. clattered, clashes.

Why do you think someone might say this poem has a happy ending?

Even though they both died, Bess and the highwayman ended up together (as ghosts) at the end of the poem.