

"The Highwayman," a poem by Alfred Noyes published in 1906, tells the story of a highwayman who falls in love with Bess, a landlord's daughter. The story ends tragically, but both are reunited again on winter nights in the afterlife.

The poem opens on a winter night with a highwayman riding into town. He is dressed finely and rides confidently into the city in the moonlight. He taps on the shutters but they are all closed until one window opens, and he sees Bess, the landlord's daughter.

He and Bess are love, and he asks her to wait for him to return. He is after a prize, but he will come back. She agrees and lets down her hair for him to kiss. In the dark, the ostler, Tim, watches them. When the highwayman rides away, Tim goes off to betray him.

In the second part, Bess is waiting for him to return, but he does not come back in the morning or the afternoon. In the evening, the King's men ride into the town and capture Bess. They tie her up and use her as bait. As a joke, they rope a musket to her and ask her to keep watch, laughing as they go downstairs.

She is unable to get free no matter how hard she tries. She can move just her finger so that she can cover the trigger; she decides to do no more in case they hear her. She waits for the highwayman. In the distance, she hears the sound of a horse. She does not know if the men have heard it yet. She listens, and then she makes a crucial decision.

She pulls the trigger and shoots herself in the heart so the sound of the gunshot will warn him. He hears it and takes off not knowing that she has killed herself to warn him. He rides all night, and in the morning, he hears the news of Bess's sacrifice. In his anger, he rides back into town where they shoot him, and he dies as well.

The epilogue of the poem states that in the winter when the wind is in the trees, you can still hear the highwayman ride into town. He knocks on all the windows until he finds the one of his love. He whistles his tune, and the landlord's daughter is waiting for him.

The central theme of the poem is love. The love between the highwayman and the landlord's daughter is an idealized love, and although it kills them both, we understand that this kind of love is worth the ultimate sacrifice. Tim is also in love with Bess, which is why he betrays the highwayman, but we understand that his love is more base than the pure love between the highwayman and Bess.

The highwayman is an antihero. He is a robber who steals from travellers. Even though his job is not an upstanding one, we still admire his ability to love Bess, and we admire his bravery. He is not an ideal person, but the love they share redeems his character.

An unusual aspect of the poem is that the main characters are beautiful. The writer spends a lot of time describing the looks of the highwayman. He wants us to understand that this man is no ordinary robber. He is clean and snappy. Bess is described in beautiful terms as well. Again, in contrast, Tim the ostler is ugly and sloppy. Their appearances are foreshadowing of their fate. We are not typically tasked with judging on appearance, but the poem makes it difficult not to draw a comparison between the physical beauty of the highwayman and Bess and the beauty of their love, as well as the ugliness of Tim and the base love he has for Bess.

The poem is framed in descriptions of the natural world. The moonlight alone is mentioned nineteen separate times. This exaggerated, otherworldly description of the natural world gives the poem its strong sense of atmosphere. The writer gives us an extraordinary sense of reality to frame the actions that are taking place. It's not just a love story; it is the kind of story that becomes legend.

The poem also subverts the notion of bravery. The highwayman is brave; he has to be to ride the roads at night and rob travellers. Bess is brave in using her death to warn her love. It is clear that Tim is the opposite of brave despite the fact that he is doing the morally right thing by turning in the highwayman. And the King's men are definitely not brave in that they use Bess as bait to capture him instead of riding out to meet him directly.

"The Highwayman" challenges several major poetic themes to create a love that is both intriguing and idealized. It celebrates the antihero for being capable of true love and real bravery and lets us know that those who would try to interfere with true love will ultimately fail.