

Reading Questions: Prompt Sheet

The Highwayman by Alfred Noyes

Reading Questions and Answers

Which words are unfamiliar? Why? Can you work out what they mean by reading the rest of the stanza?

- torrent: strong and fast-moving like a river
- galleon: an old-fashioned sailing ship used from the 15th century
- moor: un-farmed open land, often covered with heather
- breeches: trousers
- doe-skin: skin of a female deer, soft and supple
- pistol: small gun designed to be held in one hand
- pistol-butt: handle of the pistol
- rapier: long, thin, twin-edged sharp sword
- rapier hilt: handle of the rapier
- stable-wicket: a small door or gate
- ostler: old-fashioned word to describe a man who looks after horses
- harry: bother or harass
- casement: window
- brand: hot iron used for burning a mark on livestock

Stanza 1: Which words and phrases tell us what time of day it is and what the weather is like?

- Example answer: Mention of the moon and the moonlight reflecting off the road tell us that it is night-time. 'The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees' tells us that it is very windy.

Stanza 2: What is the highwayman wearing? What do his clothes suggest about him? What does 'he rode with a jewelled twinkle' mean?

- Example answer: The highwayman is wearing a French cocked-hat - a triangular shaped hat worn by men in the 18th century; a pair of brown breeches (trousers) made of doe-skin (deer hide); a claret (deep-red) velvet coat; white shirt with lace ruffles at the collar and thigh-high boots. He is clearly well-dressed and presented; he obviously takes pride in his appearance.
- 'He rode with a jewelled twinkle' means that the moonlight is reflecting off him and his weapons (his pistol butts a-twinkle/his rapier hilt a-twinkle) making him look like he is studded with jewels. It also hints at a twinkling, confident personality.

Stanza 3: Who has the highwayman come to see? What do you think a 'love-knot' is?

- Example answer: The highwayman has come to see Bess - the daughter of the inn landlord. In this poem, Bess's love-knot is made by plaiting a ribbon into her hair. This represents her bond with the highwayman.

Stanza 4: Who is Tim? What is he doing and why? What does the description tell us about him?

- Example answer: Tim is an ostler, which means he looks after the horses. He is skulking around the inn-yard listening to the conversation between Bess and the highwayman.
- The description makes Tim sound like he is a deranged and lowly character. The words 'his face was white and peaked' suggests he is sickly-looking with eyes like 'hollows of madness' indicating an almost crazed demeanour. His 'hair like mouldy hay' tells us that he is unkempt and dirty.

Stanza 5: What does the highwayman mean when he says he is 'after a prize to-night'? What does he promise to Bess?

- Example answer: The prize the highwayman is after is money or other goods that he intends to steal from travellers out on the road.
- He promises Bess that no matter what happens he will return to her with gold.

Stanza 6: What do you think 'His face burnt like a brand' means? What are the 'sweet, black waves'?

- Example answer: 'His face burnt like a brand' means that he is blushing from Bess's attention - his face feels like it is glowing red hot as if struck with a branding iron.
- 'Sweet black waves' describes Bess's wavy hair.

Deeper Reading

How and why do you think Tim will be significant in the poem?

- Tim loves Bess but she and the highwayman are in love with each other and probably completely unaware of Tim's feelings and the frustration and despair that unrequited love brings.
- The fact that a crazy man, who is in love with Bess, knows she is involved with a wanted highwayman is a potential threat. He could try and spoil their arrangement in a bid to try to get closer to Bess himself.

