

# 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?**

- tawny: orangey/yellow-brown colour
- gypsy: traveller
- landlord: man who runs an inn
- ale: beer
- gagged: stopped from moving the mouth to prevent screaming by putting something in it, e.g. a length of material that could then be tied around the head
- musket: a gun with a long barrel (the tubular part of the gun)
- muzzle: the hole at the end of the barrel of a gun where the bullet comes out
- spurs: spikes or a spiked wheel worn on the heels of riding boots and used to prompt the horse to move forwards

**Stanza 1: Who are the red-coats? What time of day do they come?**

- Example answer: The red-coats were soldiers, so-called because of the red military jackets they wore. As these red-coats are described as 'King George's men' it is likely they were serving under King George III who ruled from 1760-1810.
- The soldiers come during the 'tawny sunset' when the light is an orangey/yellow-brown and it is not fully dark, 'before the rise o' the moon'.

**Stanza 2/3: What have the red-coats done? What do they mean by 'keep good watch'?**

- Example answer: The red-coats have tied Bess up so that she is stood upright with a musket strapped up her body and the muzzle pointing into her breast. They have propped her up in front of the window facing outwards.
- The red-coats say 'Keep good watch,' because they know when the highwayman arrives Bess will do her best to warn him of the danger waiting and in doing so warn them of his arrival.

**Stanza 4/5: Which words and phrases describe Bess's desperation? What is she trying to do?**

- Example answer: Bess is frantically trying to secure a grip on the trigger of the musket. The line 'She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or blood!' shows that she is desperate to achieve this aim and the exertion and pain of trying will not deter her. To Bess, standing there feels 'like years' and her fingers are 'stretched and strained' trying to reach the trigger.

**Stanza 6/7: Why is 'tlot, tlot' repeated several times? Why is Bess described as the red-coats' 'priming'?**

- Example answer: 'Tlot, tlot,' is repeated several times to build up the suspense of the highwayman's arrival. It represents the sound of the horse's hoofs approaching.
- Something that is primed is prepared and ready for use. In this part of the poem Bess is described as the red-coats' 'priming' because they are using her like bait to lure in the highwayman.

**Stanza 8/9: Which words/phrases describe the highwayman's state of mind throughout these two stanzas?**

- Example answer: The highwayman is stopped in his tracks by the sound of the gunshot and he is confused 'he did not know who stood...' This confusion turns to a sickening realisation when he hears about Bess 'his face grew grey to hear'. In stanza 9 his anger surfaces. He is incensed and intent on revenge 'Back, he spurred like a madman...his rapier brandished high!'

**Stanza 10/11: How do these stanzas compare to stanzas 1 and 2 from Part 1 of the poem?**

- Example answer: These stanzas almost exactly mirror stanzas 1 and 2 from Part 1 of the poem, except this time the two main characters are dead. Repeating the stanzas in this way is a poignant reminder of the fate they met. Now they are trapped in time - a ghostly eternity - continuously re-living their last meeting together before their deaths.

### Deeper Reading

**Find words and phrases throughout the poem that reflect the theme of danger and death.**

- From the very start of the poem there is a sense of unrest and an eerie ghostly atmosphere. In Part 1, stanza 1, the 'torrent of darkness' represents something deep and foreboding and the moon as a 'ghostly galleon' on 'cloudy seas' also suggests there could be trouble ahead.
- In stanza 3, Bess's red love-knot could be seen to represent the lovers' blood that will be spilt.
- In stanza 4, Tim's crazed demeanour suggests impending danger - he loves Bess; will he seek revenge on the highwayman?
- In stanza 5, the highwayman promises to return even if 'hell should bar the way'. A hellish fate will later afflict them both.
- In Part 2, stanza 2, Bess is tied up and death and danger is inevitable, 'there was death at every window; And hell at one dark window'. We know now that something bad will definitely happen.
- In stanzas 4 and 5, Bess finds the trigger of the musket and we know that she has the power to kill herself, 'the trigger at least was hers'. Her blood pounds round her body - she is poised and ready to commit the act of suicide for love, 'the blood of her veins in the moonlight throbbed to her love's refrain'.

