The Highwayman

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▲ Critical Viewing What elements of the poem's setting does this illustration capture? [Connect]
Part One

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,²
And the highwayman came riding—

Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.

He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches³ of brown doeskin.
They fitted with never a wrinkle. His boots were up to the thigh.

And he rode with a jeweled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt⁴ a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn yard.
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

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1. galleon (gål' ən) n.: Large Spanish sailing ship.
2. moor (moor) n.: Open, rolling land with swamps.
3. breeches (brich' iks) n.: Trousers that reach to or just below the knee.
4. rapier (rā' pē ar) hilt: Large cup-shaped handle of a rapier, which is a type of sword.

◆ Build Vocabulary

torrent (tōr' ent) n.: Flood
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting\(^5\) a dark red love knot into her long black hair.

And dark in the dark old innyard a stable wicket\(^6\) creaked
Where Tim the ostler\(^7\) listened. His face was white and peaked.
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like moldy 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—
"One kiss, my bonny\(^8\) 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\(^9\) 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."

He rose upright in the stirrups. He scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair in the casement.\(^10\) His face burnt like a brand\(^11\)
As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,
(O, sweet black waves in the moonlight!)
Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the west.

**Part Two**

He did not come in the dawning. He did not come at noon;
And out of the tawny sunset, before the rise of the moon,
When the road was a gypsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,
A redcoat troop came marching—
Marching—marching—
King George's men\(^12\) came marching, up to the old inn door.

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5. plaiting (plāt' ŵl) adj.: Braiding.
6. stable wicket (stā' bal wik' ēt): Small door or gate to a stable.
7. ostler (ōst' lar) n.: Person who takes care of horses at an inn or a stable.
8. bonny (bān' ē) adj.: Scottish for "pretty."
9. harry (hār' ē) v.: To disturb by constant attacks.
10. casement (kās' men) n.: Window frame that opens on hinges.
11. brand (brand) n.: Piece of burning wood.
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 her casement, the road that he
would ride.

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering
jest. 13

They had bound a musket beside her, with the muzzle
beneath her breast!
“Now, keep good watch!” and they kissed her. She heard the
doomed 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!

She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held
good!
She writhed her hands till her 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!
The tip of one finger touched it. She strove no more for the
rest.
Up, she stood up to attention, with the muzzle 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;

13. sniggering (snig' or in) jest: Sly joke.

◆ Build Vocabulary

landlord (land' lord) n.: Person who keeps a rooming house, inn, etc.
cascade (kas kā'd') n.: Waterfall or anything tumbling like water
tawny (tō' nā) adj.: Tan; yellowish brown
bound (bound) v.: Tied
strive (strīv) v.: Struggle
And the blood of her veins, in the moonlight, throbbed to her love's refrain.

_Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot!_ Had they heard it? The horsehoofs ringing clear;
_Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot,_ 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 redcoats looked to their priming!¹⁴ She stood up, straight and still.

_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.

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 blood!
Not till the dawn he heard it, and his face grew gray 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.

Back, he spurred like a madman, shouting a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier _brandished_ high.
Blood-red were his spurs in 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.

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¹⁴. _priming (prə'ming)_ n.: Explosive used to set off the charge in a gun.

◆ **Build Vocabulary**

_brandished_ (brand'lisht) adj.: Waved in a threatening way
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.

Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark innyard.
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.

Guide for Responding

◆ Literature and Your Life

Reader's Response Who do you think was more brave—Bess or the highwayman? Why?
Thematic Focus What choices do Bess and the highwayman make that lead to trouble?
Poll Ask several classmates to supply three adjectives to describe the highwayman. Identify the adjectives most frequently used. What conclusion can you draw about this larger-than-life figure based on the results?

✓ Check Your Comprehension
1. Describe the two main characters of the poem.
2. Where and when does most of the action take place?
3. Use lines 25–30 to explain the highwayman's plans.
4. Why does Bess think she needs to warn the highwayman?
5. Use lines 75–80 to summarize how she communicates her warning.

◆ Critical Thinking

Interpret
1. What evidence is there to suggest that Bess and the highwayman have met on many moonlit nights? [Infer]
2. Find three details that make the highwayman appear a romantic, or dashing, figure. [Connect]
3. How does the repetition of the color red add to the poem's romantic quality? [Support]
4. What elements of the setting add to the poem's romantic quality? [Support]
5. What do the last two stanzas suggest about the love between Bess and her highwayman? [Draw Conclusions]

Evaluate
6. Would the poem have been as effective if it had ended at line 90? Explain. [Evaluate]

Extend
7. What can you learn from this poem about life in eighteenth-century England? [Social Studies Link]