CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Tam o’ Shanter

Robert Burns · *1790 · original English text*

When chapman billies leave the street, and drouthy neibors meet, Tam o’ Shanter takes the road from Ayr on a night that will show him a dance he should not have stayed to see. The site EPUB is this poem only; the Gutenberg file is the collected Poems and Songs of Robert Burns.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a night’s drinking cost a man who will not take the short road home, and can a comic Scots tale still end as a warning?

“When chapman billies leave the street,”

The opening of the poem

The hosted EPUB is Tam o’ Shanter only. Project Gutenberg #1279 is the collected Poems and Songs. Quote only this tale, in stretches that appear in both, including the Scots of “chapman billies,” “drouthy neibors,” and “bousing at the nappy.” The poem is comic, then suddenly dire: a kirk, a dance of witches, a short-tailed mare, and a narrow escape. For a wide older band. Teach the Scots on the page, not a flattened paraphrase only, and teach the last warning without turning the poem into a mere temperance tract.

KEY CHARACTERS

Tam o’ Shanter
The drinker on the road from Ayr, honest and not wise enough that night.

the mare
The beast who carries him, and who pays a price at the last water.

Kate, at home
The waiting wife, already a warning in the early lines.

the company in the kirk
The dance Tam should not have stayed to see, including Nannie.

WHEN CHAPMEN LEAVE THE STREET

> *“When chapman billies leave the street,”*
>
> The opening

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

When Market Days Are Late

THE OPENING

Chapmen leave the street, thirsty neighbors meet, and folk begin to take the gate. Tam is still sitting, drinking, while the road and a waiting wife are unnamed only for a moment.

- The first line is exact in both the EPUB and the Burns volume.
- The Scots is the poem; quote it.
- The comedy of the tavern is the first movement, not the whole.

> *“When chapman billies leave the street,”*
>
> The opening

02

Honest Tam, from Ayr

THE RIDE BEGINS

Honest Tam o’ Shanter canters from Ayr, a town that never a town surpasses for honest men and bonie lasses—and the storm and the drink go with him.

- The name is Tam o’ Shanter in this typography (curly apostrophe).
- The praise of Ayr is fond and already ironic.
- The mare is about to matter.

03

A Kirk, and a Dance

THE VISION

He sees what he should not: a lighted kirk, a dance, and a company no Christian should stay to watch. The comedy turns.

- Teach the witches’ dance as the poem’s warning, not as a spectacle to linger on.
- The tale is comic and dire in the same stanzas.
- Nannie and the short cut of a tail belong to the climax, not the opening.

04

A Chase, and a Narrow Cut

THE ESCAPE

The ride for the bridge, the last stretch of safety, and a mare who pays the price of Tam’s looking back.

- The escape is narrow and not costless.
- Keep the Scots and the pace.
- The warning to other Tams is already sounding.

05

The Poem Only

THE HOSTED FILE

The site EPUB ends with this tale. The Gutenberg file is a whole Burns. Stop at Tam’s close, and do not quote other songs as this work.

- Flag PG #1279 as the collected Poems and Songs.
- A short comic-dire narrative, for a wide older band, in Scots as printed.
- Do not flatten it into a mere lecture on drink, and do not skip the last fright.

A Night Road | Drink and Folly | A Dire Comedy | A Narrow Escape | A Scots Tale

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The site EPUB is Tam o’ Shanter only. Project Gutenberg #1279 is the collected Poems and Songs of Robert Burns. Quote only this tale, in stretches that appear in both. The opening is exact: “When chapman billies leave the street,” The name is Tam o’ Shanter (curly apostrophe). Keep the Scots as printed (drouthy neibors, bousing at the nappy, bonie lasses).
2. A short comic-dire narrative of drink, a witches’ kirk, and a narrow escape, for a wide older band. Teach the dance as a warning, not as a spectacle, and do not flatten the poem into a mere temperance tract.
3. Do not quote other Burns songs in the Gutenberg file as this work.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1279: Poems and Songs of Robert Burns (chronological arrangement), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/tam-o-shanter/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.