

Name: _____

Class: _____

The Pied Piper of Hamelin

By Robert Browning

1842

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a celebrated English poet and playwright known for his dramatic verse. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," is a poetic retelling of a German tale from the Middle Ages in which a town suffers consequences after a visit from an odd stranger.

As you read, take notes on times when characters are motivated by greed or personal gain.

- [1] Hamelin town's in Brunswick,¹
By famous Hanover city;
The River Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
- [5] A pleasanter spot you never spied;
But, when begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see townsfolk suffer so
From vermin, was a pity.
- [10] Rats!
They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cook's own
ladles,
- [15] Split open the kegs of salted sprats,²
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
- [20] In fifty different sharps and flats.

At last the people in a body
To the Town Hall came flocking:



"Pied Piper with Children" by Kate Greenaway is in the public domain.

1. a city in Germany
2. a small fish in the herring family

- "Tis clear," cried they, "our Mayor's a noddy;³
And as for our Corporation—shocking
[25] To think we buy gowns lined with ermine⁴
For dolts that can't or won't determine
What's best to rid us of our vermin!
You hope, because you're old and obese,
To find in the furry civic robe ease?
[30] Rouse up, sirs! Give your brains a racking
To find the remedy we're lacking,
Or, sure as fate, we'll send you packing!"
At this the Mayor and Corporation
Quaked with a mighty consternation.⁵
- [35] An hour they sat in council,
At length the Mayor broke silence:
"For a guilder⁶ I'd my ermine gown sell,
I wish I were a mile hence!
It's easy to bid one rack one's brain —
[40] I'm sure my poor head aches again
I've scratched it so, and all in vain.
Oh for a trap, a trap, a trap!"
Just as he said this, what should hap
At the chamber-door but a gentle tap?
[45] "Bless us," cried the Mayor, "What's that?"
(With the Corporation as he sat,
Looking little though wondrous fat;
Nor brighter was his eye, nor moister
Than a too-long-opened oyster,
[50] Save when at noon his paunch⁷ grew mutinous
For a plate of turtle, green and glutinous.)⁸
"Only a scraping of shoes on the mat?
Anything like the sound of a rat
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!"
- [55] "Come in!" — the Mayor cried, looking bigger:

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3. dated term for a foolish person
 4. a small northern weasel whose fur was once valued as a symbol of wealth, nobility, or high rank
 5. feelings of anxiety or distress, especially due to something unexpected
 6. a gold or silver coin formerly used in the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria
 7. large or protruding belly
 8. sticky; glue-like in texture

And in did come the strangest figure!
His queer⁹ long coat from heel to head
Was half of yellow and half of red;
And he himself was tall and thin,
[60] With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,
And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin,
No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,
But lips where smiles went out and in —
There was no guessing his kith and kin!¹⁰
[65] And nobody could enough admire
The tall man and his quaint¹¹ attire.
Quoth one: "It's as my great-grandsire,
Starting up at the Trump of Doom's¹² tone,
Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!"
[70] He advanced to the council-table:
And, "Please your honors," said he, "I'm able,
By means of a secret charm, to draw
All creatures living beneath the sun,
That creep, or swim, or fly, or run,
[75] After me so as you never saw!
And I chiefly use my charm
On creatures that do people harm,
The mole, and toad, and newt, and viper;
And people call me the Pied Piper."
[80] (And here they noticed round his neck
A scarf of red and yellow stripe,
To match with his coat of selfsame cheque;
And at the scarf's end hung a pipe;
And his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying
[85] As if impatient to be playing
Upon this pipe, as low it dangled
Over his vesture,¹³ so old-fangled.)
"Yet," said he "poor piper as I am,
In Tartary¹⁴ I freed the Cham,¹⁵

9. strange

10. phrase referring to one's friends, acquaintances, and relations

11. old-fashioned in a unique and pleasing way

12. a trumpet signal of God's final judgment on Earth; also a trumpet that can raise the dead

13. clothing; garments

14. the historical name of a region with indefinite boundaries from Eastern Europe and Asia;

[90] Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats;
I eased in Asia the Nizam¹⁶
Of a monstrous brood of vampire-bats:
And, as for what your brain bewilders,
If I can rid your town of rats
[95] Will you give me a thousand guilders?"
"One? fifty thousand!" — was the exclamation
Of the astonished Mayor and Corporation.

Into the street the Piper stept,
Smiling first a little smile,
[100] As if he knew what magic slept
In his quiet pipe the while;
Then, like a musical adept,
To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled
[105] Like a candle flame where salt is sprinkled;
And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered,
You heard as if an army muttered;
And the muttering grew to a grumbling;
And the grumbling grew to a mighty rumbling;
[110] And out of the houses the rats came tumbling:
Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats,
Grave old plodders, gay young friskers,¹⁷
Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins,
[115] Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,
Families by tens and dozens,
Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives —
Followed the Piper for their lives.
From street to street he piped, advancing,
[120] And step for step, they followed, dancing,
Until they came to the river Weser
Wherein all plunged and perished
— Save one who, stout as Julius Caesar,¹⁸
Swam across and lived to carry

the area was overrun by the Tartars in the mid-13th century

15. likely refers to an ethnic group in Southeast Asia

16. a title given to the ruler of the former Indian state of Hyderabad

17. a playful skip

18. Roman general and dictator in the 1st century, BCE

- [125] (As he the manuscript he cherished)
To Rat-land home his commentary:
Which was, "At the first shrill notes of the pipe,
I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,
And putting apples, wondrous ripe,
- [130] Into a cider press's gripe:
And a moving away of pickle-tub-boards,
And a leaving ajar of conserve-cupboards,
And the drawing the corks of train-oil-flasks,
And a breaking the hoops of butter-casks;
- [135] And it seemed as if a voice
(Sweeter far than by harp or by psaltery¹⁹
Is breathed) called out, Oh rats, rejoice!
The world is grown to one vast drysaltery!²⁰
So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon,²¹
- [140] Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!
And just as a bulky sugar-puncheon,²²
All ready staved, like a great sun shone
Glorious scarce an inch before me,
Just as methought it said, 'Come, bore me!'
- [145] — I found the Weser rolling o'er me."

You should have heard the Hamelin people
Ringing the bells till they rocked the steeple.
"Go," cried the Mayor, "and get long poles!
Poke out the nests and block up the holes!
- [150] Consult with carpenters and builders,
And leave in our town not even a trace
Of the rats!" — when suddenly up the face
Of the Piper perked in the market-place,
With a, "First, if you please, my thousand guilders!"
- [155] A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked blue;
So did the Corporation, too.
For council dinners made rare havoc
With Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock;²³

19. an ancient and medieval musical instrument similar to a dulcimer consisting of a flat sounding box with strings which are plucked with the fingers

20. a shop where chemicals and dyes are sold

21. a snack; a drink or snack taken between meals, especially in the afternoon

22. a large cask for fermenting alcoholic beverages; likely refers to a sweet, rum-like drink here

23. various types of wine

And half the money would replenish
[160] Their cellar's biggest butt²⁴ with Rhenish.
To pay this sum to a wandering fellow
With a gypsy²⁵ coat of red and yellow!
"Beside," quoth the Mayor, with a knowing wink,
"Our business was done at the river's brink;
[165] We saw with our eyes the vermin sink,
And what's dead can't come to life, I think.
So, friend, we're not the folks to shrink
From the duty of giving you something for drink,
And a matter of money to put in your poke;
[170] But, as for the guilders, what we spoke
Of them, as you very well know, was in joke.
Beside, our losses have made us thrifty:
A thousand guilders! Come, take fifty!"

The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
[175] "No trifling! I can't wait, beside!
I've promised to visit, by dinner-time
Bagdad, and accept the prime
Of the Head Cook's pottage, all he's rich in,
For having left, in the Caliph's²⁶ kitchen,
[180] Of a nest of scorpions no survivor:
With him I proved no bargain-driver,
With you, don't think I'll bait a stiver!²⁷
And folks who put me in a passion
May find me pipe to another fashion."
[185] "How?" cried the Mayor, "d'ye think I brook
Being worse treated than a cook?
Insulted by a lazy ribald²⁸
With idle pipe and vesture piebald?²⁹
You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst,

24. a cask, typically used for wine, ale, or water

25. This is an outmoded and offensive term used to describe Traveler or Romani people in Europe and Asia.

26. in Islam, the chief civic and religious leader, believed by many to be the representative of Allah on Earth

27. a former coin of the Netherlands equal to five Dutch cents, the smallest possible amount

28. referring to sexual topics in a rude but humorous way

29. multicolored

- [190] Blow your pipe there till you burst!"
- Once more he stept into the street;
And to his lips again
Laid his long pipe of smooth straight cane;
And ere he blew three notes (such sweet
- [195] Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
Never gave the enraptured air)
There was a rustling, that seemed like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
- [200] Little hands clapping, and little tongues chattering,
And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering,
Out came the children running.
All the little boys and girls,
With rosy cheeks and flaxen³⁰ curls,
- [205] And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.
- The Mayor was dumb,³¹ and the Council stood
As if they were changed into blocks of wood,
- [210] Unable to move a step, or cry
To the children merrily skipping by,
— Could only follow with the eye
That joyous crowd at the Piper's back.
But how the Mayor was on the rack,³²
- [215] And the wretched Council's bosoms beat,
As the Piper turned from the High Street
To where the Weser rolled its waters
Right in the way of their sons and daughters!
However he turned from South to West,
- [220] And to Koppelberg Hill his steps addressed,
And after him the children pressed;
Great was the joy in every breast.
"He never can cross that mighty top!
He's forced to let the piping drop,
- [225] And we shall see our children stop!"

30. light-colored; blonde

31. In this context, "dumb" means temporarily speechless.

32. refers to a medieval torture device

When, lo! as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children followed,
[230] And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain-side shut fast.
Did I say, all? No! One was lame,³³
And could not dance the whole of the way;
And in after years, if you would blame
[235] His sadness, he was used to say, —
"It's dull in our town since my playmates left!
I can't forget that I'm bereft³⁴
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
Which the Piper also promised me;
[240] For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
Joining the town and just at hand,
Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
And everything was strange and new;
[245] The sparrows were brighter than the peacocks here,
And their dogs outran our fallow³⁵ deer,
And honey-bees had lost their stings,
And horses were born with eagles' wings;
And just as I became assured
[250] My lame foot would be speedily cured,
The music stopped and I stood still,
And found myself outside the hill,
Left alone against my will,
To go now limping as before,
[255] And never hear of that country more!"

Alas, alas for Hamelin!
There came into many a burgher's³⁶ pate³⁷
A text which says, that heaven's Gate
Opes to the rich at as easy rate
[260] As the needle's eye takes a camel in!³⁸

33. an outmoded term used to describe physical disabilities affecting the feet or legs

34. deprived of or lacking something, especially in a way that causes sadness

35. In this context, "fallow" refers to a brownish-yellow color.

36. a citizen, especially a prosperous member of the middle class

37. archaic term for "head"

The Mayor sent East, West, North, and South
To offer the Piper by word of mouth,
Wherever it was men's lot to find him,
Silver and gold to his heart's content,
[265] If he'd only return the way he went,
And bring the children behind him.
But when they saw 'twas a lost endeavor,
And Piper and dancers were gone forever,
They made a decree that lawyers never
[270] Should think their records dated duly
If, after the day of the month and year,
These words did not as well appear,
"And so long after what happened here
On the Twenty-second of July,
[275] Thirteen hundred and Seventy-six;"
And the better in memory to fix
The place of the children's last retreat,
They called it, the Pied Piper's Street—
Where any one playing on pipe or tabor³⁹
[280] Was sure for the future to lose his labor.
Nor suffered they hostelry⁴⁰ or tavern
To shock with mirth a street so solemn;
But opposite the place of the cavern
They wrote the story on a column,
[285] And on the great church-window painted
The same, to make the world acquainted
How their children were stolen away,
And there it stands to this very day.
And I must not omit to say
[290] That in Transylvania⁴¹ there's a tribe
Of alien people that ascribe
The outlandish ways and dress
On which their neighbors lay such stress,
To their fathers and mothers having risen
[295] Out of some subterraneous⁴² prison
Into which they were trepanned⁴³

38. refers to the Bible, Matthew 19:24

39. a small drum played with one hand while the other hand plays a pipe

40. a hotel or inn

41. a historical and cultural region of Central Europe, encompassing central Romania

42. underground

Long time ago in a mighty band
Out of Hamelin town in Brunswick land,
But how or why, they don't understand.

[300] So, Willy, let you and me be wipers
Of scores out with all men — especially pipers;
And, whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice,
If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise.

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43. "Trepanned" is an archaic term meaning tricked or trapped.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes a central theme of the poem?
 - A. Family bonds can overcome any hardship in life.
 - B. Greed and corruption can have terrible outcomes.
 - C. The use of magic is dangerous and comes at a price.
 - D. Nature will always win when pitted against mankind.

2. Which detail from "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" best supports the idea that the townspeople do not trust the Mayor and the Corporation to effectively deal with the rat problem?
 - A. "To think we buy gowns lined with ermine / For dolts that can't or won't determine" (Lines 25-26)
 - B. "At length the Mayor broke silence: / 'For a guilder I'd my ermine gown sell'" (Lines 36-37)
 - C. "It's easy to bid one rack one's brain — / I'm sure my poor head aches again" (Lines 39-40)
 - D. "Save when at noon his paunch grew mutinous / For a plate of turtle, green and glutinous." (Lines 50-51)

3. What do the Mayor's statements in lines 185-190 mainly reveal?
 - A. The Mayor is afraid of the Pied Piper and plans to seek help from the army in Bagdat.
 - B. The Mayor is an overly-confident man who cares more about money than the safety of his town.
 - C. The townspeople are fearful of what the Pied Piper might do, but they are powerless to persuade the Mayor.
 - D. The Pied Piper threatens to harm the townspeople, but the Mayor knows that he really has no power over them.

4. What is the main effect of lines 235-255 in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin"?
- A. The lines hint at the possibility that the Pied Piper will return to the town to take revenge on the adults.
 - B. The lines show that the children were eager to follow the Pied Piper to the magical land he promised them.
 - C. The lines illustrate that the Pied Piper wanted to spare the children the devastation of the plague that would destroy the town.
 - D. The lines demonstrate that one child was spared by the Pied Piper so he could tell the children's story to future generations.
5. What is the effect of the allusion in lines 258-260?
- A. The allusion to the Bible shows that the story was often told on important trade routes.
 - B. The allusion implores the reader to think carefully before engaging in magic or witchcraft.
 - C. The allusion to a chapter of the Bible reinforces the idea that wealthy people are often greedy.
 - D. The allusion reminds the reader that all government decisions should be made through a vote.
6. What does the development of the poem suggest about the relationship between greed and humanity?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The phrase "pay the piper" has endured over centuries. Have you ever heard this phrase? What do you think it means? Describe different examples of when a person may have to "pay the piper" in a modern context. Do you think the Mayor and Corporation ever intended to pay the Pied Piper? Why, or why not?
2. Under what circumstances, if any, do you think revenge is justified in real life? Do you think the Pied Piper's revenge against the people of Hamelin is justified? Why, or why not?
3. When the Pied Piper first appeared in the text, did you find him to be trustworthy? If you were the Mayor of Hamelin, would you have made a deal with him? Does your opinion of the Pied Piper's trustworthiness change throughout the text? Why, or why not?
4. What do you think ultimately happened to the children of Hamelin? Why? Support your response with details from the poem.
5. Think about the last remaining child in Hamelin, and write a journal entry from his point of view describing life in the town after the other children have gone.