

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Pied Piper of Hamelin

By Robert Browning
1888

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was an English poet and playwright known for his dramatic verse. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," published in 1888, is a poetic retelling of the German legend from the Middle Ages in which a man is hired to lure the rats away from the town with a magic pipe. As you read, take notes on the Piper's actions and motivations.

- [1] Hamelin town's in Brunswick,
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 sprats¹,
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.



"Pied Piper with Children" is in the public domain.

- At last the people in a body
To the Town Hall came flocking:
"Tis clear," cried they, "our Mayor's a noddy²;
And as for our Corporation—shocking
- [25] To think we buy gowns lined with ermine³
For dolts⁴ 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 consternation⁵.

1. a small fish of the herring family

- [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 glutinous⁸.)
"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:
And in did come the strangest figure!
His queer 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 swarthy⁹ skin,
No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,
But lips where smiles went out and in—
There was no guessing his kith and kin¹⁰!
- [65] And nobody could enough admire
The tall man and his quaint attire.
Quoth one: "It's as my great-grandsire,
Starting up at the Trump of Doom's tone¹¹,
Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!"

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2. a silly or foolish person, used as an insult
 3. a small northern weasel whose fur was once valued as a symbol of wealth, nobility, or high rank
 4. a term used to insult someone's intelligence
 5. **Consternation (noun)**: a feeling of alarm, confusion, or dismay, often caused by something unexpected
 6. a gold or silver coin formerly used in the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria
 7. **Paunch (noun)**: large or protruding stomach
 8. sticky
 9. **Swarthy (adjective)**: dark or tanned of complexion
 10. phrase referring to one's friends, acquaintances, and relations
 11. A trumpet sounding that can raise the dead

- [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 vesture¹², so old-fangled.)
"Yet," said he "poor piper as I am,
In Tartary¹³ I freed the Cham¹⁴,
- [90] Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats;
I eased in Asia the Nizam¹⁵
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.

12. **Vesture** (*noun*): clothing or garment

13. the historical name of a region with indefinite boundaries Eastern Europe and Asia; the area was overrun by the Tartars in the mid-13th century.

14. May be referring to the Cham, or Campa, people, an ethnic group in Southeast Asia.

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

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,
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,
Swam across and lived to carry
[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 psaltery¹⁶
Is breathed) called out, Oh rats, rejoice!
The world is grown to one vast drysaltery!
So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon¹⁷,
[140] Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!
And just as a bulky sugar-puncheon¹⁸,
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;
And half the money would replenish

[160] Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish.
To pay this sum to a wandering fellow
With a gypsy 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's¹⁹ 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 stiver²⁰!
And folks who put me in a passion
May find me pipe to another fashion."

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16. an ancient musical instrument that consists of a flat sounding box with numerous strings which are plucked with the fingers
 17. a snack; a drink or snack taken between meals, especially in the afternoon
 18. a large cask – in this case a "sugar-puncheon" refers to a cask containing sugar
 19. a spiritual leader of Islam, claiming succession after Muhammad; a former Muslim ruler of Baghdad (until 1258) and of the Ottoman Empire (from 1571 until 1924).
 20. a former nickel coin of the Netherlands, equal to five Dutch cents; the smallest possible amount

[185] "How?" cried the Mayor, "d'ye think I brook
Being worse treated than a cook?
Insulted by a lazy ribald²¹
With idle pipe and vesture piebald²²?
You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst,
[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 justling²³ 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 flaxen curls,
[205] And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.

21. **Ribald** (*noun*): an immoral or disrespectful person
22. marked or spotted in two different colours, especially black and white
23. A less common word for jostle or jostling

- The Mayor was dumb²⁴, 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,
[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!"
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,
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 bereft²⁵
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 fallow 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!"

24. In this context, "dumb" means he was rendered temporarily speechless

Alas, alas for Hamelin!
There came into many a burgher's²⁶ pate²⁷
A text which says, that heaven's Gate
Opes²⁸ to the rich at as easy rate
[260] As the needle's eye takes a camel in!²⁹
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 tabor³⁰
[280] Was sure for the future to lose his labor.
Nor suffered they hostelry³¹ 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 Transylvania 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 subterraneous³² prison
Into which they were trepanned
Long time ago in a mighty band
Out of Hamelin town in Brunswick land,
But how or why, they don't understand.

25. **Bereft** (*adjective*): deprived of or lacking in something

26. **Burgher** (*noun*): a citizen, especially a prosperous member of the middle class

27. the head

28. Opens

29. Matthew 19:24

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

[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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31. **Hostel** (*noun*): a hotel or inn
 32. **Subterranean** (*adjective*): below the earth

Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. How does the author characterize the Mayor and the council? Cite evidence from the text. [RL.3]

2. How does the author characterize the Pied Piper? Cite evidence from the text. [RL.3]

3. What motivates the Mayor to break his promise to the Piper? Support your answer. [RL.6]

4. How does the Pied Piper react to this betrayal? Cite evidence in your answer. [RL.1]

5. Where does the Piper promise to take the children? Where does he actually take them? [RL.1]

6. What is the moral or message of the poem? Explain your answer with specific evidence from the text. [RL.2]

7. Is the Piper justified in his actions or is he simply greedy, like the Mayor? [RL.1]
