The Pied Piper of Hamelin

POEM TEXT

(Written for, and inscribed to, W.M. the Younger)

I.

Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
  By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;
  But, when begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see the townsfolk suffer so
  From vermin, was a pity.

II.

    Rats!
They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
  And bit the babies in the cradles,
And eat the cheeses out of the vats,
  And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
    By drowning their speaking
    With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats.

III.

At last the people in a body
  To the Town Hall came flocking:
'Tis clear, cried they, our Mayor's a noddy;
  And as for our Corporation — shocking
To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
For dolts that can't or won't determine
What's like to rid us of our vermin!
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.

IV.

An hour they sate in council,
  At length the Mayor broke silence:
For a guilder I'd my ermine gown sell;
  I wish I were a mile hence!
It's easy to bid one rack one's brain —
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?
Bless us, cried the Mayor, what's that?
(With the Corporation as he sate,
Looking little though wondrous fat)
Only a scraping of shoes on the mat?
Anything like the sound of a rat
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!

V.

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,
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!
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 tone,
Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!

VI.

He advanced to the council-table:
And, Please your honours, 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,
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.
(And here they noticed round his neck
A scarf of red and yellow stripe,
To match with his coat of the self-same cheque;
And at the scarf's end hung a pipe;
And his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying
As if impatient to be playing
Upon this pipe, as low it dangled
Over his vesture so old-fangled.)
Yet, said he, poor piper as I am,
In Tartary I freed the Cham,
Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats;
I eased in Asia the Nizam
Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats:
And, as for what your brain bewilders,
If I can rid your town of rats
Will you give me a thousand guilders?
One? fifty thousand! — was the exclamation
Of the astonished Mayor and Corporation.

VII.

Into the street the Piper stept,
  Smiling first a little smile,
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,
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;
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,
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,
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
(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,
Into a cider-press's gripe:
And a moving away of pickle-tub-boards,
And a leaving ajar of conserve-cupboards,
And a drawing the corks of train-oil-flasks,
And a breaking the hoops of butter-casks;
And it seemed as if a voice
(Sweeter than by harp or by psaltery
Is breathed) called out, Oh rats, rejoice!
The world is grown to one vast drysaltery!
So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon,
Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!
And just as one bulky sugar-puncheon,
Ready staved, like a great sun shone
Glorious scarce an inch before me,
Just as methought it said, Come, bore me!
— I found the Weser rolling o'er me.

VIII.

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!
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!

IX.

A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked blue;
So did the Corporation too.
For council dinners made rare havock
With Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock;
And half the money would replenish
Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish.
To pay this sum to a wandering fellow
With a gipsy coat of red and yellow!
Beside, quoth the Mayor with a knowing wink,

Our business was done at the river's brink;
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;
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!

X.

The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
No trifling! I can't wait, beside!
I've promised to visit by dinner time
Bagdat, and accept the prime
Of the Head Cook's pottage, all he's rich in,
For having left, in the Caliph's kitchen,
Of a nest of scorpions no survivor —
With him I proved no bargain-driver,
With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver!
And folks who put me in a passion
May find me pipe after another fashion.

XI.

How? cried the Mayor, d'ye think I'll brook
Being worse treated than a Cook?
Insulted by a lazy ribald
With idle pipe and vesture piebald?
You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst,
Blow your pipe there till you burst!

XII.

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
Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
  Never gave th' enraptured air)
There was a rustling, that seem'd like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
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,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.

XIII.

The Mayor was dumb, and the Council stood
As if they were changed into blocks of wood,
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,
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,
And to Coppelburg 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,
And we shall see our children stop!
When, lo, as they reached the mountain's side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children follow'd,
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
His sadness, he was used to say, —
It's dull in our town since my playmates left!
I can't forget that I'm bereft
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
Which the Piper also promised me;
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 every thing was strange and new;
The sparrows were brighter than 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 felt assured
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,
And never hear of that country more!

XIV.

Alas, alas for Hamelin!
  There came into many a burgher's pate
  A text which says, that Heaven's Gate
  Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate
As the needle's eye takes a camel in!
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,
If he'd only return the way he went,
  And bring the children behind him.
But when they saw 'twas a lost endeavour,
And Piper and dancers were gone for ever,
They made a decree that lawyers never
  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,
"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 tabor
Was sure for the future to lose his labour.
Nor suffered they Hostelry or Tavern
  To shock with mirth a street so solemn;
But opposite the place of the cavern
  They wrote the story on a column,
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
That in Transylvania there's a tribe
Of alien people who ascribe
The outlandish ways and dress
On which their neighbours lay such stress
To their fathers and mothers having risen
Out of some subterraneous 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.

XV.

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

SUMMARY

The town of Hamelin is in Brunswick, near the famed German city of Hanover. The wide River Weser runs right by its southern wall. You never saw a nicer place! But, at the time my song begins—nearly 500 years ago—you'd have been sad to see how Hamelin's citizens were plagued by vermin.

Rats! They fought dogs, killed cats, and nipped sleeping babies. They devoured the half-curdled cheese, ate soup right out of the cooks' spoons, broke into the barrels of preserved fish. They nested inside men's best hats and even interrupted the women's conversations with the dreadful, discordant noise of their squeaking.

Finally fed up, the townspeople marched to the Town Hall, shouting: "Our Mayor is obviously useless! And as for our governing Corporation, it's scandalous that we pay for the elegant fur-lined robes of fools who can't (or won't) figure out how to get rid of these rats! Pull yourselves together, gentlemen! Think hard and find a solution, or we'll most certainly get rid of you." Hearing this, the Mayor and the Corporation shook with worry.

They sat silently together for an hour. At last, the Mayor spoke up, saying, "I'd give up my official robes for no more than a guilder—I wish I were far away from here! Sure, it's easy to tell a guy to think hard, but my head hurts from trying to come up with an answer, and I have no results. Oh, if only we had a trap!" Just at the moment he said this, what do you think he heard but a quiet knock at the door? "Good gracious," said the Mayor, "what's that sound?" (He said it as he sat there with the Corporation, looking small and timid but making up for it by being astonishingly round.) "Was it just someone cleaning their shoes on the doormat? Anything that sounds even a little bit like a rat makes my heart pound!"

"Come in!" said the Mayor, pulling himself up tall. In came the most peculiar fellow. He was wearing a strange long coat, half-yellow and half-red. He was tall and thin, with pin-sharp blue eyes, light hair hanging free, and dark skin. He had no beard or moustache, just a secretively smiling mouth. No one could guess where he came from or who he was related to. And no one could stop marveling at him and his peculiar outfit. One member of the Corporation said: "It's as if my great-grandfather, leaping up as the trumpet sounds to mark the end of the world, had come out from beneath his brightly painted gravestone!"

The strange man came up to the council table and said, "If you please, your honors, I have the power (through a secret spell) to call all living creatures to follow me; it's like nothing you ever saw! I mostly use my powers on unwanted creatures that cause problems: moles, toads, newts, snakes. People call me the Pied Piper." (At that, the council noticed that he was wearing a scarf striped in red and yellow around his neck, matching the colors and patterns of his coat. At the end of that scarf dangled a pipe. They noticed, too, that the Piper's fingers twitched on this pipe as if he were eager to play it, while it swung over his old-fashioned outfit.) "Though I'm only a poor piper," he went on, "last June I rescued the King of Tartary from a plague of biting flies. In Asia, I saved another monarch from a dreadful colony of vampire bats. As for what's troubling you: if I can get rid of your rats, will you pay me a thousand guilders?" "A thousand? We'd give you fifty thousand!" the amazed Mayor and Corporation cried.

The Piper walked out into the street, smiling to himself, as if thinking about the magic waiting quietly in his pipe. Then, like a skilled musician, he shaped his lips to play—and his eyes glittered green and blue, like a candle flame does when you sprinkle salt on it. And before he had played even three sharp notes, it sounded as if an army were on the move. A low rumble got louder and louder—until rats came bursting out of all of the houses. There were rats of every shape, size, color, and description. There were solemn old rats, lighthearted young rats, whole generations of rats, raising their tails at a jaunty angle and perking up their whiskers—rat families by the dozen, rat siblings and rat couples—all following the Piper as if their lives depended on it. He went on from street to street, and the rats followed in his footsteps, dancing—until at last they came to the river Weser, where all the rats plummeted into the water and drowned. All that is, except one, who—mighty as a Roman general—swam across the river and survived to carry home his lovingly preserved memoirs to Ratland. He wrote: "When the first high notes of the pipe played, I heard a sound like organ meat being prepared, and like ripe apples being mashed in a cider press—and like the lids being lifted off of pickle barrels, and like cupboards full of preserves being left open, and like the corks of oil bottles being pulled out, and like tubs of butter cracking open. And it seemed that a voice sweeter than angelic music was singing, *Celebrate, oh rats! The world has been transformed into a single huge pantry! So eat your fill, every meal of the day!* And just as I seemed to see a barrel of sugar broken open, rising before me like a beautiful sun—just as I thought it cried to me, *Come, break in and eat your fill!*—that's when I found I was struggling in the river."

Oh, you should have heard the people of Hamelin ringing the bells until the church tower shook. "Go get some long sticks," shouted the Mayor, "poke the rats' nests out of the walls and block the holes off! Hire some handymen to fix things up, and don't leave the slightest sign of the rats in our town!" All of a sudden, the Piper popped up in the town square, saying, "Before you do all that: my thousand-guilder fee, please!"

A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked unhappy; so did the Corporation. For at their council dinners they used to enjoy the finest wines. *Half* the money the piper was asking for would be enough to refill the biggest barrel in their cellar with the best Rhenish wine. How could they give such money to an itinerant stranger wearing a motley red-and-yellow coat? "After all," said the Mayor, winking, "the job was done by the riverside: we saw the rats drown, and I don't believe they're going to come back to life! So, Mister Piper: we're certainly not so rude that we won't give you a drink and a little cash. But the thousand guilders we discussed—of course, that was a *joke*, as you must know. Besides, having all our goods devoured by rats has made us rather budget-conscious. A thousand guilders! That's ridiculous—come on, take fifty instead."

The Piper stopped smiling. He said, "Don't play around. I have no time to lose: I promised to be in Baghdad by dinnertime, where the Head Cook will feed me a fine dinner—in reward for my having exterminated the scorpions infesting the Caliph's kitchen. I didn't back down on my deal with him—and don't think I'll back down with you either, not by a penny! And those who make me angry may discover that I play a *different* tune."

"What's that?" shouted the Mayor. "Do you think I'll put up with being treated worse than a lowly Cook is? Insulted by a lounger playing a lazy pipe and wearing a jester's clothing? You're threatening *us*? Go on then: you can play your pipe until you pop."

Once again, the Piper walked out into the street. Once more, he brought his pipe to his lips. And before he'd played three notes—three notes sweeter than any brilliant musician had ever yet conjured up—there came a sound like that of a playful, happy crowd. Little feet in wooden shoes clattered along; little hands clapped, and little tongues spoke. Like chickens in the barnyard when it's feeding time, all Hamelin's children came running out. All the little rosy-cheeked, fair-haired, bright-eyed, pearly-smiled children skipped cheerfully after the Piper, following his song, laughing and shouting.

The Mayor was struck silent, and the Council stood frozen in place, unable even to move or to call out to the children. They

could only watch as the happy crowd followed the Piper. But the Mayor was in agony, and the Council's hearts beat hard as the Piper led the children away from the main road and toward where the Weser flowed. But then he changed direction, heading toward Coppelburg Hill instead, with the children at his back. The Mayor and Council were deeply relieved, thinking: "He'll never cross those mountains! He'll have to give up his piping, and the children will stop!" But as they reached the mountainside, a magical door opened up in it, as if a cave had hollowed itself out all of a sudden. The Piper went in, and the children followed him. When all of them had gone into the mountain, the magic door shut tight. "All of them," did I say? Not quite: one had an injured foot, and couldn't make it in. If, in the years that followed, you chided him for his sadness, he'd explain: "It's boring here since all my friends left! I can't stop thinking about everything I missed out on—all the amazing things the Piper promised us. He told us he was taking us to a glorious place not far from the town, where rivers ran, fruit trees grew, the colors of the flowers were more beautiful, and everything was wondrous. The sparrows in that land were more brilliant than peacocks, their dogs ran faster than our deer do, honeybees didn't sting, and horses had wings like eagles. Just when I was sure that my injured foot would be healed there, the music ended, and I found myself alone outside the Hill, abandoned in spite of all my hopes—left to limp along like I always have, and never again hearing of that wonderful country."

What a tragedy for Hamelin! Many of the wealthy townspeople thought, then, of a verse from the Bible that says that wealth makes it awfully hard to get into Heaven. The Mayor sent out messages in every direction offering the Piper whatever he wanted if he'd come back and bring the children. But when, at last, the people understood that they'd never find the Piper and the children again, they proclaimed that said all future legal documents should record, not just the year and the date, but how long it had been since the children disappeared on July 22, 1376. To memorialize the day further, they renamed the street the children went down "The Pied Piper's Street," and forbade anyone from playing the pipe or the drum there. Pubs weren't allowed to operate on that sad street, either. Beside the place on the hill where the children disappeared, they put up a monument. They memorialized the incident in the stained glass of their church window, too, to let the world know how their children were taken. That window is there to this day. I shouldn't forget to add that, in Transylvania, there's a town of strange people who say that their peculiar customs and clothing (which their neighbors are so startled by) came from their parents, who emerged from an underground prison that they were locked into once long ago after being taken from Hamelin—but they can't explain how that happened.

So, my little friend Willy, let's be sure we settle our debts with everyone—pipers in particular. And whether they save us from rats or mice, whatever we've promised them, let's keep our promises.

THEMES

HONESTY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Robert Browning's poem retells the old legend of the Pied Piper: a strange musician in multicolored clothing who saves the town of Hamelin from a plague of rats with his enchanting pipe-playing. But when the Corporation (the governing body) of Hamelin refuses to pay the Piper for his exterminator services, he exacts his revenge by luring the town's children away with magic music just as he lured the rats. Browning's poem spells out one of the tale's lessons plainly: when we make a bargain, "let us keep our promise." Reneging on a deal, in this poem, has unexpected and awful consequences—so one had better be honest.

The Mayor and Corporation of Hamelin are at their wits' end about a terrible plague of rats that has descended on their town. So helpless are they in the face of the rodent onslaught that when a mysterious stranger who calls himself the Pied Piper turns up and promises to get rid of the rats in exchange for the substantial sum of a "thousand guilders," they say they'd be happy to pay fifty times that if only he can do it.

The Piper, true to his word, enchants the rats by playing a magical tune on his pipe that makes them follow him anywhere—even right into the river, where they all drown. The Corporation is deeply relieved, but not so happy when the Piper comes to collect his paycheck. Reasoning that the Piper can't bring back the rats he removed—"what's dead can't come back to life, I think," says the scheming Mayor—they refuse him the thousand guilders they promised him and offer a paltry fifty instead.

Such selfishness and untrustworthiness, the poem suggests, invites well-deserved punishment. In retaliation for being cheated, the Piper plays another enchanted tune—this one calling to the children of the town, who follow him into a mysterious mountain cavern and disappear forever. Don't worry, it's not *too* sinister: the poem suggests they don't die, but emerge on the other side of the mountains and found a new town of their own. Regardless, they're lost to their parents for good.

One trick thus invites another. Behave dishonestly, the poem's narrator warns, and others will be tempted to treat you in just the same way, perhaps doing you worse harm than you bargained for.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9

- Lines 10-20
- Lines 21-32
- Lines 33-48
- Lines 49-63
- Lines 64-91
- Lines 92-139
- Lines 140-148
- Lines 149-167
- Lines 168-178
- Lines 179-184
- Lines 185-201
- Lines 202-249
- Lines 250-293
- Lines 294-297

CLASS, WEALTH, AND GREED

Robert Browning inserts some sharp Victorian class commentary into his retelling of the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin (the musical rat exterminator who exacts revenge on the non-paying town of Hamelin by stealing its children). The wealthy town council that hires the Pied Piper greedily refuses to pay him, looking down on him as a lowly outsider with no real power. They realize their fatal mistake when he takes his revenge. Snobbery and greed, the poem suggests, backfire on the snobbish and greedy.

The Mayor and Corporation of Hamelin, the town leaders, are a pretty fancy lot. Dressed in "ermine" and drinking the fanciest wines—"Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock"—they treat themselves to the finer things in life (though their fellow townspeople enjoy no such pleasures). Rather than satisfying the Corporation, wealth makes them greedier: though they have more than enough, they're unwilling to pay the Pied Piper because his agreed fee of a "thousand guilders" would eat into their wine budget.

Besides being selfish, the wealthy governors of Hamelin are snobbish. They don't merely cheat the Pied Piper because they want to keep their money to themselves, but because they look down on him as a wanderer with no wealth of his own and no fixed place in society. Because he's not part of their powerful circle, he has no recourse against them if they decide to pay him a mere fraction of the agreed price—or so they believe.

When the Piper leads their children away into a mysterious cavern in the mountains, however, the wealthy townspeople realize their terrible mistake. As these wealthy men watch their children disappear, the poem's narrator observes, they suddenly remember a famous Bible passage that says "that Heaven's Gate / Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate / As the needle's eye takes a camel in!" In other words, clinging to wealth leads to hellish consequences.

Through this unflattering portrait of a greedy, snobbish upper class, Browning suggests that such people aren't merely unpleasant, but shortsighted—and cruising for a fall.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 24-27
- Lines 35-36
- Lines 49-63
- Lines 87-91
- Lines 146-148
- Lines 149-167
- Lines 168-178
- Lines 179-184
- Lines 250-254
- Lines 294-297

THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

The Pied Piper, a strange figure in a red-and-yellow cloak who leads vermin to their doom with the music of his magic pipe, is an uncanny and slightly sinister fellow, a stranger with his own mysterious purposes. He's also *enchanting*, literally: his music has a persuasive power like nothing else on earth. Always on the outskirts, charming but deceptive, the Piper can be read as a figure for artists in general, his tale painting a picture of the role artists play in society (for better and for worse).

A stranger and an outsider, the Pied Piper doesn't fit into Hamelin's mainstream. His bright, harlequin-like red-and-yellow clothing marks him as a "queer" figure—something like a court jester. In his strangeness, he might even be a bit eerie: a member of the ruling Corporation of Hamelin sees him as a ghost newly emerged from under "his painted tombstone."

The poem firmly connects the clothes that mark the Piper as an outsider to the instrument that marks him as an artist. The strap that holds his magical pipe is patterned in the "self-same cheque" as his motley coat: being a piper is part and parcel of what makes him peculiar. Being an artist, these images suggest, means standing *out* and standing *apart*, not belonging to the ordinary world.

Living this way, the artist gains a great power: the ability to conjure up enchanted imaginary worlds. Through his magical music, the Piper speaks to rats and children alike of paradise, tempting the rats with dreams of endless food ("munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon / Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!") and the children with promises of "a joyous land" where "every thing was strange and new." In other words, the eerie beauty of the Piper's music conjures up heavenly illusions—and thus gives him the power to sway those who hear him.

This power is both creative and dangerous. Though the Piper can weave alluring visions of paradise, he can also use those

visions to deceive. The Piper's song *promises* endless food and marvelous adventure but *leads* only to drowning and entombment.

This poem's vision of the artist's powers thus feels pretty ambivalent. Being an artist might mean having the power to weave beautiful visions. But it also means being an eternal outsider and, potentially, a trickster and deceiver (not to mention never getting paid what you're owed).

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 49-63
- Lines 64-91
- Lines 92-139
- Lines 155-156
- Lines 185-201
- Lines 202-249

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-9

Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;
But, when begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin, was a pity.

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin" begins with a little scene-setting. This poem, the narrator informs us, takes place in the German town of Hamelin, on the banks of the river Weser (pronounced somewhere between "Veeser" and "Weeser"). It's a charming place with old stone walls; "a pleasanter spot you never spied," the narrator says. But "almost five hundred years ago," it wasn't so pleasant at all: back then, Hamelin suffered from a terrible plague of "vermin."

All these details might ring a bell for readers who know their folklore. This poem will retell the old story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the magical musician who rid a medieval town of its rat infestation.

As the poem's inscription reveals, this poem was written for one "W.M. the Younger"—that is, Willy Macready, the young son of Robert Browning's friend William Macready. Browning wrote this poem to entertain Willy while the boy was stuck in bed recovering from an illness. Just like a good uncle telling a bedtime story, the poem's narrator speaks in an engaging, personable voice.

That sparky voice rests on the poem's accentual meter. Rather than using any particular pattern of metrical feet (like iambs or trochees), the poem measures lines in beats. Listen to the rhythm of the first few lines of the poem, for example:

Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;

The poem hops between lines with three beats and lines with four, scattering those beats wherever it likes within the lines to create a pattering, chatty rhythm.

The rhymes are just as lively. Rather than keeping to a set rhyme scheme here, Browning throws rhymes around for dramatic effect, sometimes stringing as many as six rhyming lines together.

Notice all the musical alliteration in these first lines, too:

Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;

All those jaunty matching sounds make the poem sound a little bit magical, different from ordinary speech: this is a storyteller's voice.

In its sounds, its rhythms, and its language alike, this will be a playful poem, a distracting treat for a bored kid. But it will also offer some sly social commentary, winking at adult readers with its remarks on greed, shortsighted conventionality, and just how hard it is for an artist to get paid what he's owed.

LINES 10-20

Rats!
They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And eat the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats.

In the second stanza, the poem's drama kicks into gear with a single word: "Rats!" The "vermin" that plagued Hamelin, the narrator reports, were a swarm of rodents so overwhelming that you could find a rat making mischief wherever you looked. These rats didn't just play the usual rat tricks of cheese-thieving and nest-making, but got so bold that they "bit the babies in the

cradles."

Insistent rhymes and intense parallelism make Hamelin's rat problem sound inescapable. Of the eleven lines in this stanza, six rhyme with "Rats!": *cats*, *vats*, *sprats*, *hats*, *chats*, *flats*. The poem thus returns to ratty noises over and over. And take a look at the anaphora here:

> They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
> And bit the babies in the cradles,
> And eat the cheeses out of the vats,
> And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,

All those "and"s (which also make this an example of polysyndeton) add to a mood of overwhelm: there are rats here, *and* there, *and* there, *and* there…

Just to hear it described, this infestation sounds both dangerous and disgusting. But the narrator's language keeps this from feeling like a horror story. The image of the rats nesting in fancy "Sunday hats" paints a funny picture of a rat living the high life in an elegant chapeau. And the description of rats "spoil[ing] the women's chats" with their "shrieking and squeaking / In fifty different sharps and flats" is comically precise; it's as if the rats are singing in a rodent choir, tuning their ratty little voices to be as discordant as possible. The internal rhyme of "shrieking and squeaking" helps to make this description feel silly and mischievous, too.

Hamelin has a serious problem, in other words—but not one that the narrator wants his listener to feel too worried about. The tone here is light.

LINES 21-32

At last the people in a body
To the Town Hall came flocking:
'Tis clear, cried they, our Mayor's a noddy;
And as for our Corporation — shocking
To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
For dolts that can't or won't determine
What's like to rid us of our vermin!
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.

Quite understandably, the people of Hamelin get fed up with their rat problem and decide that it's time to do something about it. So they march "in a body" to the Town Hall, where they confront the Mayor and Corporation (that is, the governing council). They're not happy with their elected leaders:

> 'Tis clear, cried they, our Mayor's a noddy;
> And as for our Corporation — shocking
> To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
> For dolts that can't or won't determine
> What's like to rid us of our vermin!

In other words, the people are deeply frustrated that their taxes are paying for elegant fur-lined robes for men who can't seem to think of a single thing to do about the plague that's fallen upon their town.

Once again, the narrator's language makes this confrontation feel funny, not dangerous. Calling the Mayor a "noddy" (a fool), the townspeople speak like angry children, not like rioters. And strings of three rhymes in a row—*ermine / determine / vermin*, *racking / lacking / packing*—land quick and light as popping bubbles.

But the rhyme pairing *ermine* and *vermin*, striking a comical contrast between elegant furs and filthy rats, also introduces a matter that's going to be important: the Mayor and Corporation's wealth. The townspeople are frustrated because their leaders are living the high life on Hamelin's tax money while doing nothing truly useful.

These ermine-robed gentlemen would clearly like to hang onto their cushy positions. When the townspeople threaten to throw them out, they "quake[] with a mighty consternation"—that is, they shake in their boots.

LINES 33-48

An hour they sate in council,
At length the Mayor broke silence:
For a guilder I'd my ermine gown sell;
I wish I were a mile hence!
It's easy to bid one rack one's brain —
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?
Bless us, cried the Mayor, what's that?
(With the Corporation as he sate,
Looking little though wondrous fat)
Only a scraping of shoes on the mat?
Anything like the sound of a rat
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!

To be fair to the Mayor and Corporation, they're really in a bind. As the Mayor says, "it's easy to bid one rack one's brain" to find a solution to the rat problem, but what on earth can anyone do in the face of such a ratty catastrophe? (A ratastrophe, if you will?) He'd give up his prized "ermine gown" for no more than a "guilder," a single gold coin, if only he were a "mile hence" from Hamelin and all its problems. At last, with dramatic epizeuxis, he cries, "Oh for a trap, a trap, a trap!"

It's just at this moment that hope arrives in the form of a gentle tap on the door. Take a look at the imagery in this passage:

Bless us, cried the Mayor, what's that?
(With the Corporation as he sate,
Looking little though wondrous fat)
Only a scraping of shoes on the mat?
Anything like the sound of a rat
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!

Presenting the Mayor as "little but wondrous fat," the poem warns he might be both rather self-indulgent and a small man both literally and metaphorically—not exactly a born leader. His fear at the sound of someone at the door also suggests his nerves are worn thin.

Look at that long string of rhymes at the end of the stanza: *that*, *sate* (pronounced and meaning "sat"), *fat*, *mat*, *rat*, *pit-a-pat*. No fewer than six in a row, and just as in the repetitive rhymes of the previous stanza, they all rhyme with *rat*! The poor Mayor clearly has rats on the brain.

LINES 49-63

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,
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!
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 tone,
Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!

Finally, the poem's titular character enters the room: the Pied Piper arrives. He cuts the "strangest figure": dressed in a checkered red-and-yellow coat, smiling secretively, he looks old-fashioned and rather eerie to the ermine-robed council. A member of the Corporation whispers that this man looks like his "great-grandsire," his great-grandfather, leaping up from beneath his "painted tombstone" at the end of the world.

In this medieval setting, then, the mysterious Piper looks like a throwback to an even more distant past, and he stands out amongst the Corporation. Take a look at the narrator's description of him:

His queer long coat from heel to head
Was half of yellow and half of red;
And he himself was tall and thin,
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 —

All the detailed imagery here strikes a contrast with the picture of the Mayor in more ways than one. All readers learn about the Mayor is that he's "little," "wondrous fat," and robed in ermine: he's just your average well-fed bureaucrat. The Piper, on the other hand, is distinctive. "Tall and thin" to the Mayor's short and fat, dressed like a court jester next to the Mayor's furry elegance, he presents a striking juxtaposition with the town's leader.

The Piper's lean, beardless face also suggests that he's canny and alert. His "sharp blue eyes" are "each like a pin," a simile that evokes a piercing and rather discomfiting gaze. His "lips where smiles went out and in" make him sound secretive, privately amused. And if he's "swarthy," or darkly tanned, he's a wanderer, a guy who spends a lot of time out on the road.

Though this stranger reminds one member of the Corporation of his "great-grandsire" (great-grandfather):

There was no guessing his kith and kin!

This exclamation underlines just how unusual this fellow is in Hamelin. The people of this little town, this line suggests, all know each other so well that they could trace each other's families back generations: *Oh yes, that's Gerda, Fritz the Baker's daughter*, and so on and so on. The Piper, by contrast, seems like an outsider in every way.

He's also a mystery. He hasn't introduced himself yet, remember. Though readers might have a pretty good guess that this is the Pied Piper (since the word "pied," meaning multicolored, refers to his coat "half of yellow and half of red"), he hasn't spoken a word of introduction yet. He simply appears and lets the council make of him what they will.

LINES 64-81

He advanced to the council-table:
And, Please your honours, 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,
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.
(And here they noticed round his neck
A scarf of red and yellow stripe,
To match with his coat of the self-same cheque;
And at the scarf's end hung a pipe;
And his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying
As if impatient to be playing
Upon this pipe, as low it dangled

Over his vesture so old-fangled.)

Without preamble, the bright-clothed stranger steps up to the "council-table" and describes what he can do. "By means of a secret charm," he says, he can call "all creatures living beneath the sun" to follow him:

> 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.

At last, then, the stranger introduces himself by his harmonious title: consonant /p/ and assonant /i/ sounds make the Pied Piper's name sound as musical as his job. But he doesn't name himself before describing his powers, which seem much more important to him than what "people call" him. Notice, too, that he doesn't say *he* calls himself the Pied Piper; who he really is remains a mystery. His pipe-playing gives him all the identity he seems to want or need.

The Mayor and Corporation now notice that he's wearing:

> A scarf of red and yellow stripe,
> To match with his coat of the self-same cheque;
> And at the scarf's end hung a pipe;

The imagery here links the piper's "old-fangled," multicolored, court-jester-like costume to his pipe-playing: the scarf that holds his pipe "match[es] with his coat of the self-same check." Being a strange, nameless outsider marked out by peculiar clothing seems connected to being a musician. The Piper is such an eager musician, in fact, that (as the Corporation notices, perhaps with a little unease) his fingers twitch as if eager to be playing the pipe even now. This guy clearly has one job, one purpose in life, and he embraces it with all his energy.

The Piper's introduction presents more than one mystery. His music gives him awe-inspiring power: through it, he has control over *every living creature*. But he hasn't used that control to, say, make himself a King. Instead, he's set up shop as a kind of tuneful exterminator.

If he hasn't used his powers to get himself a cushy station in life like the Mayor's, perhaps he simply doesn't want such a role. The sharp juxtaposition between Piper and Corporation so far suggests that this Piper prefers to live on his own terms, marked out as a loner by his peculiar costume. The Corporation is a bunch of people acting as one; the Piper acts alone.

LINES 82-91

Yet, said he, poor piper as I am,
In Tartary I freed the Cham,
Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats;
I eased in Asia the Nizam
Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats:
And, as for what your brain bewilders,
If I can rid your town of rats
Will you give me a thousand guilders?
One? fifty thousand! — was the exclamation
Of the astonished Mayor and Corporation.

The Piper now unfurls his impressive resume. With his musical skills, he declares:

> In Tartary I freed the Cham,
> Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats;
> I eased in Asia the Nizam
> Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats:

The "Cham" and "Nizam" are a couple of very 19th-century inventions: these made-up names of rulers or kings are meant to sound excitingly exotic to a wide-eyed English audience. Besides suggesting that the Piper has earned the gratitude of powerful royalty, these allusions make it sound as if he's well-traveled and world-famous; if he had a business card, it might read "Court Exterminator to the Monarchs of the East."

Perhaps the Piper, like his author, is trying to impress a rustic audience with these tales of success in far-off lands. Hamelin's a prosperous little town, but it still seems to be a place where everyone knows everyone else's "kith and kin."

Note, though, that the Piper also downplays his own powers here, calling himself a mere "poor piper," again setting himself apart from the wealthy and powerful Mayor and Corporation. This, too, might be a canny strategy, for he seems to know exactly how rich Hamelin is when he requests a fee of "a thousand guilders"—a thousand gold pieces—to get rid of the rats.

To the embattled Mayor and Corporation, this sum sounds cheap: "One? fifty thousand!" they cry. Remember that ready agreement: it's going to be important later.

LINES 92-104

Into the street the Piper stept,
Smiling first a little smile,
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,
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;
And out of the houses the rats came tumbling.

With his fee agreed upon, the Pied Piper heads out into the streets of Hamelin to work his magic. "Smiling first a little smile," he puts his pipe to his lips:

> And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled,
> Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;

The simile of the Piper's eyes flickering blue and green like a salted candle flame adds an extra shiver of mystery to this moment. The image calls up the kind of trick with which you might entertain a bored Victorian child on a long winter night—just the kind of bored Victorian child this poem is addressed to. By conjuring up a vision of something eerie and magical springing out of something as ordinary as a candle, this moment suggests that this piper is much more than he seems. Perhaps, with his eyes that are sharp as pins and bright as flames, he's even a little dangerous.

The moment also suggests just how much the Piper enjoys his job. He absolutely delights in exercising his powers; a "musical adept," a talented musician, he's reveling in doing the thing he does best, the thing that gives him his name.

Before the Piper has even finished playing "three shrill notes," his magic begins to work. Take a look at the imagery in this theatrical moment:

> 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;
> And out of the houses the rats came tumbling.

The rats' arrival works rather like the approach of the T-Rex in Jurassic Park: the audience hears and feels something big on the way before anything comes into sight, building up some deliciously squirmy anticipation. The movement here from "muttering" to "grumbling" to "rumbling" to (at last) "the rats came tumbling" uses assonance and internal rhyme to evoke the same basic sound getting louder and louder, coming closer and closer. A rat stampede is on the move.

LINES 105-112

> *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,*
> *Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,*
> *Families by tens and dozens,*
> *Brothers, sisters, husbands, wives —*
> *Followed the Piper for their lives.*

At last, a tide of rats overflows the houses of Hamelin and spills out onto the streets. The narrator enjoys himself here, describing this flood of vermin with jaunty, goofy epistrophe:

> Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
> Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats,

That, anyone would agree, is a whole lot of rats. Though its members are differentiated by size and color, this rat parade feels uniformly and overwhelmingly *ratty*; the sheer number of times the word "rats" appears here sees to that.

Once again, though, this rat-flood doesn't feel frightening or disgusting, exactly. That's in part because the speaker anthropomorphizes the rats, giving them personalities, describing them as "grave" (serious) "old plodders" and "gay" (happy) "young friskers" and pointing out their family relations to each other: "fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins." "Cocking tails and pricking whiskers," they seem alert and cheerful, as if they're all on their way to a party. The music of this passage contributes to the upbeat holiday tone: for instance, just listen to the brisk, satisfying /k/ consonance and /ih/ assonance in "cocking tails and pricking whiskers."

What could just about be a scene from a horror movie, then, instead comes across as something that's both a little gross and pretty funny. Readers here are invited to share, not the townspeople's astonishment and disgust, but the rats' enthusiasm as they dance to the Piper's magical tune.

LINES 113-120

> *From street to street he piped advancing,*
> *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*
> *(As he the manuscript he cherished)*
> *To Rat-land home his commentary,*

Playing his enticing music, the Piper leads the giddy rats through the streets of Hamelin—and then, in two unceremonious lines:

> [...] they came to the river Weser
> Wherein all plunged and perished

The rats, who moments ago were enjoying themselves like never before, all drown. The Piper's music might be beautiful and enchanting, but it's also treacherous.

One rat only escapes alone to tell his tale. The narrator's anthropomorphism gets even more comic here. This lone survivor, he declares, is a rat as "stout as Julius Caesar"—a simile that alludes to another noted river-crosser. (The Roman general and dictator Julius Caesar famously kicked off a war when he and his army crossed the Rubicon river.) The incongruous, goofy comparison softens the rather grim thought that all those ratty "families by tens and dozens," rats readers have just learned to feel some sympathy for, have drowned.

This rat doesn't just have Caesar's might, he has Plutarch's eloquence: he writes a "manuscript," a "commentary" on the

events of that fateful day that he carries home to "Rat-land" for the sake of the historical record. Through this stout and literary rat, readers will learn exactly what kinds of powers the Piper's music possesses.

LINES 121-139

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

The literary rat's chronicle of events sheds some light on what happens when one hears the Piper's tune:

> I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,
> And putting apples, wondrous ripe,
> Into a cider-press's gripe:
> And a moving away of pickle-tub-boards,
> And a leaving ajar of conserve-cupboards,
> And a drawing the corks of train-oil-flasks,
> And a breaking the hoops of butter-casks;

All the sonic imagery here helps readers to feel what it's like to be a rat whose dreams are coming true. The rat's intense familiarity with what it *sounds* like when people open a food storage bin makes you imagine rats crouched in the walls, veined ears aquiver, listening hard and waiting for their moment to scurry out and feast. The Piper's tune speaks to them of what it's like to know you're right on the verge of the greatest meal of your lifetime.

And once again, intense parallelism suggests overflowing abundance. Notice that the parallelism here stresses verbs describing negligent housekeeping: "And a moving away," "and a leaving ajar." In Rat Heaven, it turns out, the angels are all forgetful cooks, and the "world is grown to one vast drysaltery"—that is, the world is nothing but a great big pantry with all the lids askew. The rats don't need fine wines or roasted fowl to enjoy themselves to the utmost: all they want is a pickle jar left open and a broken tub of butter.

To complete this picture of a paradise for rats, an angelic voice, "sweeter" than the music of the "harp" or the "psaltery" (a dulcimer-like instrument), sings of the delights the rats are about to enjoy. Listen to the comical sounds here:

> So munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon,
> Breakfast, supper, dinner, luncheon!

Jolly internal rhymes, chewy repetitions, and vivid onomatopoeia (as in "munch" and "crunch") give this passage the sound and rhythm of ratty jaws chomping away.

The Piper's tune, then, doesn't sound like "shrill notes" to the rats, but like all the noises they like best: noises that promise good eating. The music hasn't finished playing tricks, though. Last but not least, it conjures up a full-on hallucination:

> [...] one bulky sugar-puncheon,
> Ready staved, like a great sun shone
> Glorious scarce an inch before me,

The simile of a broken sugar-puncheon (that is, a sugar barrel) as glorious as the rising sun makes it clear that rats are a simple folk with their hearts in their stomachs. Heaven, for them, is a place where all that happens is eating.

The chronicling rat remembers that he felt as if he were but an "inch" away from this final sugary apparition when hard reality broke in on him. Just when paradise seemed in reach, he came to his senses and "found the Weser rolling o'er" him and his compatriots.

Rat Heaven's simplicity is both funny and rather touching: all the rats ever wanted, after all, was to be well fed. And the Piper's tune plays those rats like fiddles, reaching straight into their hearts and unearthing their deepest desires. There's thus something both tragicomic and sinister in this episode. The Piper's tune, this stout rat's records reveal, is as cruelly deceptive as it is alluring.

LINES 140-148

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!
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!

While readers are privy to the rats' experience through the surviving rat's manuscript, the people of Hamelin have no such insight. All they know is that their rat problem is over and it's time to rejoice. After joyfully ringing the town's bells "till they

rock[] the steeple," they prepare to eradicate every last trace of the rats from their town, clearing the last of the nests from their walls and blocking up all the holes.

Take a look at the way this stanza's rhymes proceed. As the Mayor commands the people of Hamelin to get to de-rattifying, the poem uses couplets: *people / steeple*, *poles / holes*. Then, something interrupts this neat, one-two one-two progress:

> 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!

The triplet introducing the Piper breaks in on the brisk repairs just as the Piper breaks in on the Mayor's officious commands. The rhyme on *builders* doesn't resolve until the Piper makes his polite request for his thousand *guilders* at the end of the stanza. Hamelin's business won't truly be done, this procession of rhymes suggests, until the Corporation pays the Piper.

LINES 149-160

> *A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked blue;*
> *So did the Corporation too.*
> *For council dinners made rare havock*
> *With Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock;*
> *And half the money would replenish*
> *Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish.*
> *To pay this sum to a wandering fellow*
> *With a gipsy coat of red and yellow!*
> *Beside, quoth the Mayor with a knowing wink,*
> *Our business was done at the river's brink;*
> *We saw with our eyes the vermin sink,*
> *And what's dead can't come to life, I think.*

This stanza begins with a moment of anadiplosis that suggests the Mayor had almost forgotten what he'd agreed to pay:

> [...] up the face
> Of the Piper perked in the market-place,
> With a, First, if you please, my thousand guilders!
> IX.
> A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked blue;

The Mayor, here, repeats the Piper's request for "a thousand guilders!" to himself in dismay as he and the Corporation feel the weight of the sum they promised. Remember, these ermine-wearing gentlemen are used to living high on the hog, partying on the townspeople's dime. They're so familiar with the price of the fine wines they like to drink—"Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock"—that they know exactly how much of the wine budget they'll lose if they pay the Piper his agreed fee:

> [...] half the money would replenish
> Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish.

Readers might note that the Mayor and Corporation sound not un-ratlike as they think of all the wine they could buy with those thousand guilders. Their greed might be a little more refined that the rats'—less "devouring straight butter," more "sipping a '72 claret"—but greed it is, nonetheless.

It's not just the thought of losing all that fine Rhenish wine that makes them uneasy. They're also reluctant to "pay this sum to a wandering fellow / With a gipsy coat of red and yellow!" Here, the poem's earlier juxtaposition between the lean, peculiar lone wolf and the rotund, conventional insiders comes into play. The Mayor and Corporation, looking at this strange wanderer, see him as an outsider, and decide that means they can treat him as they like. It simply wouldn't be *right* for wealthy and powerful men like them to pay some guy from who-knows-where all that money. It'd be against the order of things!

"Beside," the Mayor adds, the Piper has no recourse if the Corporation decides not to pay him the full sum. The rats are gone, and "what's dead can't come to life, I think."

In other words, a mixture of snobbery, greed, and calculated dishonesty persuades the Mayor and Corporation that they can cheat the Piper with impunity. They're the powerful in-crowd, he's the powerless stranger.

LINES 161-167

> *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;*
> *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!*

Having resolved to pay the Piper rather less than the agreed-upon fee, the Mayor speaks to the strange musician in a tone of condescending joviality. Certainly they'll pay him *something*, but the Piper must "very well know" that the thousand guilders they mentioned were nothing but a "joke," and that a mere fifty, plus a chummy drink or two, is really the more appropriate compensation. The Mayor compounds this obvious insult by suggesting that "our losses have made us thrifty"—that is, that after all this rat business, their own pockets are feeling a bit light at the moment.

All in all, they're playing a game all too familiar to freelancers to this very day. Robert Browning might be inserting a little satire here, observing that one of the biggest annoyances of the artist's life is getting paid in a timely fashion.

Once again, rhyme plays a big part in setting the tone. The Mayor uses a string of six whole rhymes in a row as he eases into his wheedling speech: *wink / brink / sink / think / shrink /*

drink. It's as if he's slowly working up to the big cheat. As he gains confidence, there's a shorter rhymed triplet—*poke / spoke / joke*—and finally, winding up, the firm couplet of *thrifty / fifty*.

But the Piper, as the Mayor and Corporation should very well know, is no fool. The Mayor's snobbery blinds him, making him seem to forget that he's dealing with an enchanter.

LINES 168-178, BETWEEN LINES 178-179, LINES 179-184

The Piper's face fell, and he cried,
No trifling! I can't wait, beside!
I've promised to visit by dinner time
Bagdat, and accept the prime
Of the Head Cook's pottage, all he's rich in,
For having left, in the Caliph's kitchen,
Of a nest of scorpions no survivor —
With him I proved no bargain-driver,
With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver!
And folks who put me in a passion
May find me pipe after another fashion.
XI.
How? cried the Mayor, d'ye think I'll brook
Being worse treated than a Cook?
Insulted by a lazy ribald
With idle pipe and vesture piebald?
You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst,
Blow your pipe there till you burst!

Stanzas 10 and 11—both short and sharp—tell of the face-off between the Piper and the Mayor.

In stanza 10, the Piper has his say. "No trifling!" he tells the Mayor—*don't mess around!* The Piper has no time to play games: he's due in "Bagdat" (Baghdad, that is) by dinner time, where he'll be rewarded with a handsome dinner for having rid the "Caliph's kitchen" of a "nest of scorpions." He didn't wheel and deal with the Caliph, he warns the Corporation, and he won't bargain with them, either. With sinister ambiguity, he concludes that "folks who put me in a passion / May find me pipe after another fashion."

These words should put the Mayor and Corporation on their guard for more reasons than one. If the Piper is going to make it all the way from Hamelin to Baghdad by dinnertime, he must have magic powers beyond even those he's revealed so far. For that matter, he's already shown what he can do with the music of his pipe. Every rat in town followed him to destruction. He's a powerful man!

The sounds of these lines also suggest he's losing his patience quickly:

> With him I proved no bargain-driver,
> With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver!
> And folks who put me in a passion
> May find me pipe after another fashion.

The combination of blunt /p/, /b/, and /d/ alliteration, harsh /f/ alliteration, and hissing /s/ and /sh/ sibilance make the Piper's voice sound sharp but soft, and utterly unamused.

The Mayor, blinded by arrogance and greed, doesn't know what's good for him. His dignity wounded by the suggestion that a mere "Cook" might have demands on the Piper's schedule that trump the Mayor's own, he cries:

> How? cried the Mayor, d'ye think I'll brook
> Being worse treated than a Cook?
> Insulted by a lazy ribald
> With idle pipe and vesture piebald?

Here, his snobbery comes right out into the open. Calling the Piper a "lazy ribald" with an "idle pipe," he draws on a classic philistine's criticism of artists: *This guy's just a low-class layabout! What kind of a job is piping, anyway?* You can hear his anger in his driven /i/ assonance: "idle pipe and vesture piebald."

The Mayor looks down on the Piper not in spite of but because of his strange skills, seeing them as the marks of someone who's no good to *his* idea of society. This in spite of the fact that the magical Piper has just saved his skin (or his "ermine gown," at least).

Danger's brewing. As the Mayor concludes his tirade by inviting the Piper to "do [his] worst," the listening audience knows that he'll live to regret those words.

LINES 185-201

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
Soft notes as yet musician's cunning
Never gave th' enraptured air)
There was a rustling, that seem'd like a bustling
Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
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,
And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,
Tripping and skipping, ran merrily after
The wonderful music with shouting and laughter.

Without another word, the Piper heads back out into the street and begins to play once more. Much of the language here echoes his earlier piping: again, the spell takes hold "ere he bl[ows] three notes," a repetition that makes readers anticipate that the Piper will again call to someone. But what (or who) will

follow the Piper now?

Just as before, readers hear a stampede coming before they see it. Listen to the internal rhymes here:

> There was a **rustling**, that seem'd like a **bustling**
> Of merry crowds **justling** at pitching and **hustling**,
> Small feet were **pattering**, wooden shoes **clattering**,

All that jolly rhyming onomatopoeia suggests a lively, happy crowd. But having seen what happened to the rats, readers might greet this crowd with horror. For it's already clear that the Piper must be calling to the town's children.

When the kids finally make their appearance, they're running "like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattered," a simile that paints a picture of happy chaos—and suggests that the children are responding to the Piper's song with the same kind of instinctual hunger that the rats did. But with their "rosy cheeks," "flaxen curls," "sparkling eyes," and "teeth like pearls," the kids are also a picture of idyllic youthful beauty—a touching sight, if they weren't all barreling after a man who just used the same hypnotic music to drown rats.

All the imagery in this passage evokes the children's sweetness, happiness, and innocence—and thus makes this moment terribly sinister. Strangely, it might be *less* creepy if the children walked along like hypnotized zombies or tiptoed after the Piper in awe. But as they rush after him, "tripping and skipping" with unwitting glee, they're clearly in the grips of the same enchanting, delicious delusion that was the rats' downfall. What the narrator *doesn't* say makes this moment dreadful: the image speaks for itself.

LINES 202-219

The Mayor was dumb, and the Council stood
As if they were changed into blocks of wood,
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,
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,
And to Coppelburg 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,
And we shall see our children stop!

Confronted with the sight of all the town's children following the Piper toward the river, the Mayor and Corporation are so horrified that it's "as if they were changed into blocks of wood": they're in shock so deep they can't even move or speak. Frozen in place, they suffer terribly as the Piper wends his way down toward the Weser (where, presumably, countless dead rats still bob). The narrator plays up the sickening juxtaposition between the adults' agony and the children "merrily skipping by" in a "joyous crowd."

Imagine Hamelin's relief, then, when the Piper turns "from South to West," leading the children away from the river and toward "Coppelburg Hill," a peak just outside town. The townspeople rejoice, certain that "he never can cross that mighty top": the mountain, they're sure, is simply too high and imposing for the Piper to traverse.

The shape of these lines creates a mood of agonizing tension. Listen to how the meter in these lines mirrors the watching townsfolk's feelings as the Piper heads:

> To **where** the **We**ser **rolled** its **wa**ters
> **Right** in the **way** of their **sons** and **daugh**ters!

Though both of these lines have four **stresses**, the second uses more quick, scurrying unstressed syllables, making the line sound as frantic as the watchers.

Two long stretches of rhyme in lines 214-219, meanwhile, intensify the drama at the end of the stanza:

> However he turned from South to **West**,
> And to Coppelburg 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***,
> And we shall see our children ***stop***!

These focused rhymes are intense as the townspeople's stare, and leave readers and townspeople alike teetering in suspense as they wait to see what the Piper will do when he reaches Coppelburg Hill.

LINES 220-225

When, lo, as they reached the mountain's side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children follow'd,
And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain side shut fast.

The townspeople are pinning all their hopes on the mighty slopes of Coppelburg Hill, which they're sure the Piper and his parade of hypnotized children can't cross. And perhaps the Piper *can't* cross the mountain—but then, he doesn't need to. He's a magician:

When, lo, as they reached the mountain's side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children follow'd,

The Piper thus leads the children into what might as well be a tomb. The enchanted door "shut[s] fast" behind them, never to open again.

This grim image introduces some real terror and sorrow to what has so far been an essentially lighthearted poem. For refusing to pay a bill, the Mayor and Corporation of Hamelin have just watched all their children disappear into the earth—and just when they felt as if the kids might be saved, too.

So far, this poem has looked askance on the Mayor and Corporation, whose snobbery and greed make them foolish and short-sighted. In this passage, the poem might invite readers to think a little harder about the Piper, too. Just as in the stanza where the Piper first summons the children with his music, what the narrator *doesn't* say here is as important as what he does say. There's no mention of how the Piper looks or feels as he leads the children away: he's a cypher, a complete mystery. All readers really know of him is that he has magical talents and enjoys the power they give him. Certainly he doesn't seem to have even the smallest of qualms about child-stealing.

The poem's portrait of the Piper, read symbolically, might thus suggest a certain ambivalence about the power of art (and the power of artists). The Piper has the ability to put compelling, enchanting, persuasive visions and ideas into other people's heads—which, after all, is what artists of all kinds do, be they pipers, playwrights, or poets. Such visions, the narrator reveals, can be dangerous and deceptive. While the Mayor and Corporation have behaved badly and dishonestly, the Piper's revenge itself feels like an abuse of power, and one that's dishonest in its own right, with the music's false promises of paradise. Artists, this poem suggests, have as much power to mislead (literally!) as they do to enlighten.

LINES 226-249

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
His sadness, he was used to say, —
It's dull in our town since my playmates left!
I can't forget that I'm bereft
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
Which the Piper also promised me;
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 every thing was strange and new;
The sparrows were brighter than 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 felt assured
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,
And never hear of that country more!

Just like the rats, Hamelin's children skip merrily off to their doom. There's another parallel between the two incidents, too: in both cases, a lone survivor escapes to tell his tale. This time, that survivor is a little boy who doesn't make it into the mountain before the magical door shuts.

There's a difference here, though. Where the chronicler rat survived because he was "stout as Julius Caesar" and could swim across the river, Hamelin's one remaining child escapes because he has a handicap: a "lame foot" that slows him down. And where the rat seems relieved to have made it out alive, the little boy—the only child left in Hamelin—feels only "sadness."

He's not simply sad because "it's dull in our town since my playmates left," though that's certainly one of his woes. He also "can't forget" what the Piper's song promised him. Now, just as the rat did, he opens a window on what he heard in that enchanted music:

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 every thing was strange and new;

Where the Piper spoke to the rats of a glutton's heaven, he speaks to the children of something richer: a paradise "just at hand," so close you could reach out and grab it. In some ways, this paradise sounds like the Garden of Eden, a peaceful land of beauty and comfort. But it also promises sights that are "strange and new"—excitements beyond what the children can dream.

Just as in the rat's chronicle, the vision of paradise unfolds with abundant polysyndeton that suggests an overflow of wonders:

The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,
And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
And honey-bees had lost their stings,
And horses were born with eagles' wings:

All the images here paint a picture of a land where everything is just a little more intense than it is in the everyday world: brighter, faster, richer. But this is a gentler and more magical world, too, where the bees can't sting you when you try to eat

their honey and where you might be able to go for a ride on a winged horse. This paradise sounds like a perfected version of the real world, a place with all the comforts of home that's still more exciting, more astonishing, more pleasurable than the everyday. In other words, it's a paradise tailored to small children, safe and thrilling at once.

Poignantly, hearing of this land makes the little boy certain that his "lame foot would be speedily cured" as soon as they got there: if this is a place *like* home, but better, then surely he'll be healed there. But it's that very foot that bars him from the paradise he seeks. "Left alone against [his] will," he must now "go now limping as before."

If the sight of the children disappearing into the hill invited readers to question the Piper's powers, this little boy's fate intensifies that dubiousness. The rats' experience leads readers to suspect that the Piper's promise of an enchanted land might be deceitful. Yet the promise of a better place, however unreal, is so beautiful that the little boy who's left out will be haunted by it all his life, longing for something he can never have—and blaming his lame foot for his suffering, not knowing that the Piper's vision was a lie all along. The deceptive dreams the artist can conjure up might have painful consequences.

LINES 250-262

Alas, alas for Hamelin!
There came into many a burgher's pate
A text which says, that Heaven's Gate
Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate
As the needle's eye takes a camel in!
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,
If he'd only return the way he went,
And bring the children behind him.
But when they saw 'twas a lost endeavour,
And Piper and dancers were gone for ever,

As they stare at the rocky cliff into which their children have vanished, the people of Hamelin, sick with regret, remember a biblical parable:

> Alas, alas for Hamelin!
> There came into many a burgher's pate
> A text which says, that Heaven's Gate
> Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate
> As the needle's eye takes a camel in!

This allusion to one of Jesus's most famous (and weirdest) stories suggests that the Mayor and Corporation are at last understanding the consequences of their greed. The parable suggests that the rich often have trouble seeing beyond the pleasures and privileges of their wealth: the camel simile is meant to suggest that it's almost impossible for a rich person to look beyond worldly things toward the afterlife. Here, greed hasn't merely blinded the town's rich men to what actually matters, it's flung them into the hell of grief.

Yet again, though, notice how Browning's rhymes temper this awful moment. Comically pairing "Hamelin" and "camel in," the poem winks at the reader, providing a little witty distance from the action. This tale is certainly meant to offer a moral lesson, but it's also not meant to be *too* overwhelmingly grim. As in any fairy tale, the dreadful things that happen here don't land with the grisly reality of a horror movie, but with a little folkloric distance. (Just think of the Grimm fairy tales, full of nail-studded barrels and red-hot shoes, but still not exactly *scary* to listen to: more deliciously shivery.)

Money can't save the people of Hamelin now. Though they send out messengers in every direction offering "silver and gold" in abundance to the Piper if only he'll come back and "bring the children behind him," no one can find the guy, of course. The townspeople must now resign themselves to mourning what they've lost.

LINES 263-282

They made a decree that lawyers never
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,
"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 tabor
Was sure for the future to lose his labour.
Nor suffered they Hostelry or Tavern
To shock with mirth a street so solemn;
But opposite the place of the cavern
They wrote the story on a column,
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.

As the people of Hamelin start to come to terms with their grief, the poem takes a quick turn away from folklore and into real history—or something like it. The legend of the Pied Piper is an old, old story; some 17th-century chroniclers set it down as a *true* story that happened way back in the 13th or 14th century. While some of that is, shall we say, unlikely—17th-century history books often print tall tales right alongside true events—there is evidence to suggest that the town of Hamelin really did lose most or all of its children in some mysterious calamity in the late 1200s. Whether that was a plague (with the

Piper becoming a symbol of death) or just a mass emigration in which the younger generation struck out for new territory, town records do suggest that *something* happened to Hamelin's kids.

Browning here borrows one chronicler's later (and likely less accurate) date for these events: July 22, 1376. That's the date that the people of Hamelin "decree" that all of the town's official documents must include from now on. Every new proclamation or record must include not just "the day of the month and the year," but a mention of exactly how long it's been since "the Twenty-second of July, / Thirteen hundred and Seventy-six."

This loss, in other words, was the end of one era and the beginning of another for the people of Hamelin. Just as the BC/AD calendar counts years starting from the birth of Christ, Hamelin will now mark time starting from the day their children were lost.

The people of Hamelin mark their grief not just in their documents, but the fabric of their city. They rename the street where the children made their "last retreat," calling it "The Pied Piper's Street," and they ban pubs and inns from operating there, loath to "shock with mirth a street so solemn": this street will be an eternal monument to loss, and anyone who parties or plays music on "pipe or tabor" (that is, pipe or drum) there will be punished.

They also put up what might as well be a tombstone "opposite the place of the cavern," a "column" upon which they inscribe the story of what happened. Last but not least, they make a new stained glass window for their church that represents the events of that terrible day. The window "stands to this very day," the narrator says audience—another true fact, if a slightly modified one. (There are records of such a window, but the church it stood in was long gone by the time Browning wrote. There is, however, a new Pied Piper window in a Hamelin church today.)

Hamelin, in short, turns itself over to mourning, becoming a living testament to its people's folly and grief. The church window in particular, alongside that earlier allusion to the biblical parable of the camel and the needle's eye, suggests that the people are *repenting*, taking a spiritual lesson from their suffering—and trying to share that lesson with whoever comes to town.

LINES 283-293

And I must not omit to say
That in Transylvania there's a tribe
Of alien people who ascribe
The outlandish ways and dress
On which their neighbours lay such stress
To their fathers and mothers having risen
Out of some subterraneous 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.

The poem has just finished describing a Hamelin in permanent guilt-ridden mourning for its lost children. As the stanza ends, the narrator lightens this sad picture with a twist.

First, he reminds his audience that he's there:

> And I must not omit to say

Speaking up in the first person, the narrator puts a little distance between his listeners and the story, reminding them that this is just a tale he's telling.

Then, he delivers the oddly consoling news that there's a "tribe / Of alien people" in Transylvania, people whose neighbors look at them askance for their "outlandish ways and dress." These people explain that they picked up their weird habits from their ancestors, people who emerged "out of some subterraneous prison"—that is, people who escaped from an underground dungeon. These, of course, were the lost children, who apparently made their way out of the mountains on the other side and founded a little town of their own.

That's excellent news, of course: the children weren't simply entombed forever. But this passage also sets up a juxtaposition not unlike the one between the Corporation and the Piper earlier. Now, Hamelin's children's children's children are the "outlandish" strangers among the people of Transylvania. Perhaps the Piper led the children, not just into a mountain, but into a more Piper-like way of life; their descendants sound rather like a bohemian artists' colony that moved in next door to a bunch of conventional Transylvanian squares.

The Piper has thus left behind not just a warning about greed, but a dash of outsider spirit, a cheerfully weird independence. In some sense, he's stolen the children away to something more like his own way of life.

LINES 294-297

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

At last, the poem reaches its final short, cheery stanza. The narrator ends his tale by turning directly to his audience—and to one listener in particular: "Willy," the little boy Browning wrote this poem for. In the friendly, conspiratorial tone of a good uncle, the narrator lays out the moral of the story for Willy:

> So, Willy, let you and me be wipers
> Of scores out with all men — especially pipers:
> And, whether they rid us from rats or from mice,

If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise.

Both the teller and the listener can learn something from this tale, these closing words suggest: keep your promises, settle your scores. But in spite of its neat, crisp alliteration—"Willy" and "wipers," "rid" and "rats"—and its simple moral, these lines aren't just a tidy instructive ending. There are hints of wildness and magic beneath the smiling surface of these lines.

When the speaker encourages Willy to keep promises to "all men—especially pipers," he gives the sense that there might be some truth to this story; Willy just might run into a real Pied Piper someday. One must keep an eye on such magicians, these lines suggest, and be forewarned that beautiful stories can be deceiving.

This conclusion also leaves unspoken the *other* lesson the people of Hamelin learned, to their cost. The poem's deeper moral feeling is a distaste for wealthy complacency and snobbery—and for the kind of smallmindedness that treats difference as inferiority.

SYMBOLS

THE PIED PIPER

As an outsider, an enchanter, and a deceiver, the Pied Piper might symbolize artists in general.

A strange, solitary figure, the Piper can play music so enchanting that it puts heavenly visions into the heads of whoever hears it, be they child or rat. He uses these powers to make his living, but also to get his revenge when the Mayor and Corporation of Hamelin refuse to pay him what they owe him.

The poem hints that beautiful art can attract and enchant, but also deceive—and that gifted artists like the Piper are thus both wizards and tricksters. The Piper uses his astonishing powers to serve his own purposes, and his music is as treacherous as it is beautiful.

Though the poem is ambivalent about the Piper, the narrator also admires his music and seems sympathetic to his difficulties in getting paid (a problem for artists since time immemorial).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 50-63:** "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, / 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! / 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 tone, / Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!"
- **Lines 64-89:** "He advanced to the council-table: / And, Please your honours, 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, / 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. / (And here they noticed round his neck / A scarf of red and yellow stripe, / To match with his coat of the self-same cheque; / And at the scarf's end hung a pipe; / And his fingers, they noticed, were ever straying / As if impatient to be playing / Upon this pipe, as low it dangled / Over his vesture so old-fangled.) / Yet, said he, poor piper as I am, / In Tartary I freed the Cham, / Last June, from his huge swarms of gnats; / I eased in Asia the Nizam / Of a monstrous brood of vampyre-bats: / And, as for what your brain bewilders, / If I can rid your town of rats / Will you give me a thousand guilders?"
- **Lines 92-101:** "Into the street the Piper stept, / Smiling first a little smile, / 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, / Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled; / And ere three shrill notes the pipe uttered, / You heard as if an army muttered;"
- **Lines 113-114:** "From street to street he piped advancing, / And step for step they followed dancing,"
- **Lines 146-148:** "suddenly up the face / Of the Piper perked in the market-place, / With a, First, if you please, my thousand guilders!"
- **Lines 155-156:** "a wandering fellow / With a gipsy coat of red and yellow!"
- **Lines 168-178:** "The Piper's face fell, and he cried, / No trifling! I can't wait, beside! / I've promised to visit by dinner time / Bagdat, and accept the prime / Of the Head Cook's pottage, all he's rich in, / For having left, in the Caliph's kitchen, / Of a nest of scorpions no survivor — / With him I proved no bargain-driver, / With you, don't think I'll bate a stiver! / And folks who put me in a passion / May find me pipe after another fashion."
- **Lines 181-182:** "a lazy ribald / With idle pipe and vesture piebald?"
- **Lines 185-190:** "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 / Soft notes as yet musician's cunning / Never gave th' enraptured air)"
- **Lines 210-223:** "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, / And to Coppelburg 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, / And we shall see our children stop! / When, lo, as they reached the mountain's side, / A wondrous portal opened wide, / As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed; / And the Piper advanced and the children follow'd,"

- **Lines 233-234:** "the Piper also promised me; / For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Bright imagery brings this story to life. Browning wrote this poem to amuse a young friend who was sick in bed, and the vivid pictures he paints seem designed to take a kid out of his uncomfortable situation and into a folktale.

For instance, Browning puts portraits of the Mayor and the Pied Piper right next to each other, creating pictures of the two men not just through description but through their contrast with each other. When readers meet him, the Mayor is sitting at his council table "looking little though wondrous fat," short but majestically round. The Piper, on the other hand, is:

> [...] 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,
> 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 —

These two men have a kind of Laurel-and-Hardy difference in physique, a comical contrast. Notice, too, how long the narrator spends describing the Piper compared to how long he spends describing the Mayor. The Mayor is just an everyday well-fed bureaucrat; the Piper, on the other hand, is a strange fellow like no one in this town has ever seen, and he gets described in as much detail as a newly discovered species of parrot. The image of his "lips where smiles went out and in," in particular, suggests he's a mysterious, cagey sort of guy: the smiles that go in sound like private smiles, smiles he doesn't share with the world at large.

There's a similar sense of mystery and magic in the lines where the Piper begins to play:

> To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
> And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled,
> Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;

Besides evoking an eerie, unexpected sparkle, this image suggests there's something a little dangerous about this man and his fiery look.

His piping produces this astonishing result:

> 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;
> 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,

In this theatrical moment, the townspeople (and the readers) *hear* the rat stampede before they see it. When the rats finally put in an appearance, the description of their many shapes, sizes, and colors works alongside intense parallelism to suggest that there's every kind of rat here—but they're all still rats, zillions and zillions of rats, unified in their rattiness.

A similar movement from sound to sight also conjures up the moment when the Piper pipes again, this time in revenge:

> There was a rustling, that seem'd like a bustling
> Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,
> Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering,
> 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,
> And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,

Once more, a sound—this time, that of happy scrambling—arrives, ominously, before the children come into sight. When the kids finally appear, the speaker's imagery stresses their beauty and sweetness: they're all rosy-cheeked treasures, the worst thing in the world for their parents to lose.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "shrieking and squeaking / In fifty different sharps and flats."
- **Lines 31-32:** " At this the Mayor and Corporation / Quaked with a mighty consternation."
- **Lines 41-42:** "what should hap / At the chamber door but a gentle tap?"
- **Lines 43-45:** "Bless us, cried the Mayor, what's that? / (With the Corporation as he sate, / Looking little though wondrous fat)"

- **Lines 51-57:** "His queer long coat from heel to head / Was half of yellow and half of red; / And he himself was tall and thin, / 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 —"
- **Lines 74-76:** "(And here they noticed round his neck / A scarf of red and yellow stripe, / To match with his coat of the self-same cheque;"
- **Lines 96-107:** "Then, like a musical adept, / To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled, / And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled, / 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; / 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,"
- **Line 109:** "Cocking tails and pricking whiskers,"
- **Lines 121-122:** "At the first shrill notes of the pipe, / I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,"
- **Lines 129-131:** "a voice / (Sweeter than by harp or by psaltery / Is breathed) called out, Oh rats, rejoice!"
- **Lines 135-137:** "one bulky sugar-puncheon, / Ready staved, like a great sun shone / Glorious scarce an inch before me,"
- **Lines 155-156:** "To pay this sum to a wandering fellow / With a gipsy coat of red and yellow!"
- **Lines 188-190:** "three notes (such sweet / Soft notes as yet musician's cunning / Never gave th' enraptured air)"
- **Lines 191-194:** "There was a rustling, that seem'd like a bustling / Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling, / Small feet were pattering, wooden shoes clattering, / Little hands clapping, and little tongues chattering,"
- **Lines 198-199:** "With rosy cheeks and flaxen curls, / And sparkling eyes and teeth like pearls,"
- **Lines 221-222:** "A wondrous portal opened wide, / As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;"
- **Line 239:** "The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,"

SIMILE

Witty, surprising similes bring the story of the Pied Piper to life.

The earliest of the poem's similes describe the Pied Piper himself. His "sharp blue eyes," the narrator reports, are "each like a pin." His gaze, in other words, is narrow, pointed, and penetrating. He's dressed in such peculiarly old-fashioned clothing that, as a member of the Corporation cries:

> [...] It's as my great-grandsire,
> Starting up at the Trump of Doom's tone,
> Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!

These similes make the Piper seem both sharp-witted and uncanny, more like a roving ghost than an ordinary citizen. That impression only gets stronger when he prepares to play his magic pipe:

> To blow the pipe his lips he wrinkled,
> And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled,
> Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;

This simile conjures up a kind of nursery magic: sprinkling salt in a candle flame to make it change color is the kind of trick with which you might amuse a Victorian child on a winter night. Through this image, the Piper's magic (like the Piper himself) seems to spring up out of nowhere.

Similes also enliven the comical passage in which the lone rat who survives the Piper's plot writes his memoirs. This fellow, the narrator remarks, survived because he was "stout as Julius Caesar," truly a river-crossing leader among rats. He remembers that the Piper's tune painted a magical picture of pantries and store-rooms left open wide so that rats could eat at their leisure. In the crowning image of them all:

> [...] one bulky sugar-puncheon,
> Ready staved, like a great sun shone
> Glorious scarce an inch before me,

Depicting a cracked-open sugar barrel as a vision beautiful as the rising sun, this simile suggests that rats are a simple, singleminded folk: their hearts are in their stomachs.

One of the poem's most significant similes isn't Browning's own. As the miserable people of Hamelin watch their children disappear into the mouth of a magical cavern, they recall:

> A text which says, that Heaven's Gate
> Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate
> As the needle's eye takes a camel in!

This surreal simile comes from a famous Bible story in which Jesus warns his followers that wealth often blinds people to things of higher importance: it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into Heaven on his own steam. So it proves in this poem. For clinging to their paltry "thousand guilders," the Mayor and Corporation lose a greater treasure: their town's children.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 54:** "With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,"
- **Lines 61-63:** "It's as my great-grandsire, / Starting up at the Trump of Doom's tone, / Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!"
- **Line 96:** "Then, like a musical adept,"

- **Lines 98-99:** "And green and blue his sharp eyes twinkled, / Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;"
- **Line 101:** "You heard as if an army muttered;"
- **Line 117:** "stout as Julius Caesar,"
- **Lines 135-137:** "just as one bulky sugar-puncheon, / Ready staved, like a great sun shone / Glorious scarce an inch before me,"
- **Lines 191-192:** "There was a rustling, that seem'd like a bustling / Of merry crowds justling at pitching and hustling,"
- **Lines 195-196:** "And, like fowls in a farm-yard when barley is scattering, / Out came the children running."
- **Line 199:** "teeth like pearls,"
- **Lines 202-203:** "the Council stood / As if they were changed into blocks of wood,"
- **Lines 252-254:** "Heaven's Gate / Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate / As the needle's eye takes a camel in!"

REPETITION

All different flavors of repetitions—but especially anaphora and polysyndeton—give the poem a rollicking rhythm. For instance, listen to the strong anaphora in the lines where the rats first appear:

> They fought the dogs, **and** killed the cats,
> **And** bit the babies in the cradles,
> **And** eat the cheeses out of the vats,
> **And** licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,

All those lines starting with "and" (also an example of polysyndeton) make this rat flood feel overwhelming: everywhere you look, the rats wreak more havoc. No wonder that the Mayor calls for help with such desperate epizeuxis: "Oh for **a trap, a trap, a trap!**"

A similar effect appears when the rats make their second fateful appearance:

> **And the** muttering **grew to a grumbling;**
> **And the grumbling grew to a** mighty rumbling;
> **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,

Both the parallelism here and the intense diacope on "rats" creates a picture of a surging verminous sea stampeding toward its destruction.

The one rat who lives to write his memoirs later remembers what the Piper's song promised him:

> I heard a sound as of scraping tripe,
> **And** putting apples, wondrous ripe,
> **Into** a cider-press's gripe:
> **And a moving away** of pickle-tub-boards,
> **And a leaving ajar** of conserve-cupboards,
> **And a drawing** the corks of train-oil-flasks,
> **And a breaking** the hoops of butter-casks;

The polysyndeton here—all those "and"s—again suggests an overwhelming abundance, this time of tasty snacks. Meanwhile, the parallelism of verbs like "**leaving** ajar" and "**drawing** the corks" emphasizes human carelessness: rat heaven, it turns out, looks a lot like neglectful housekeeping.

After so cannily ridding Hamelin of rats, the Piper politely requests his fee. Listen to the anadiplosis that suggests the Mayor has second thoughts about the bargain:

> [...] suddenly up the face
> Of the Piper perked in the market-place,
> With a, First, if you please, my **thousand guilders**!
> IX.
> A **thousand guilders**! The Mayor looked blue;

Readers can hear the incredulity in this repetition: the Mayor seems to repeat the sum in shock, as if he's just hearing about it for the first time (which, of course, he is not). His refusal to pay sets off the chain of events that leads to the narrator's own repetitive lament: "**Alas, alas** for Hamelin!"

Throughout the poem, then, repetition helps to evoke the characters' lively, vivid voices and creates a sense of abundance, overwhelm, or intensity.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "and"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 40:** "a trap, a trap, a trap"
- **Line 52:** "half of," "half of"
- **Line 68:** "or," "or," "or"
- **Line 72:** "and," "and," "and"
- **Line 93:** "Smiling," "smile"
- **Line 102:** "And the," "grew to a grumbling"
- **Line 103:** "And the," "grumbling grew to"
- **Line 104:** "And," "rats"
- **Line 105:** "rats," "rats," "rats," "rats"
- **Line 106:** "rats," "rats," "rats," "rats"
- **Line 113:** "street," "street"
- **Line 114:** "step," "step"
- **Line 125:** "And a"
- **Line 126:** "And a"
- **Line 127:** "And a"

- **Line 128:** "And a"
- **Line 129:** "And"
- **Line 133:** "on," "on"
- **Line 137:** "me"
- **Line 138:** "me"
- **Line 139:** "me"
- **Line 148:** "my thousand guilders"
- **Line 149:** "A thousand guilders"
- **Line 167:** "A thousand guilders"
- **Line 175:** "With"
- **Line 176:** "With"
- **Line 194:** "Little," "little"
- **Line 197:** "little"
- **Line 198:** "and"
- **Line 199:** "And," "and"
- **Line 223:** "And," "and"
- **Line 224:** "And"
- **Line 237:** "And"
- **Line 238:** "And"
- **Line 240:** "And"
- **Line 241:** "And"
- **Line 242:** "And"
- **Line 243:** "And"
- **Line 250:** "Alas, alas"
- **Line 282:** "And"
- **Line 283:** "And"

ALLUSION

In telling a cautionary tale against greed, this poem alludes to a famous passage from the biblical Gospels.

In this story (of which slightly different versions appear in the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke), a rich man asks Jesus what he can do to win eternal life. Jesus tells him to follow all the commandments—and then, Columbo-like, adds that there's just one more thing: he should also sell all his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and come be one of Jesus's disciples. The rich man doesn't like this idea at all and leaves disappointed. Jesus explains to the rest of his followers:

> Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches
> to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a
> camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a
> rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

In other words, a rich guy is as likely to get into Heaven as a camel is to squeeze through the eye of a needle; there's just no way they do it, Jesus goes on, without God's grace. It's this famous, striking, rather surreal analogy that the rich men of Hamelin remember with dismay after they watch their children disappear into the mountainside:

> There came into many a burgher's pate
> A text which says, that Heaven's Gate
> Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate
> As the needle's eye takes a camel in!

The allusion here suggests that the burghers' shortsighted greed is an old, old flavor of folly; wealth has made fools of people since money existed.

The poem also makes a tongue-in-cheek allusion to a famous moment in Roman history. When the rats plunge into the river and drown, only one survives, a rat as "stout as Julius Caesar." Julius Caesar wasn't just an infamous Roman general and ruler, but a noted river-crosser: by traversing the Rubicon river with his army, he began a war that would lead to the downfall of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the new Roman Empire.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 250-254:** "Alas, alas for Hamelin! / There came into many a burgher's pate / A text which says, that Heaven's Gate / Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate / As the needle's eye takes a camel in!"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem's juxtaposition between the rotund and elegant Corporation and the lean, colorful Piper contrasts two ways of life—both of which have their difficulties.

Wearing "gowns lined with ermine" (an expensive fur) and drinking the finest "Rhenish" wine, the Mayor and the Corporation of Hamelin are living the high life—funded, the poem suggests, by the poorer townspeople, who pay for those gowns and that wine from their taxes. The Mayor, in particular, the poem presents as a man who enjoys overindulging: he's grown fat on the town's dime (or guilder, as the case may be). These men, in other words, are the picture of selfish wealth and comfort, and their jobs were easy as could be before the plague of rats came along. They're also part of an in-crowd: the whole Corporation often acts as one body.

The Piper, by contrast, is a lean and lonely figure. His "pied" (or multicolored) clothing makes him look like a minstrel, a jester, or (as the Corporation scornfully calls him) a "gipsy"—a wanderer and an outsider. "Tall and thin" where the Mayor is "little but wondrous fat," raggedly bright where the Corporation is luxuriously furred, he presents a striking visual contrast to the wealthy men. The differences between them suggest the distance between haves and have-nots, insiders and outsiders.

The juxtaposition between Corporation and Piper also contrasts two different kinds of power. The Corporation is a body of influential men with the force of the group behind them. They feel they can bully and cheat the Piper because they're important and because they outnumber him. Even their name, the "Corporation," suggests they're one big entity made

up of a bunch of people, all acting and thinking the same. The Piper, on the other hand, has a more individualistic power. As a magician and an artist, he can transfix anyone he chooses with the music of his pipe. Perhaps the juxtaposition even hints that this is the way artists live in general: on the edges, outside mainstream power, but with eerie sway over people's imaginations.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-27:** "To think we buy gowns lined with ermine / For dolts that can't or won't determine / What's like to rid us of our vermin!"
- **Lines 43-45:** "Bless us, cried the Mayor, what's that? / (With the Corporation as he sate, / Looking little though wondrous fat)"
- **Lines 49-63:** "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, / 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! / 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 tone, / Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!"
- **Line 82:** "Yet, said he, poor piper as I am,"
- **Lines 92-99:** "Into the street the Piper stept, / Smiling first a little smile, / 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, / Like a candle-flame where salt is sprinkled;"
- **Lines 149-167:** "A thousand guilders! The Mayor looked blue; / So did the Corporation too. / For council dinners made rare havock / With Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock; / And half the money would replenish / Their cellar's biggest butt with Rhenish. / To pay this sum to a wandering fellow / With a gipsy coat of red and yellow! / Beside, quoth the Mayor with a knowing wink, / Our business was done at the river's brink; / 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; / 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!"
- **Lines 179-184:** "How? cried the Mayor, d'ye think I'll brook / Being worse treated than a Cook? / Insulted by a lazy ribald / With idle pipe and vesture piebald? / You threaten us, fellow? Do your worst, / Blow your pipe there till you burst!"

ALLITERATION

Strong alliteration makes this poem sound jaunty and funny (even in its darker moments).

Punchy alliteration marks the poem from the start. Listen to these lines from the first stanza, where the speaker describes the many charms of Hamelin:

> Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
> By famous Hanover city;
> The river Weser, deep and wide,
> Washes its wall on the southern side;
> A pleasanter spot you never spied;

All these repeated initial sounds feel stylized and musical, setting a folkloric tone: this is elevated language to describe a quaint, fairy-tale sort of place. (A German speaker might object that "Weser" should be pronounced with a /v/ sound rather than a /w/ sound, but we'll let that pass.)

Later on, alliteration makes an avalanche of rats sound even more overwhelming:

> Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
> Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats,
> Grave old plodders, gay young friskers,

The matching /gr/ and /br/ sounds here (as well as assonance and internal rhyme, as in the match between "grey" and "gay") give this catalogue of rodents a kind of consistency. The repeated sounds make that tide of rats feel overwhelmingly and uniformly, well, *ratty*, at the same time as it's made of rats of all sorts.

The Pied Piper himself, of course, is alliterative too—and assonant (with those two long /i/ sounds), and consonant (with the inner /p/ of "piper"). His chiming name makes him sound powerful and musical right from the get-go.

(Note that we've only marked a few selections of the poem's copious alliteration here—there's plenty more to find.)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Hamelin"
- **Line 2:** "Hanover"
- **Line 3:** "Weser," "wide"
- **Line 4:** "Washes," "wall," "southern side"
- **Line 5:** "spot," "spied"
- **Line 8:** "suffer so"
- **Line 11:** "cats"
- **Line 12:** "bit," "babies," "cradles"

- **Line 14:** “licked,” “ladles”
- **Line 15:** “Split,” “salted,” “sprats”
- **Line 18:** “speaking”
- **Line 19:** “shrieking,” “squeaking”
- **Line 20:** “fifty,” “sharps,” “flats”
- **Line 23:** “clear,” “cried”
- **Line 24:** “Corporation”
- **Line 26:** “dolts,” “determine”
- **Line 27:** “rid”
- **Line 28:** “Rouse,” “racking”
- **Line 29:** “remedy”
- **Line 31:** “Mayor,” “Corporation”
- **Line 32:** “mighty,” “consternation”
- **Line 37:** “bid,” “brain”
- **Line 45:** “Looking little”
- **Line 48:** “pit,” “pat”
- **Line 51:** “queer,” “coat,” “heel,” “head”
- **Line 52:** “half,” “half”
- **Line 53:** “he himself”
- **Line 55:** “light loose,” “swarthy skin”
- **Line 56:** “cheek,” “chin”
- **Line 58:** “kith,” “kin”
- **Line 60:** “quaint”
- **Line 61:** “Quoth,” “great-grandsire”
- **Line 62:** “Trump,” “tone”
- **Line 63:** “tombstone”
- **Line 70:** “chiefly,” “charm”
- **Line 73:** “people,” “Pied Piper”
- **Line 76:** “self-same”
- **Line 79:** “playing”
- **Line 80:** “pipe”
- **Line 82:** “poor piper”
- **Line 86:** “brood,” “bats”
- **Line 87:** “brain bewilders”
- **Line 88:** “rid,” “rats”
- **Line 92:** “street,” “stept”
- **Line 99:** “salt,” “sprinkled”
- **Line 102:** “grew,” “grumbling”
- **Line 103:** “grumbling grew”
- **Line 105:** “Great,” “brawny”
- **Line 106:** “Brown,” “grey”
- **Line 107:** “Grave”
- **Line 108:** “cousins”
- **Line 109:** “Cocking”
- **Line 116:** “plunged,” “perished”
- **Line 117:** “Save,” “stout”
- **Line 118:** “Swam,” “carry”
- **Line 120:** “commentary”
- **Line 122:** “sound,” “scraping”
- **Line 126:** “conserve-cupboards”
- **Line 128:** “breaking,” “butter”
- **Line 131:** “rats, rejoice”
- **Line 140:** “have heard,” “Hamelin”
- **Line 142:** “poles”
- **Line 143:** “Poke”
- **Line 144:** “Consult,” “carpenters”
- **Line 145:** “town,” “trace”
- **Line 147:** “Piper perked,” “place”
- **Line 154:** “biggest butt”
- **Line 163:** “matter,” “money,” “put,” “poke”
- **Line 168:** “face fell”
- **Line 173:** “Caliph's kitchen”
- **Line 174:** “scorpions,” “survivor”
- **Line 177:** “put,” “passion”
- **Line 178:** “pipe”
- **Lines 179-180:** “rook / Being”
- **Line 182:** “pipe,” “piebald”
- **Line 185:** “stept,” “street”
- **Line 186:** “lips”
- **Line 187:** “Laid,” “long,” “smooth straight”
- **Lines 188-189:** “such sweet / Soft”
- **Line 195:** “fowls,” “farm”
- **Line 209:** “bosoms beat”
- **Line 211:** “Weser,” “rolled,” “waters”
- **Line 212:** “Right,” “way”
- **Line 232:** “sights,” “see”
- **Line 233:** “Piper,” “promised”
- **Line 234:** “joyous”
- **Line 235:** “Joining,” “just”
- **Line 236:** “gushed,” “grew”
- **Line 237:** “flowers,” “forth,” “fairer”
- **Line 240:** “dogs,” “deer”
- **Line 241:** “honey,” “bees”
- **Line 242:** “horses,” “born”
- **Line 245:** “stopped,” “stood still”
- **Line 253:** “Rich,” “rate”
- **Line 264:** “dated duly”
- **Line 272:** “Pied Piper's”
- **Line 273:** “playing,” “pipe”
- **Line 274:** “lose,” “labour”
- **Line 276:** “street so solemn”
- **Line 277:** “cavern”
- **Line 278:** “column”
- **Line 284:** “Transylvania,” “tribe”
- **Line 294:** “Willy,” “wipers”
- **Line 296:** “rid,” “rats”

VOCABULARY

Ditty (Line 6) - A little song.

Salted sprats (Line 15) - Preserved fish.

Noddy (Line 23) - A useless fool.

Corporation (Line 24, Line 31, Line 44, Line 91, Line 150) - The town's governing body or council.

Ermine (Line 25, Line 35) - Elegant weasel fur, white with black specks. Often used for to line the robes (or "gowns") of important people.

Dolts (Line 26) - Fools.

Like (Line 27) - Likely.

Quaked with a mighty consternation (Line 32) - That is, "Shook in great dismay."

Sate (Line 33, Line 44) - A variant spelling of "sat."

Hence (Line 36) - Away.

Bid one (Line 37) - That is, "tell somebody to."

Hap (Line 41) - Happen.

Wondrous (Line 45) - Amazingly, astonishingly.

Queer (Line 51) - Strange.

Swarthy (Line 55) - Dark, deeply tanned.

Kith and kin (Line 58) - Family.

Admire (Line 59) - Here, "admire" means "marvel at" rather than "look at with approval."

Quaint (Line 60) - Old-fashioned and peculiar.

Quoth (Line 61, Line 157) - Said.

Great-grandsire (Line 61) - Great-grandfather.

The Trump of Doom's tone (Line 62) - The sound of the angelic trumpet that heralds the end of the world.

Pied (Line 73) - Multicolored. The Piper's name refers to his red-and-yellow clothing.

His vesture so old-fangled (Line 81) - That is, "his old-fashioned clothing."

Cham, Nizam (Line 83, Line 85) - Made-up names for the rulers of far-off lands. These titles are meant to sound grand and exotic.

Adept (Line 96) - A person who's very good at something.

Ere (Line 100) - Before.

Gay (Line 107) - Cheery and lighthearted.

Friskers (Line 107) - That is, frisky, lively young creatures.

Wherein (Line 116) - In which.

Gripe (Line 124) - Tight grip.

Pickle-tub-boards (Line 125) - The lids of pickle barrels.

Conserve-cupboards (Line 126) - Pantries for storing preserves in.

Train-oil-flasks (Line 127) - Bottles of whale oil.

Psaltery (Line 130) - A medieval string instrument a little like a harp and a little like a dulcimer.

Drysaltery (Line 132) - A pantry (so called because it's where you'd keep foods you'd *salted* and preserved).

Nuncheon (Line 133) - A lunchtime snack.

Sugar-puncheon (Line 135) - A barrel of sugar.

Ready staved (Line 136) - Already broken open.

Bore (Line 138) - Gnaw into.

O'er (Line 139) - A contraction of "over."

Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock (Line 152) - Different kinds of fine wine.

Butt (Line 154) - A wine-barrel.

Rhenish (Line 154) - A particularly fine kind of German wine.

Poke (Line 163) - Bag, sack.

Trifling (Line 169) - Fooling around.

Pottage (Line 172) - Stew—though here the Piper is probably using the word to mean food in general.

Bate a stiver (Line 176) - That is, "lessen my fee by a penny."

Passion (Line 177) - A temper, a rage.

D'ye think I'll brook (Line 179) - That is, "do you think I'll put up with."

Ribald (Line 181) - Ne'er-do-well, lowlife.

Piebald (Line 182) - Two-colored.

Th' enraptured air (Line 190) - That is, "the enchanted air."

Justling at pitching and hustling (Line 192) - That is, "jostling each other while playing ball games and hurrying along."

Flaxen (Line 198) - Fine, fair, and light, like the flax plant.

On the rack (Line 208) - Suffering as if being stretched on a rack, a torture device.

Bosoms (Line 209) - Chests.

Fast (Line 225) - Firmly, as if locked.

Bereft (Line 231) - Deprived.

Many a burgher's pate (Line 251) - That is, "many a wealthy townsperson's head."

Opes (Line 253) - Opens.

Tabor (Line 273) - A little handheld drum, often played alongside a pipe.

Suffered (Line 275) - Allowed.

Hostelry (Line 275) - An inn or pub.

Mirth (Line 276) - Laughter.

Ascribe (Line 285) - Attribute.

Subterraneous (Line 289) - Underground.

Trepanned (Line 290) - To "trepan" usually means to bore a hole in a person's skull so as to relieve pressure on their brain. Here, Browning uses the word metaphorically to suggest that the hill opened up like a trepanned skull so that the children could go inside.

Aught (Line 297) - Anything.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin" uses a rollicking, unpredictable form. Across its 15 irregular stanzas, there's no standard meter or rhyme scheme (though there's plenty of rhythmic accentual meter and rhyme). Instead, the narrator changes line lengths and stanza shapes for dramatic effect. The plague of rats, for instance, makes its first appearance in a one-word line: "Rats!"

At the end of the poem, readers discover that, all along, the narrator has had a specific audience in mind: a little boy named Willy. Browning wrote this poem for a friend's son who was sick in bed, and the poem's mixture of magic, humor, and sinister mystery seems calculated to keep a bored kid entertained.

METER

This poem is written in accentual meter. That means that lines are measured not in regular metrical feet (like the iamb or the trochee) but by the number of stressed beats per line. The Pied Piper's first speech in lines 64-69, for instance, uses four-beat lines, but doesn't put the stresses in any predictable place:

> He advanced to the council-table:
> And, Please your honours, 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,
> After me so as you never saw!

This kind of meter is flexible and somewhat open to interpretation. It also often turns up in nursery rhymes, so it feels especially fitting for a children's poem.

Browning doesn't just stick to one line length throughout, however. Though most lines are three or four beats long, the narrator sometimes throws in a little variation or surprise. For instance, take a look at what happens when the rats first appear in line 10:

> Rats!
> They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
> And bit the babies in the cradles,

A one-word line introduces the rats with dramatic flair. Then, the poem moves into a quick, pattering description of the vermin's shameless behavior. The longer lines here even fall briefly into iambic tetrameter (that is, they take on a steady da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM rhythm), sweeping the reader along at a snappy pace.

All in all, the poem's meter feels brisk, flexible, and energetic. Even in its darker moments, the poem never *sounds* anything less than gleeful.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is laden with rhyme—but it doesn't use anything so orderly as a rhyme scheme. Instead, Browning slings rhymes wherever he likes for dramatic effect.

For example, take a look at the pattern of rhymes in the first stanza:

ABCCCBDDB

The B rhyme that threads through this passage holds the stanza in shape, while the strings of C and D rhymes feel jaunty and bouncy.

Now, listen to what happens in the second stanza:

AABABAAACCA

These lines keep on returning to words that rhyme with the stanza's first punchy one-word line: "Rats!" That inescapable A rhyme suggests an overwhelming tide of vermin—and also feels stylized, goofy, and funny, even as the poem describes a dreadful infestation.

Perhaps what's most notable and most satisfying about this poem's rhymes, though, is how witty and surprising they often are. When Browning rhymes "ermine" with "vermin," "river Weser" with "Julius Caesar," or "ribald" with "piebald," it's hard not to share his glee in the endless, ridiculous possibilities of the English language.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a storyteller—a third-person narrator standing at a distance from the action. At least, he is until the end of the poem, when he suddenly addresses "Willy," the little boy he's been telling this tale to. In this moment, it becomes clear that the speaker is a voice for Browning himself. Browning wrote this tale to entertain his friend's son Willy when the boy was recovering from an illness. His conspiratorial tone at the end of the poem, where he tells Willy "let you and me be wipers / Of scores out with all men" makes him sound like the best kind of uncle: a guy who respects his young friend and is just as caught up in the story he's telling as Willy is.

The poem's tone, too, gives readers a glimpse of the speaker's personality. The speaker mingles humor and a relish of rhyme with sharp-eyed social commentary: unimpressed by greedy rich men, amused by human foibles, and ambivalent about the mysterious, ever-so-slightly sinister Piper, he comes across as equal parts sardonic and humane.

SETTING

The poem is set in medieval Hamelin, a town in Brunswick (a

former state in Germany) beside the river Weser. More than that, the poem gives a particular date. Its events take place "almost five hundred years" before the narrator tells the story:

> On the Twenty-second of July,
> Thirteen hundred and Seventy-six [...]

In other words, the tale is being told in the mid-1800s, but it's set in the middle ages.

Browning draws some of these details from real-life events. The town of Hamelin once had a stained-glass window much like the one described toward the end of the poem—a window thought to commemorate the death of many of the town's children, perhaps by plague. (That would make sense of the rodent portion of the story: the bubonic plague was spread by fleas carried on rats.) The Piper himself seems like pure legend; the generation of lost children might not be.

Mostly, though, the Hamelin of this poem is a fairy tale village: a once-prosperous little town with sturdy medieval city walls, invaded from within by what almost feels like a biblical plague of rats. The poem's events don't feel historical, but folkloric, telling a cautionary tale.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) was most famous in his time for not sounding much like a poet. His contemporaries were confused by his most distinctive works: dramatic monologues in which Browning inhabited a character like an actor playing a part. Even Oscar Wilde, a big Browning fan, famously said that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Victorian literary world was much more at ease with the melancholy lyricism of Tennyson or the elegance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Browning's wife, and a much more famous poet) than with the novelistic storytelling of Browning's work.

But it's on his earthy, vibrant dramatic monologues that Browning's enduring reputation rests. His most famous poems form a veritable rogues' gallery, with narrators from a corrupt bishop to a murderous Italian duke to an equally murderous lover. By allowing these hideous men to speak for themselves, Browning explored the darkest corners of human nature—and took a particular interest in the ways that people justify their terrible deeds. Villains, Browning's monologues suggest, don't tend to think that they're villains. Browning's poetry wasn't all theatrical murder and greed, though; he also wrote tenderly about heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak.

While "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" similarly casts a jaded eye on greedy humanity, it's no dramatic monologue but rather a piece of pure storytelling, with Browning himself as narrator.

Browning wrote this poem for his friend William Macready's son Willy (whom he directly addresses in the last stanza, encouraging the boy to take a moral from the story and keep his promises). He later published the poem in his 1842 book *Dramatic Lyrics*, the third in an eight-volume series of his works collectively titled *Bells and Pomegranates*. This collection would deeply influence 20th-century modernist poets like Ezra Pound. Browning still moves readers to this day: for instance, his life and work inspired contemporary writer A.S. Byatt to write her acclaimed novel *Possession*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While this poem is meant to be a light, amusing tale for a sick kid, it also incorporates some pointed criticism of the wealthy and powerful burghers of Hamelin, whose riches only make them greedier. Browning, an astute social critic, was not particularly a fan of the wealthy and powerful of his own era, either—of whom there were many.

The Victorian age in England was marked by a huge divide between a wealthy upper class and an impoverished lower class, and by a belief that England's upper classes should rightfully rule the world because of some innate superiority. Under the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain became a massive world power; it was often proverbially said that the "sun never set on the British Empire." With colonial footholds across the globe, that Empire saw itself as a force for good, spreading cultural and scientific advances. The colonized countries, understandably, took a very different perspective on the matter, and the period was marked not only by prosperity in Britain but by discord pretty much everywhere else.

Browning's poetry often pointed out the greed, hypocrisy, and self-deceptions of those who feel they have a right to hoard and to rule. Here, the Piper's dire punishment falls on those townspeople who only remember too late:

> A text which says, that Heaven's Gate
> Opes to the Rich at as easy a rate
> As the needle's eye takes a camel in!

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More on Browning — Find a wealth of Browning resources at the Victorian Web. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work via the British Museum. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/biography/browningbiography.html)
- Dramatic Lyrics — Read more about the important

collection in which this poem was published (and see images of this poem's first printing). (https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126784.html)

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a lively reading of the poem—including a little introduction telling the story of how Browning came to write it. (https://youtu.be/7fQ9cIaw7Zk)
- The Poem Illustrated — See images from the edition of the poem illustrated by Kate Greenaway—a version that made the poem into a children's classic. (https://vintageillustrators.weebly.com/pied-piper-of-hamelin-kate-greenaway.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Confessions
- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Love in a Life
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Laboratory
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot

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