

ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem

The Pied Piper of Hamelin

The Poet



Robert Browning (1812-1889) is one of the great names in English poetry. Very few of his works are suitable for children, and even 'The Pied Piper' is challenging. However, it is included because it is the most definitive version of a world famous story.

Browning was the son of a clerk at the Bank of England. He was educated at home with his sister by a private tutor. His father (also Robert) had a 6,000 volume library, and young Robert became a voracious reader. His talent was not long in showing itself. At the age of twelve, he wrote a volume of poetry. By fourteen, he was fluent in French, Italian, Greek and Latin. At sixteen, he enrolled briefly at the University of London, but dropped out. His official career as a poet dates from 1833, when his father paid for the publication of a book of verse. He travelled widely, in Russia and Italy, soaking up experiences. ***Paracelsus*** (1835) was a critical success – and Browning became a name.

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In 1844, he began corresponding with a reclusive lady poet whose work he admired, Elizabeth Barrett. She was a gifted writer, who had already made a significant reputation. However, very much in the style of Victorian England, she was under the 'protection' (control) of her stern

father, whose urge to keep his children from the world bordered on madness. There was no question, in his mind, of Elizabeth meeting



young men. Browning courted her by means of letters, in secret. Their correspondence developed into a passionate love affair. In 1846, defying her father, she eloped with Browning. The pair married and fled to Europe. They lived in Italy until Elizabeth's death in 1861. They had one child, Pen.

Some years after his wife's death, Browning and his son returned to England. He went on to become a celebrated poet. Towards the end of his life he returned to Italy. He died in Venice, but was buried in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

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'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' (1849) is based in a real place (the town of Hameln in Northern Germany) and a real historical event, though exactly *what* is the subject of much dispute.

The event is nominally placed in the year 1284, though an alternative date of 1376 is also common (and is the one used by Browning). It concerns the by now familiar story of a rat plague.

A rat catcher appeared and was promised a schilling for every head. He lured the rats out of town, where they drowned in the Weser river. However, when he returned to collect his due, the town's rulers refused to pay him. Later, he took his revenge by taking away the town's children.

This story began appearing as early as 1300. What really happened? There are conflicting theories. Some argue that the tale refers to the 'Black Death' (bubonic plague): the stealing away of children by a strange figure (who might be Death), the dance (symbolic of the convulsions of death), and the rats themselves, all fit this idea, though the date is wrong (the plague came in the fourteenth century). Another theory is that the story relates to the Children's Crusade, a religious movement of 1212 in which children literally walked out of Europe and disappeared in the Holy Land. Another is that the story refers to waves of emigration from Germany to eastern Europe during the period. More fanciful versions make the Piper into the Devil himself.



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Whatever the real origin, by the 1500s the tale was well established in German folk lore. It was written up by the Brothers Grimm, using not one but many sources. Browning based his version on ***Wonders of the Visible World*** (1687), which itself is sourced to older accounts.

The poem tells the now celebrated (because of Browning largely) story of a plague of rats – a piper – a promise broken – and the piper’s revenge on the treacherous mayor and ‘Corporation’ (council) of the town. It uses very sophisticated language, including quite a number of archaic expressions. However, despite the linguistic difficulty of the piece, the story itself is clear.

The poem has a complex and ‘irregular’ structure. Each of the fifteen episodes has its own length and rhyme scheme. The shortest (XI, with only six lines) has a simple **a/a/b/b/c/c** couplet rhyme. The longest (VII, with 48 lines), uses a mixed scheme (**a/b/a/b/a/c/c/c/d/d etc**). Browning varies the stanzas or verse paragraphs to match the story. The meter is iambic (**soft/hard**).

Why is this poem included? Because it is **the** standard version of a very well known myth, and one of the most celebrated of all narrative poems. Despite its challenges – and they are real – it is exciting, powerful and has an important moral.



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Glossary of Words

adept	one who is skilled at (here, playing the pipe)
atire	clothing
aught	anything
bate	(V.) deduct
bereft	without
brook	(V.) stand for, tolerate
Brunswick	area of Germany
burgher	citizen of a town or city
butt	barrel
Caliph	King (of Baghdad)
cheque	pattern (archaic use)
Claret, Moselle, Vin-de-Grave, Hock	types of wine
consternation	horror, concern
Corporation	the town council
dolts	idiots, fools
endeavour	mission, scheme
ermine	highly expensive fur lining
flaxen	golden



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Glossary of Words

gay	happy, merry
gipsy	member of a nomadic people, of low reputation
glutinous	sticky and thick
guilder	gold coin
Hanover	famous German city
hostelry	inn or hotel
Julius Caesar	famous Roman emperor
kith and kin	relations, whom he might be connected to
lot	fate
methought	I thought
mutinous	rebellious (as in his stomach protested, because of hunger)
needle's eye	Biblical story: it is impossible to pass a camel through a needle's eye
nemt	a small amphibian (like a frog)
noddy	idiot (archaic slang)
obese	extremely fat
outlandish	ridiculous or outrageous
pate	head
paunch	stomach
piebald	two colours in an irregular pattern



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Glossary of Words

portal	wide door or opening
potage	a type of soup
queer	odd, bizarre
quoth	said (quoted)
replenish	refill
Rhenish	white wine
ribald	jester or loose and unreliable person
rouse	awaken, stir
sharps and flats	sounds (from musical notation)
sprats	small herring like fish
steeple	pointed summit of a church
stiver	small coin (like a cent)
stept	stepped
subterraneous	underground
tabor	drum
tavern	inn
thrifty	careful with money
Transylvania	wild area of eastern Europe
trepanned	cut open the head of
trifling	fooling around

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Trump of Doom	the trumpet of doom
Turtle	turtle soup (a very expensive delicacy)
Weser	river that runs through Hameln (Hamelin)
vats	large wooden vessels
vermin	pests
vesture	clothing
viper	a type of deadly snake