The Pied Piper of Hamelin

Robert Browning · *1842 · original English text*

The town of Hamelin is overrun with rats. A stranger in odd clothes offers to rid it of them for a thousand guilders, and the Mayor and Corporation agree. The piper plays, the rats follow him to the river, and the town refuses to pay. Browning wrote this retelling of the old German legend for a sick child, and it is a comic tale with a dark ending.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens to people who promise and then do not pay, and what is the cost of breaking a bargain?

The poem is a fable of bargains. The town takes the piper's help and cheats him, and the piper is as good as his word in the other direction. The children are taken away, and one lame boy is left behind to tell what he saw. Browning's moral at the end is plain: keep your promises.

KEY CHARACTERS

the Pied Piper
A stranger in a red and yellow coat with a magic pipe.

the Mayor
The town's leader, who makes and breaks a promise.

the Corporation
The town council, which goes along with him.

the lame boy
The one child left behind.

Grades 4–9
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01
The Town and the Rats
OPENING STANZAS

Hamelin, in Brunswick, is overrun with rats, which bite babies, spoil food, and drown out the talk of the town. The people turn on the Mayor and Corporation.

- The rats are described in a long list of mischief.
- The townspeople are angry and loud.
- The Mayor is afraid and helpless.

02
The Stranger
MIDDLE STANZAS

A strange piper in a coat of red and yellow offers to rid the town of rats for a thousand guilders. The Mayor promises fifty thousand if he can.

- The piper's dress and manner are striking.
- He has done this before elsewhere.
- The Mayor's promise is large.

03
The Rats Go
MIDDLE STANZAS

The piper plays, and the rats follow him to the river Weser, where they drown. One survives to tell of a land of plenty.

- The rats come out of every house.
- The music is irresistible.
- The rats' doom is complete.

04
The Broken Promise
LATER STANZAS

The Mayor and Corporation refuse to pay the thousand guilders and offer fifty. The piper warns them and goes.

- The town's greed grows with safety.
- The Mayor makes a joke of the debt.
- The piper's warning is calm.

05
The Children
FINAL STANZAS

The piper plays again, and the children follow him into the side of a mountain, which closes. A lame boy, left behind, tells what he saw.

- The children's joy is part of the horror.
- The lame boy cannot keep up.
- The poem ends with a moral.

Promises | Music and Magic | Greed | Children

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 4–9

1. Notice how the rhythm and the rhymes imitate the piper's tune.
2. The poem is a retelling of an old legend. Ask what Browning adds.
3. The Mayor's bargaining is comic. See where the joke turns serious.
4. The ending includes a moral. Decide if it fits the story.

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