

A Poem Fantastic (Though Usually Old) That May Teach a Lesson (So It's Often Retold)

THE BALLAD

The ballad is a form of narrative verse that was especially popular during the Middle Ages and was later used by many English poets. It's different than the narrative poems we learned about earlier in several ways. For one thing, ballads are usually on the shorter side although they can still be pretty long compared to some other poetic styles. And the action within ballads tends to rise to an exciting climax.

Ballad writers often chose a story with supernatural elements, like ghosts or demons or other spooky characters. There's often a lesson to be learned in a ballad, too—but these aren't lessons like “finish your vegetables” or “clean your room.” Instead, they're lessons about fairness and justice and doing what's right. The stories behind most ballads are

sad ones, as the poet recounts a miserable tragedy, like a loved one who disappeared, breaking the poet's heart.

One great example of a ballad is Robert Browning's “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” This particular ballad isn't about lost love but about lost children. The event it describes supposedly took place in Germany in the year 1284. Since then, the tale has been retold many times by many people, but never with as much magic and sparkle as in Browning's 1842 poem.

The expression “pay the piper” comes from the story of the Pied Piper, and it has come to represent suffering the consequences of an earlier action.

If You're a Poet, You Should Know It

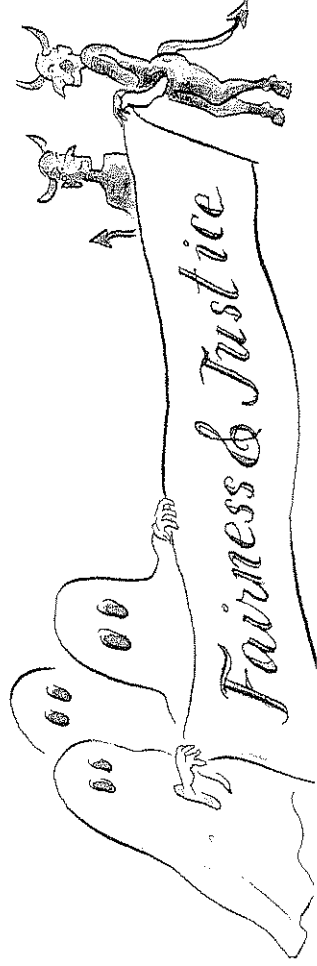
ballad: A poem that tells a short story in a moving and exciting way.

climax: The high point of a poem after the tension is built up, and where the action that will change everything occurs. (A climax in a poem is just like a climax in a movie, when the hero squares off with the bad guy for the final showdown.)

supernatural: Eerie things that come from beyond and that cannot be easily explained—like spirits, bogeymen, or Pied Pipers.

▶▶ PLAY TRACK 25

Robert Browning was a nineteenth-century British writer of poems and plays. “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” is one of his most famous works and was written for the young son of one of Browning's friends. Browning's fun rhymes and vivid images paint colorful pictures in the reader's heads. Have a listen to some of the poem. The narrator will fill you in on the parts that are missing. You can find and read the entire poem at the library or the bookstore.



The Pied Piper of Hamelin

by Robert Browning

In Germany hundreds of years ago, the residents of a small village called Hamelin were hopelessly plagued by one particular furry nuisance—or so the legend goes...

Rats!

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

And ate the cheeses out of the vats,

And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles,

Split open the kegs of salted sprats,

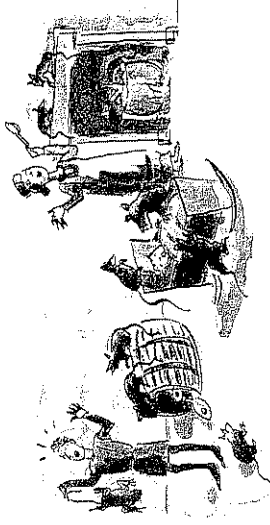
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,

And even spoiled the women's chats,

By drowning their speaking

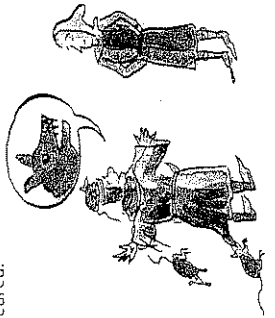
With shrieking and squeaking

In fifty different sharps and flats. . . .



The village leaders were desperate to rid the town of the rats. While meeting at Town Hall to develop a plan, a stranger suddenly appeared.

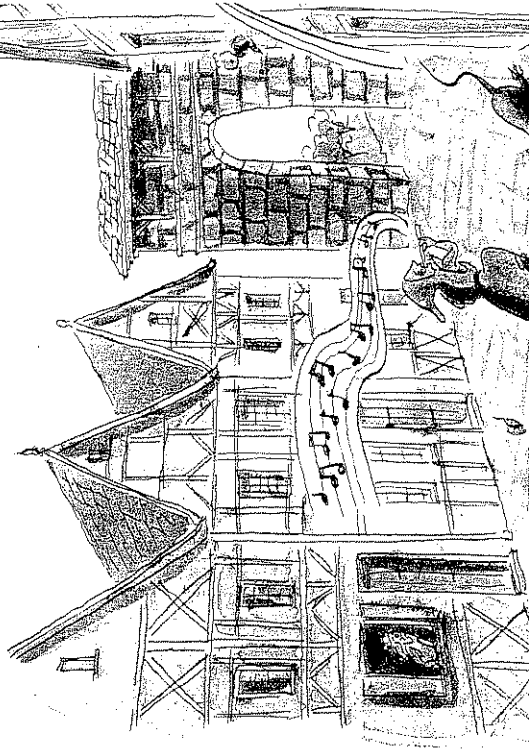
His queer long coat from heel to head
Was half of yellow and half of red,
And he himself was tall and thin,
With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,
And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin,
No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,
But lips where smiles went out and in;
There was no guessing his kith and kin...



Because of his strange, multicolored clothing, the fellow called himself the Pied Piper ("pied" being an old-fashioned way of describing something with many colors). The Piper promised the townspeople that he would lead all the rats out of the village—for a tidy fee. The mayor quickly agreed, and the Pied Piper raised his flute to his lips

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, gray 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 by step they followed dancing, . . .

With the rats gone, the villagers rejoiced. But when the Pied Piper asked for his payment, the mayor went back on his word and offered him only a tiny sum. So the Piper picked up his flute once again and began to blow.

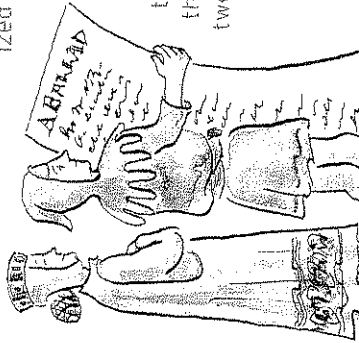


Pied Piper confirmed...

There was a rustling that seemed 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....
When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced and the children followed,
And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain-side shut fast....

With that, the children disappeared, never to be seen again, and the people of Hamelin learned a harsh lesson about keeping a promise.

Broadside ballads were poems printed on large sheets of paper that looked like newspaper pages. These poems offered colorful, sometimes exaggerated (what we today would call "sensationalized") retellings of



current news events. They were popular from the sixteenth century all the way up to the twentieth century.

Words for the Wise

pied: Containing many colors in patterns and patches.

sprats: A type of fish that could be preserved with salt and eaten later.

tuft: A patch of hair.

kith and kin: Friends, neighbors, and family.

ere: Before.

brawny: Strong and muscular.

tawny: Blond or brownish.

justling: Jiggling or shaking, like jostling.

fowl: Barnyard birds (like chickens).

flaxen: Pale yellow or blond.

