

# The Story of Pied Piper in the Works of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and Robert Browning

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
njemačkog jezika i književnosti

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**Priča o čarobnom frulašu u djelima Jacoba i Wilhelma Grimma i  
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Mentorica: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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## Abstract

Fairy tales are stories that aim to entertain and teach children valuable life lessons. One such fairy tale would be the story of the Pied Piper. Most people know the following version of the story. Once upon a time, rats were plaguing a town. The citizens were at their wits' end trying to figure out how to get rid of them. Then, one day, a man comes to the town offering them help in exchange for a certain sum of money. The town agrees to the bargain and the man enchants all the rats by playing on his magic pipe thus leading all the rats away. However, when he comes back for his deserved payment, the town dismisses the deal that they had previously made with the Piper. The Piper, now angry, plays on his pipe again and this time, instead of rats, all the town's children follow him out of the town never to be seen again. The moral of the story is to keep one's promises, and the tale even inspired an idiomatic phrase "pay the piper." Rarely does one stop and wonder where the story itself came from or whether there is some truth behind it. This paper will explore how German fairy tale collectors Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and the Victorian poet Robert Browning depicted the story in order to show how their contemporary worlds inspired their respective versions of the story: one nationalist, the other religious – both in the Christian sense and in the sense of natural worship. This paper will also highlight the, sometimes neglected, profundity of children's literature.

**Keywords:** Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "The Children of Hameln," folktale, German folklore, Robert Browning, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin"

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## Introduction

Many people treat the story of the Pied Piper merely as a fairy tale by brothers Grimm. However, the tale originated several centuries before brothers Grimm turned it into children's literature in the nineteenth century. According to the records of Hameln, the real German town where the story apparently took place, the events of the story are more than just a made-up tale based on no historical evidence whatsoever. The earliest town's records explicitly mention the event of 130 children leaving the town on 26 June, the day of Saints John and Paul in the year 1284, following a piper who wore many-coloured clothing. There is no mention of rats or bargains, and it is still not clear what had truly taken place in Hameln. Nevertheless, those records led to many different versions of the account over time and space (Scutts, "Textual Sources of the Pied Piper Story").

The fourteenth-century version is from a Hameln monastery and it retells the story with heavy religious connotations, even alluding to the possibility of the town's children having taken part in a pagan ritual of sorts. In the sixteenth century, Hans Zeitlos included Piper's promise that he would return to the town in 300 years to take more children with him in his version of the story. In the year 1555, Jobus Fincelius added religious implications in the oldest printed version of the tale and referred to Piper as the Devil; however, the date of children's departure is no longer that of Saints John and Paul but instead shifts to 22 July - the day of Mary Magdalene. In the seventeenth century, Richard Verstegan finally wrote down the first English version of the story that many writers will take as a primary source for their texts on the same topic, including the renowned nineteenth-century English poet Robert Browning (Scutts, "Textual Sources of the Pied Piper Story").

This paper will explore the story of Pied Piper as a historical German legend popularized by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and as a narrative poem by Robert Browning as two of the most famous versions of the story up to the present time. The first chapter will explain the major differences between fairy tales, folktales, and legends, which will help distinguish this particular story recorded by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm from their other works. This part will also elaborate on the role of their story "The Children of Hameln" and analyse the major differences and similarities between the previous accounts of the story and their retelling of it. The following chapter will introduce certain biographical elements from Robert Browning's life, in order to better contextualize the story, and it will compare his Christian-minded version of the story with

the previous ones in order to reach a conclusion on what sources inspired him to write the poem that will subsequently be analysed. The final chapter will introduce a more detailed analysis of Browning's poem based on the research by the literary critic and writer Julian Scutts, who claims that the poem's profundity goes overlooked by many literary critics. The paper ends with the Conclusion which shows how legends circulate in various versions, depending both on the context in which they occur and the interests and visions of those who retell or adapt them, always testifying to the realities and deeper meanings relevant for a particular period.

# 1. The Version by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

## 1.1 Distinguishing Factors between a Fairy Tale, Folktale and Legend

People most commonly associate fairy tales with fictional stories told to children. After all, it is widely known that unbelievable or magical elements are an important part of a fairy tale. In *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J. A. Cuddon classifies fairy tales as a part of folk literature (281). Subsequently, he defines folk literature as follows: “For the most part, folk literature (or, perhaps, more properly, folklore) is the creation of primitive and illiterate people – and therefore much of it belongs to oral tradition (q.v.). It becomes literature in the correct sense of the word only when people gather it together and write it down” (281). In this regard, folktales and fairy tales have their roots in the oral tradition of a certain people and they have been circulating among this people until somebody wrote them down. According to Cuddon, this did not happen until the nineteenth century when the brothers Grimm decided to write down German folk tales (282).

Folk tales and fairy tales are not only similar in origin, but also in content. As William Bascom states, “[f]olktales are prose narratives, which are regarded as fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously” (4). Considering the fact that Cuddon also categorizes a fairy tale as a prose narrative, this puts a fairy tale and a folktale in a synonymous relationship of sorts. Their origins stem from the oral tradition and their content deals in magical or unlikely events that people do not treat as real historical accounts. These stories are, for example, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* or *Household Tales* written down by the brothers Grimm in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The third type of story belonging to the oral tradition is a legend. According to Cuddon, one of the definitions of a legend is “a story or narrative which lies somewhere between myth (q.v.) and historical fact and which, as a rule, is about a particular figure or person. Famous examples are Faust, the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, Hamlet, Beowulf, King Arthur, Charlemagne, Robin Hood...” (391). Whereas a fairy tale and a folk tale tell an entirely fictional story, a legend is a type of story that stands somewhere between fiction and reality. What is more, it mostly focuses on a particular person or even a historical figure. According to Cuddon, a legend may sometimes grow longer and taller with time and people would write about it in

different forms, such as verse or song. He even mentions how those figures most likely had nothing to do with some of the motifs and stories with which people associate them (391).

All versions of the story of Pied Piper focus on a figure that is originally mentioned in Hameln town register, so he might have even been a real historical figure. Countless versions of the story have added other colourful details to the account depending on their contemporary world. Some of these details being rats and the deal that the town had made with the piper. These details were never in the original version of the account. Obviously, there are many versions of the story and some of them tell a story of the same figure (the piper) in a completely different location, which means that the story has not only been changing but also travelling around the world. All of this seems to suggest that the aforementioned story of the Pied Piper is in fact a legend with its origins in German tradition, rather than just a fairy tale. In fact, this is exactly how the Brothers treat it in their collection *Deutsche Sagen*. However, the brothers Grimm already made such a significant impact on German literary world with their collection of *Household Tales* (1812), that it is possible that *Deutsche Sagen* (1816) went under the radar, before emerging into public in the guise of one of their fairy tales for children, with which they have been associated previously.

## **1.2 German Romanticism in the Literary Works of the Brothers Grimm**

As mentioned, brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are perhaps the most famous collectors of folktales and fairy tales to this day. They were German academics who largely took part in the shaping of the nineteenth-century German identity. The first part of that century was dominated by the still present and thriving feudal absolutism. Together with other, mostly young contemporary writers, the brothers Grimm fought against the aristocratic values that dominated German universities at the time, and by doing so they even earned their dismissal from the University of Göttingen in 1841. The public opinion slowly changed and finally opted for democracy over feudal absolutism, which led to the Revolution of 1848. The works of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are considered as having a rather large contribution to this public shift toward democracy (Edinger-Reeve). Their collections consisted mostly of orally transmitted folklore stories that have been circling within the German folk since the Middle Ages. In her essay about the brothers Grimm, Romy Edinger-Reeve explains how the idea of German spirit influenced the Grimms and vice versa. According to Edinger-Reeve, the fact that these stories were taken from

folklore dating as far back as the Middle Ages may invoke feelings of receiving some kind of old, but ever-lasting knowledge or values. Edinger-Reeve explains:

It is also important to take into consideration that when a reader thinks of a folk tale, they think of somewhere in the middle centuries, and that this is where they were all composed. This is incredibly significant for two reasons in regards to the Grimm brothers: One, the tales are given a sense of immortality which allows them to continue to be relevant and Two, they believed that the fundamental purpose to German progress was located in the past.

In this regard, the Brothers' writing intent seems quite clear: They wrote down folk tales and fairy tales in order to shape the national spirit. It appears as if they have been guided by the idea of helping the German folk to form its own identity by looking back to the past and returning to the roots of traditional Germanic values. Although it may seem contradictory at first glance, since they opposed the old regime with an unmistakably rebellious spirit, it should also be noted that the Grimms were quite resolute in the denial of absolutistic values because they deemed them unfitting for and unworthy of the German folk. Not to mention the fact that the aristocrats read fairy tales simply for entertainment purposes, whereas the ordinary people saw much more in them. Jack Zipes touches upon this fact in his book *Breaking the Magic Spell - Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* where he explains the dynamic between bourgeois and common folk as following:

While the folktale was the best-loved entertainment at ducal banquets and in the bedrooms of the big landowners, the tales circulating among the people were branded by both the clerical and the secular powers as damnable and inspired by the devil. Since the imaginative motifs and symbolical elements of class conflict and rebellion in pre-capitalist folk tales ran counter to the principles of rationalism and utilitarianism developed by the bourgeois class, they had to be suppressed or made to appear irrelevant.  
(24)

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm openly expressed their patriotism and made it clear with their writing style and simple expressions that it was the common folk that they were writing for. In their view, the tales that they wrote down were far from mere entertainment, as they were received by the bourgeois class. They sought something profound in these tales and saw certain deeper truths in them than the rationally oriented upper class. Their goal was to inspire the people to create a nation based on true and righteous values and they did all of this by the means of looking back in

time and building the nation from the ground up. The brothers Grimm could in this regard classify as the writers of German Romanticism. As Jack Zipes writes,

[t]he middle Romantics sought to give the Germans a national identity and unify the people around a Germanic tradition which was based on plebeian values of honesty, courage, fidelity, purity, etc. At any rate, nationalism at that time was associated with the movement for freedom, against oppressive rule, and the romantics of this period endeavoured to awaken a national consciousness so that the German people might realize their emancipation themselves. (80)

At the time, nationalism was an inspiring notion that strived to challenge the regime and help the common folk find its identity, while it also gave the Brothers a unique opportunity to report on the stories of old. Their collection of German historical legends *Deutsche Sagen* manifests this in the greatest way possible. Their tendency to research and document the historical elements of these legends is very apparent in their treatment of the story of Pied Piper as well.

### **1.3 “The Children of Hameln” as an inspirational report of the historical event**

“The Children of Hameln” is a beautiful representation of everything the brothers Grimm wished to accomplish by writing down both folktales and legends. The language of the text is very easy to understand. In its expression, it resembles an informative report on the real occurrence instead of a fictional story. The Grimms even included short explanations concerning some other historical accounts of the legend under their story to give it a layer of realism. They minimized the number of complex sentences so as not to confuse the reader and by doing so they introduced the German history to the commoners in an understandable way. Naturally, the most important part of "The Children of Hameln" is the message of the story. When compared to Zipes' book, the purpose of the Brothers' work becomes much more obvious. The underlying message of the story ties in perfectly with the plebeian values that Zipes has mentioned. The citizens of Hameln suffer a calamity due to their dishonesty and pay the consequence for not keeping their promise to Pied Piper. He takes their children away from them. This could very well be a message to the German folk that if their values, more specifically their honesty, falters, Germany will have no future.

Grimm's version of the story of Pied Piper may at first glance be mistaken for one of their fairy tales. It tells the story of how a mysterious man dressed in many-coloured clothes comes to the town to help the citizens get rid of the rats. He asks for his reward if he gets the job done and the town joyfully agrees. The man's instrument of eradication is quite strange though. It is a small, magic fife with the help of which he can enchant the creatures. He plays the fife and leads all of the rats and mice into the river where they drown. He frees the town from their plague, but now they have to pay what they promised to the man. The citizens refuse to pay him and the man, now angry, comes back to the town one morning, plays the fife again and this time leads all of the town's children to a mountain where they were never found again. How do the citizens know what happened to their children? A babysitter saw them and there were also three children that did not follow them into the cave in the mountain. One child was blind and could not see where they were going, but they heard the music so they knew how they were taken. The second child was mute and could not hear the music but they could see where they went. The third child turned around and went back for his jacket so the crowd left him behind. All the parents were heart-broken and searched for their children everywhere to no avail. The town never forgot what had happened to them that day (Grimm). This brief narration indeed appears to be fairy-tale-like in content. However, that is not all when it comes to this particular tale.

"The Children of Hameln" from 1816 begins similarly to the original text in the town records. It starts with a particular year: "In the year 1284..." (Grimm). The previous chapter introduced the notion that the Grimms reported on the historical events or legends and included them in their folktales to lift the national spirit and inspire their people to adopt certain values. It is safe to say that this manifests itself in the very first sentence of their text. The story is very informative in terms of setting and time. Indeed, if compared to the thirteenth-century text in the Hameln register, their version is completely faithful to the original as opposed to some other later versions. The place of children's disappearance is Poppenberg ("Calvary close to Koppen" in the original text (Scutts "Textual Sources of the Pied Piper Story"), but according to the official Hameln site, it may also refer to the Koppenberg ("The Pied Piper from Brothers Grimm")). The time of the children's disappearance is "June 26, Saint John's and Saint Paul's Day, early in the morning at seven o'clock (others say it was at noon)" (Grimm). They tell the story as if it was a real historical event. This fact could be of great use when it comes to the comparison between "The Children of Hameln" and their Märchen-like texts. The Brothers Grimm never once used the expressions that allude to a fairy-tale-like structure in this one. There is no unknown place or time and everything is clear-cut. The only elements of the fairy tale to be

found in this text are the notion that the “fife” that Pied Piper is playing may be magic, that the rats could not swim, and that there was a cave in the mountain where the children disappeared almost into thin air. Even in these cases, the Brothers never once used the word “magic” to allude to wondrous properties of these elements. They are just there, treated as a part of a real historical event. This confidence in story-telling definitely helps in presenting the events as being real rather than a work of fiction; however, it is not the only tool that Grimm Brothers used in order to achieve the effect of realism. The phrase “[s]ome say...” (Grimm) also offers countless possibilities concerning the events and, in this way, makes the story more interesting. It invokes the air of mystery surrounding the story and opens the reader’s mind to new ideas. For example, the Grimm brothers write about what happened after Pied Piper took the children away in the following way: “Some say that the children were led into a cave, and that they came out again in Transylvania” (Grimm). In this way, they inspired people to make up their own mind about what had actually happened. The writer and literary critic Julian Scutts even speculates on whether there is a possible connection between Pied Piper and Dracula (“Dracula and the Pied Piper: Distant Cousins?” 3). However, the Grimm brothers were not the first ones to include the possibility of children arriving in Transylvania, as it is the case with many other, if not all, elements of their version of the story.

#### **1.4 A Comparative Analysis of “The Children of Hameln” and previous versions of the story**

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm faithfully reported on the events surrounding the story with the help of other previous versions of the tale. Scutts notes the following:

They . . . recorded folk stories while adding the spice of their own literary creativity. Thus the story of the pied Piper as told in *Deutsche Sagen* is a faithful rendition of some earlier accounts of the story with one or two significant additions to boot. They emphasize the role of the children who followed the Piper but were fortunate, or unfortunate, enough not to follow him the whole way. They also refer to a variation between two dates of the Piper's return to Hamelin, the 26th of June (corresponding to the first version of the story) and 22nd of June (not 22nd of July as in other versions). (“Textual Sources of the Pied Piper Story”)



The major differences between previous versions of the story and their own are the ones concerning the children that the Piper failed to take away, and the obvious reference to another version of the story at the end of the tale. There were originally two children not taken by the Piper: the blind one and the mute one. The first version to mention the blind and mute child would be the sixteenth-century version of Hans Zeitlos (“Textual Sources of the Pied Piper Story”). This is what the brothers Grimm included in their own version as well. However, what Scutts refers to as being the difference is the fact that they introduced the third child: “One little boy in shirtsleeves had gone along with the others, but had turned back to fetch his jacket and thus escaped the tragedy, for when he returned, the others had already disappeared into a cave within a hill“ (Grimm). It is possible that they mention the child who simply turned back to fetch his jacket to make their version slightly comedic after all the references to pain that the parents had to go through because of the disappearance of their children, although the reason is not quite clear yet. The other major difference Scutts identifies concerns itself with the already mentioned role of the tale that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm manifested in their collection *Deutsche Sagen*. They included the previous accounts of the story and even mentioned the difference in dates of the first account of the events and Seyfried’s version, which claims that children disappeared on 22 instead of 26 June (“Textual Sources of the Pied Piper Story”). This is important because it proves how thoroughly they studied the German folklore and how they wanted to share this knowledge with the public through their works.

## 2. The Version by Robert Browning

### 2.1 Victorian Poetry and “Child’s Story”

The same year that Grimm Brothers released their *Household Tales* (1812), and four years before their version of the Pied Piper story, Robert Browning was born in England into a middle-class family. Browning’s mother was a strictly religious German-Scotch woman who took great interest in music, and his father was a bank clerk who had an affinity for art, but had to let go of his dreams to support his family. Despite this, it seems as if Browning’s family provided him with plenty of love and patience, which later on proved to be very fruitful in terms of his writing legacy (“Robert Browning”). Both parents were artistically oriented, which is probably why he wanted to become a poet since a very young age. Browning’s father collected books and over time this collection accumulated into a personal library. Some of the books that landed in young Browning’s hands contained arcane lore and historical anecdotes. These texts affected Browning and it eventually resulted in an abundance of works relating to those texts. One of these works was his version of the Pied Piper story, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin: Child’s Story” (“Robert Browning”).

Browning and his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning were prolific poets of the Victorian era. Isobel Armstrong writes in the preface of her book about the importance of poetry in Victorian England. She claims how poems gave rise to most radical questions of that period. However, she argues that despite these newly found possibilities in poetry, there seems to be a certain divide within the literary community:

The poetry and poetics of the Victorian period were intertwined, often in arresting ways, with theology, science, philosophy, theories of language and politics. As cultural and intellectual change became progressively more apparent, two traditions of poetry developed, one exploring various strategies for democratic, radical writing, the other developing, in different forms, a conservative poetry. (Armstrong ix)

According to this, the poetry of Victorian era dealt with a variety of topics. However, there was also a branching of sorts. On the one hand, there was poetry that concerned itself with radical democracy, and on the other, there was conservative poetry that tried to shift forms in an attempt to introduce novelty. It is entirely possible that Browning would have found himself on the conservative side with his poem about the piper. As Scutts claims, Browning’s poem about the

Pied Piper includes a great number of biblical references (“A Focus on Two Blind Spots in Literary Theory and Criticism” 11-12), and him being from a family with a devout religious mother might have sent a message to the critics that he has opted for the latter option. His narrative poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin: Child’s Story” never reached the critical acclaims as his other poems from the same collection, *Bells and Pomegranates. No. III.—Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). Instead, critics would dismiss it as nothing more than fun and superficial piece of children’s literature. Scutts comments on this frequently in his research papers by alluding to the possibility of scholarly specialists in Victorian verse shunning anything that resembles religious approach to the analysis of the poem (“A Focus on Two Blind Spots in Literary Theory and Criticism” 2). Whatever the case is, one thing is for sure: his poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin: Child’s Story” was never considered as particularly profound by critics of his time or even today. There are only few critics such as Scutts, who decided to commit themselves to a thorough analysis of this poem. The most likely reason for this would be the fact that Browning himself very nearly did not include this narrative poem in *Dramatic Lyrics*. This means that Browning might not have held this poem in highest regard either. Mrs. Sutherland clears this up a bit in Browning’s biography:

“The Pied Piper of Hamelin” and another poem were written in May 1842 for Mr. Macready’s little eldest son, Willy, who was confined to the house by illness, and who was to amuse himself by illustrating the poems as well as reading them; and the first of these, though not intended for publication, was added to the ‘Dramatic Lyrics’, because some columns of that number of ‘Bells and Pomegranates’ still required filling.

(Browning and Sutherland Orr)

According to this, the poet never intended to publish the poem, but did so in order to fill the empty space. Apparently, a theatre manager, William Macready had a young son who delighted in drawing so the poet offered his literary talent to amuse the sick boy. This could indicate that Browning might not have found the poem suitable for publication because it was too personal, and not because it was superficial or did not contain artistic value. The rest of the paper will try to explain why “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” deserves more recognition and overall research in terms of its symbolism, messages or even references to other great works.

## **2.2 Comparative Analysis of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” and Previous Versions**

In order to prove what inspired Browning's version of the story of Pied Piper, it is necessary to look at the most important details concerning the story itself so it would be discernible from the Grimm's version. Browning's poem starts with the introduction of a setting, which is Hamelin town. Hamelin is a pleasant place, but there are rats plaguing the streets, which makes it almost unbearable to live there. The town grows impatient and they demand from the mayor and the town's council to put a stop to the vermin or they will "send them packing" (Browning 32). The council is supposed to find the solution to the mess but they just sit and do nothing. They hear a knock on the door and the strange-looking man wearing red and yellow clothes appears before them. He tells them about his previous successes in ridding the places of harmful creatures and he offers his help if they give him a thousand guilders. They, joyfully though rather jokingly, accept his offer and even propose that they give him fifty thousand guilders instead. The man succeeds in getting the town rid of the rats by playing a pipe that hung on his scarf. All rats but one drown in the river Weser. The one rat that survived was "stout as Julius Caesar" (Browning 123), and it survives to tell other rats about the enchanting power of the pipe. The town now celebrates because the rats are gone, but the piper now asks the mayor to give him thousand guilders he had promised him. The council and the mayor now start thinking about how else they could spend this money instead of giving it to a gypsy-like musician that barely did any work to get rid of the vermin. They conclude that rats are indefinitely dead and they have nothing to fear anymore, so they break their promise and instead they offer him mere fifty guilders. The piper states how there was no trifling with his previous customers and the mayor is no exception. He angrily steps out and the mayor tells him to do his worst. The piper starts playing through the streets and the children happily follow him, whereas the adults cannot move. The adults observe where their children are going and at first they rejoice when they reach the Koppelberg Hill. This is when the cave hollows inside the mountain. The Piper and the children disappear in the mountainside. However, one boy was left outside the mountain. He was lame so he could not keep up with them. The poor boy was sad to have been left behind and describes a wonderful land that the piper had promised him. The other children and the piper were never seen again. After that, the street that the children and the piper passed through, was called The Pied Piper's Street and nobody was allowed to play any instrument there. The poem mentions the date of the children's disappearance to be the 22 July 1376 and explains how Hamelin commemorated this event in various ways. Similarly to the Grimm's version, there are mentions of how the children of Hamelin might have come out in Transylvania and how the locals there regard them as a tribe of strange people with "outlandish ways" (Browning 292). The poem ends with the narrator openly telling Willy that one should always keep a promise.

“Willy,” of course, refers to Macready’s young son William for whom Browning had written the poem.

As previously mentioned, the texts that Browning’s father collected in his personal library influenced Browning immensely; so much so, that one of these books inspired him to write the poem based on the text. The book that he found in his father’s library was *Wonders of the Little World* by Nathaniel Wanley. Although Wanley’s version inspired the poet to write his version, it is important to note that there are quite a few differences in the details of Wanley’s text and Browning’s version. Arthur Dickson explains these differences and tries to come up with the version that may have influenced the poet the most, concluding the following:

Our conclusions are that, in all probability, Browning’s chief source was Verstegan, whom he knew either directly, or through a detailed retelling by his father. The form of the name Hamelin is the only detail that can be traced to Howell. The church- window, and perhaps the name Koppelberg, are from Wanley. . . . and there was probably in the poet's mind a recollection of some details in Mérimée, who had preceded him in the literary treatment of the story. (Dickson 336)

Among many others, Dickson mentions the sixteenth-century version by the already mentioned Richard Verstegan as Browning’s most likely primary source. He proposes that Browning might have heard of some of these details from his father. Whatever the case is, Verstegan’s “Pide Piper” seems to resonate the most with Browning’s “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” In both versions, the date is 22 July, the day of Mary Magdalene, in the year 1376; there are mentions of children emerging in Transylvania, and there was one lame boy who did not enter the mountain. Not to mention the fact that the wording and phrases that Browning used appeared all too similar to Verstegan’s version. One example of this being: “they bade him doe his worst” (Verstegan) compared to Browning’s verse: “Do your worst, / Blow your pipe there till you burst!” (Browning 189-190). Another example being Verstegan’s: “I cannot omit for the strangenesse thereof briefly here by the way to set it downe,” which coincides with Browning’s verse: “And I must not omit to say...” (Browning 289). Overall, it is safe to say that Verstegan’s “Pide Piper” greatly influenced Browning’s telling of the story.

There is another version of the Pied Piper story in literature that, according to Dickson, must have left a mark on Browning, regardless of whether Browning was aware of it or not. The version of a French writer, Prosper Mérimée, which he wrote in his *Chronique du Règne de Charles IX* for literary purposes rather than scientific or historic reasons. Here Dickson mentions

a couple of strange similarities. The first being the Piper's appearance. Both versions describe the piper as tall and thin and with swarthy skin (Dickson 335). The other note-worthy similarity is the citizens' remark regarding the impossible notion of coming back from the dead: "When the piper asks for his reward, the citizens call to mind 'qu'ils n'avaient plus rien a craindre des rats' ('We saw with our eyes the vermin sink, And what's dead can't come to life, I think')" (Dickson 335). This idea in particular will play a major role in the analysis of the poem.

## 2.3 Personal and Artistic Value of the Poem

Browning's poem consists of 303 lines, which he separated into fifteen stanzas. The structure of the poem seems random at times, when it switches from having as much as 48 lines in one stanza to mere six lines in the other. The same can be said for the rhyme scheme and even meter. The best example of this would be the second stanza:

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. (Browning 10-20)

The stanza opens up with a single word, which later on rhymes with random lines that are not even in length. This type of expression is something that Browning might have purposefully used to denote a playful attitude of the poem for children.

It is important to note how rich the language of the poem is. Many words require an advanced knowledge of English. Archaism of the words might also contribute to the difficulty of understanding the poem. Browning also uses many rhetorical devices to give his poem a greater value and to make it overall more entertaining. From onomatopoeic words such as "squeaking,"

“shrieking,” “rumbling,” or “crunch” to the lines which blend together a couple of different senses to paint a story more vivid. The said synaesthesia is most apparent in the following lines:

And it seemed as if a voice  
(Sweeter far 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 a bulky sugar-puncheon,  
All ready staved, like a great sun shone  
Glorious scarce an inch before me.... (Browning 135-143)

Browning almost seamlessly combines visual, auditory, and gustatory imagery to denote a wonderful hallucination of the surviving rat. The poem contains many other rhetorical figures and interesting word dynamics such as parallels and references. For example, rats “drown” women’s chats with their “squeaking and shrieking” (Browning 18-19), only to later on be drowned in a literal sense. One of the most obvious rhetorical devices is evident in Browning’s portrayal of the 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. (Browning 112-118)

Browning portrays rats as human by describing them as families and cousins. This use of personification ties in perfectly later on with the monologue of the surviving rat, who has also taken on human characteristics. In its form, the poem is an allegorical tale containing a moral message. The last stanza very openly exhibits this:

So, Willy, let you and me be wipers  
Of scores out with all men -- especially pipers;  
And, whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice,  
If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise. (Browning 300-303)

The message it sends is identical to the message of Grimm's "The Children of Hameln"; one should always keep their promise and be honest about their bargains. There is also the already mentioned reference to Macready's young son William for whom Browning wrote the poem. It could be argued that Browning purposefully used appealing imagery in order to inspire young William. This adds a personal value to Browning's poem alongside his own creative input.



### 3. Profundity in Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin: Child's Story"

#### 3.1 Biblical References and Symbolism

It is safe to say that keeping promises has proved itself an overarching theme in Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." However, the inscription to William Macready is not the only biographical element in Browning's poetry. Scutts claims that there are biblical references and symbolism prevalent in the poem ("Solar and Religious Symbolism" 1), which ties in with the fact that Browning's mother was devoutly religious. The same way Browning's father left an impression on young Browning with his many books, his mother might have played a major role in his creative work as well. Some readers might not notice another subtler message mentioned in the poem aside from the already mentioned one in the previous chapter. The fourteenth stanza opens in the following way:

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 rate

As the needle's eye takes a camel in! (Browning 256-260)

The reference to "heaven's Gate" pays homage to the Bible, and it is just one example of many other biblical references found in the poem. The lines refer to Jesus's words from the New Testament; namely, that being rich does not make one righteous, in fact, it is the complete opposite. It is more likely, though still impossible, that the camel will pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to Heaven (*The Bible*, Matthew 19.24). In his text about solar and religious symbolism, Scutts underlines some other verses that stem directly from the Bible. One of these lines is "There was no guessing his kith and kin" (Browning 64), which Scutts claims Browning probably adopted from Hebrews 7.3 (Scutts, "Solar and Religious Symbolism" 5). Aside from this, Scutts also argues that Browning uses words that may simply allude to the Bible rather than them having literal meaning in the poem. For example, Browning uses homonymic words such as "cross" or "passion" with their meaning in the poem being "traverse"

and “rage, fit of anger,” but they also obviously allude to the motifs from the Bible (Scutts, “Solar and Religious Symbolism” 1). And while some references such as these do not clearly indicate whether Browning really did take direct inspiration from the Bible, there is one motif in the poem that eerily coincides with an important theme from the Old Testament, which is that of the Promised Land. Scutts underlines the following verses as guiding points for his theory on the matter:

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.... (Browning 237-240)

Scutts notes here that the two words “promised” and “land” are not in the same line but the unusual repetition of the word “promise” and especially its usage in the close proximity to “land” may indicate that there is an allegorical or unstated significance hidden in the poem (Scutts, “Solar and Religious Symbolism” 16). One such motif would be the “Promised Land” into which the Piper led all the children except from one: the lame boy that is uttering the said lines. Scutts draws many parallels between Browning’s description of the land and the biblical Promised Land. He explains:

The idyllic vision of the lame child evokes the Messianic world described by the prophet Isaiah when all creatures will live in harmony. The reference to the honey-bee could point to the land that flows with milk and honey while the reference to the loss of the power to sting could allude to the conquest of death ascribed to divine atonement in the Christian sense. See 1 Corinthians 15. 55. (Scutts, “Solar and Religious Symbolism” 13)

He proposes that the situation of the lame boy is reminiscent of Moses who could not enter the Promised Land but experienced a vision in which he saw it (Scutts, “Solar and Religious Symbolism” 13).

One more issue needs addressing in terms of Browning’s recurrent themes in poetry. Scutts mentions how some scholars have noticed the hidden notion of resurrection in Browning’s poetry (Scutts, “Solar and Religious Symbolism” 2). As Gal Manor puts it:

Resurrection is a recurring metaphor for poetry in Robert Browning’s poems, plays and correspondence. Yet his attitude towards this trope is a conflicted one, as Browning often

associates resurrection with an objectionable sacrilegious quest as well as with popular forms of Victorian magic, such as spiritualism and mesmerism, which he abhorred. In spite of this seeming rejection of magic, Browning's attitude towards magicians and magic language is also characterized by fascination and attraction, triggered by the occult books he read in his father's large and eccentric library. As a result, magicians and mystical theories often appear in his work. (Manor 49)

Browning had conflicting feelings towards practices that seemed sacrilegious, but he also could not help but be drawn to them. According to Manor, this manifests itself in many of his works. Looking back at "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," some lines allude either directly or indirectly to the theme of resurrection. One of them being the date of the children's disappearance that he might have purposefully adopted from Verstegan's version, which is the 22 July or the day of Mary Magdalene. According to Christian belief, Mary Magdalene was the first person to witness the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Another example would be the wording of the lines "their fathers and mothers having risen / Out of some subterraneous prison" (Browning 294-295) and "It's as my great-grandsire, / Starting up at the Trump of Doom's tone, / Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!" (Browning 67-69), which allude to rising from the dead or the underworld. There is also the previously mentioned mayor's remark about the rats: "What's dead can't come to life, I think" (Browning 166). All of this points to Browning's life-long obsession with the idea of resurrection.

### **3.2 Pied Piper as a "Solar Wanderer"**

Alongside biblical references that appear in it, the poem is also rich in allusions to the sun and summertime. Some examples are more obvious than others. The more obvious ones include the phrases such as: "All creatures living beneath the sun" (Browning 73), and: "like a great sun shone / Glorious scarce an inch before me" (Browning 142-143). But there are also those that are subtler, such as: "Made nests inside men's Sunday hats" (Browning 16), or the Piper's coat and scarf of "red and yellow stripe" (Browning 81), which mentions colours associated with summer and warmth. In his text titled "A Focus on two Blind Spots in Literary Theory and Criticism Relating to the Pied Piper of Hamelin and Poetic Wandering," Julian Scutts states the following: "The basic facts relating to the Pied Piper point to the association of the figure with summer and the domain of religion and mysticism. All accounts of the legend place the event of the Piper's

appearance in Hamelin in the early or middle days of summer, the season for dancing and musical diversion” (12). Scutts explains how summer is a season associated with mysticism and musical entertainment such as dancing. 22 July in Browning’s poem falls close to the middle of summer. Given the fact that Pied Piper depicts both a musician and a magician of sorts, this implies references different from the previously mentioned religious ones. It proves the connection between Browning and all those arcane texts and lore that he had read in his father’s library, which later on served as an inspiration for his literary work.

Aside from Piper’s associations with solar symbolism, there is another term that Browning uses to describe the Piper in the following verses: “To pay this sum to a wandering fellow / With a gypsy coat of red and yellow!” (Browning 161-162). The first thing to notice is the “wandering fellow” as the mayor describes him. Scutts explains in “Here comes the Sun in Poetry” how, although the mayor uses “wandering” as a derogatory term, there is another meaning that the reader can take from the phrase. The phrase may also carry the positive connotation of wandering that can imply the Piper to be similar to a pilgrim, minstrel or even a poet, if observed from the literary point of view (Scutts 22). The mayor adds another attribute to the piper in the second line; “A gypsy coat of red and yellow” perfectly explains his wandering nature. After all, one of the definitions of the word “gypsy” is “a person who wanders or roams from place to place” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), its synonym being the word “wanderer.” Unbeknownst to many, this mention may also pay another homage to Mérimée’s *Chronique du Règne de Charles IX* where a gypsy girl named Mila tells her version of the story of the Pied Piper. This and the Piper denoted as having “swarthy skin” could both be homages to Mérimée. The wandering nature of Browning’s Piper is not restricted to just the Piper, but to the legend of the Pied Piper as a whole. The story of the Piper can even be called a wandering legend since many writers have reimagined it in different locations such as Denmark, Austria and England, each version telling a different story of the same figure.

## Conclusion

In their versions of the Pied Piper story, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and Robert Browning bring out the characteristics of their contemporary world. Just like many other versions of the story that came before them, the text is telling of the major issues and interests of the nineteenth century.

In the case of brothers Grimm, those issues revolved mostly around the values of German folk. The brothers Grimm took it upon themselves to promote the values of old that they regarded as true characteristics of the German folk. They dedicated their works to common people rather than aristocracy, and through the story of Pied Piper referred to the contemporary problems that plagued the German folk in the nineteenth century. They also thoroughly researched German legends and reported on other historical accounts surrounding those legends, all the more proving to be the keepers of German tradition and thus deserving the title of German Romantics.

In the same century, in Victorian England, Robert Browning was born to a devoutly religious mother and a rather curious father. Their influences turned out to be the leading points in Browning's literary treatment of the Pied Piper story. His mother's religious influence manifested itself in his poem through a number of biblical references and parallels, some of which still remain hidden to literary critics. His father's book collection bore many arcane texts that Browning liked to read as a child. It is safe to say that some of them also included stories and legends that might have been seen as sacrilegious by an average Victorian English person. These two seemingly contradictory influences might have resulted in Browning's dual stance towards mysticism and the supernatural. Despite this, the notion of resurrection repeats itself throughout Browning's poetry, sometimes more obvious and sometimes less. The same goes for the many references to solar symbolism and the notion of wandering that in the end beautifully depict the figure of the Pied Piper. Browning's poem is so rich in artistic expression that one can imagine how easy it was for young William to illustrate the poem.

All of this speaks of how personal and creative Robert Browning's poem is, but in the same way, how brothers Grimm's dedication to their values brought this legend into the world with the purpose to inspire their people. This legend has not only fascinated these nineteenth-century writers, but also many authors and scholars across different centuries and countries. Due to this, the Piper is, in a sense, a wandering legend in and of itself. This mysterious figure has

enchanted and inspired the minds of many over boundaries of space and time. Despite the Piper's enigmatic nature, the greatest mystery may be why some of the versions still remain largely unnoticed by the literary community.

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