



**Background** Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400) is often called the father of English poetry, and *The Canterbury Tales*, a work he never completed, is considered one of the very greatest works in the English language. In the medieval church, a pardoner was a clergy member who had authority from the pope to grant indulgences—certificates of forgiveness—to people who showed great charity. In practice, however, many pardoners—such as Chaucer’s pilgrim—were unethical and sold their certificates to make money for the church or themselves.



# The Pardoner’s Tale

from *The Canterbury Tales*

Narrative Poem by Geoffrey Chaucer translated by Nevill Coghill

CLOSE READ  
Notes

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–22, begin to collect and cite text evidence.
  - Underline clues that show that the Pardoner tries to deceive the people he preaches to.
  - In the margin, explain why the Pardoner characterizes himself as a pigeon (lines 11–13).

## The Pardoner’s Prologue

“My lords,” he said, “in churches where I preach

I cultivate a haughty kind of speech

And ring it out as roundly as a bell;

I’ve got it all by heart, the tale I tell.

5 I have a text, it always is the same

And always has been, since I learnt the game,

Old as the hills and fresher than the grass,

*Radix malorum est cupiditas. . .*<sup>1</sup>

“I preach, as you have heard me say before,

10 And tell a hundred lying mockeries<sup>2</sup> more.

I take great pains, and stretching out my neck

To east and west I crane about and peck

Just like a pigeon sitting on a barn.

<sup>1</sup> *Radix malorum est cupiditas*: Latin for “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

<sup>2</sup> **mockeries**: false tales.

avarice:

castigate:

My hands and tongue together spin the yarn  
 15 And all my antics are a joy to see.  
 The curse of **avarice** and cupidity  
 Is all my sermon, for it frees the pelf.<sup>3</sup>  
 Out come the pence,<sup>4</sup> and specially for myself,  
 For my exclusive purpose is to win  
 20 And not at all to **castigate** their sin.  
 Once dead what matter how their souls may fare?  
 They can go blackberrying, for all I care! . . .

“And thus I preach against the very vice  
 I make my living out of—avarice.  
 25 And yet however guilty of that sin  
 Myself, with others I have power to win  
 Them from it, I can bring them to repent;  
 But that is not my principal intent.  
 Covetousness is both the root and stuff  
 30 Of all I preach. That ought to be enough.

“Well, then I give examples thick and fast  
 From bygone times, old stories from the past.  
 A yokel<sup>5</sup> mind loves stories from of old,  
 Being the kind it can repeat and hold.  
 35 What! Do you think, as long as I can preach  
 And get their silver for the things I teach,  
 That I will live in poverty, from choice?  
 That’s not the counsel of my inner voice!

<sup>3</sup> **pelf**: riches.

<sup>4</sup> **pence**: pennies.

<sup>5</sup> **yokel**: rustic.

2. **REREAD** Reread lines 19–20. Paraphrase what the Pardoner says. What is his “exclusive purpose”?
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3. **READ** As you read lines 23–57, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Underline text that reveals what the Pardoner really thinks of those to whom he sells forgiveness.
  - Circle statements in which the Pardoner reveals his own character.

- No! Let me preach and beg from kirk<sup>6</sup> to kirk  
 40 And never do an honest job of work,  
 No, nor make baskets, like St. Paul, to gain  
 A livelihood. I do not preach in vain.  
 There's no apostle I would **counterfeit**;  
 I mean to have money, wool and cheese and wheat  
 45 Though it were given me by the poorest lad  
 Or poorest village widow, though she had  
 A string of starving children, all agape.  
 No, let me drink the liquor of the grape  
 And keep a jolly wench in every town!
- 50 "But listen, gentlemen; to bring things down  
 To a conclusion, would you like a tale?  
 Now as I've drunk a draft of corn-ripe ale,  
 By God it stands to reason I can strike  
 On some good story that you all will like.  
 55 For though I am a wholly vicious man  
 Don't think I can't tell moral tales. I can!  
 Here's one I often preach when out for winning. . . ."

<sup>6</sup> **kirk**: church.

4. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 50–57. In the margin, summarize the narrator's final comments of the prologue.

counterfeit:

## SHORT RESPONSE

**Cite Text Evidence** Irony is a contrast between expectations and reality. What is ironic about the Pardoner? **Cite text evidence** in your response.

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5. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 58–107, continue to cite textual evidence.
- In the margin, explain who the Pardoner’s tale will be about and who has just been killed (lines 58–72).
  - Underline descriptions of and warnings about Death.
  - In the margin, explain how the descriptions given by the tavern-knave and the innkeeper personify Death (lines 73–89).

## The Pardoner’s Tale

It’s of three rioters<sup>7</sup> I have to tell  
Who, long before the morning service bell,  
60 Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.  
And as they sat, they heard the hand-bell clink  
Before a coffin going to the grave;  
One of them called the little tavern-knave<sup>8</sup>  
And said “Go and find out at once—look s pry!—  
65 Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by;  
And see you get the name correctly too.”  
“Sir,” said the boy, “no need, I promise you;  
Two hours before you came here I was told.  
He was a friend of yours in days of old,  
70 And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,  
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.  
There came a privy<sup>9</sup> thief, they call him Death,  
Who kills us all round here, and in a breath  
He speared him through the heart, he never stirred.  
75 And then Death went his way without a word.  
He’s killed a thousand in the present plague,<sup>10</sup>  
And, sir, it doesn’t do to be too vague  
If you should meet him; you had best be wary.  
Be on your guard with such an adversary,  
80 Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,  
That’s what my mother said. It’s all I know.”

<sup>7</sup> **rioters:** rowdy people, revelers.

<sup>8</sup> **tavern-knave:** serving boy at an inn.

<sup>9</sup> **privy:** hidden, secretive.

<sup>10</sup> **plague:** Bubonic plague killed at least a quarter of the population of Europe in the mid-14th century.

publican:

The **publican** joined in with, “By St. Mary,  
What the child says is right; you’d best be wary,  
This very year he killed, in a large village  
85 A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,  
Page<sup>11</sup> in the household, children—all there were.  
Yes, I imagine that he lives round there.  
It’s well to be prepared in these alarms,  
He might do you dishonor.” “Huh, God’s arms!”  
90 The rioter said, “Is he so fierce to meet?  
I’ll search for him, by Jesus, street by street.  
God’s blessed bones! I’ll register a vow!  
Here, chaps! The three of us together now,  
Hold up your hands, like me, and we’ll be brothers  
95 In this affair, and each defend the others,  
And we will kill this traitor Death, I say!  
Away with him as he has made away  
With all our friends. God’s dignity! Tonight!”

They made their bargain, swore with appetite,  
100 These three, to live and die for one another  
As brother-born might swear to his born brother.  
And up they started in their drunken rage  
And made towards this village which the page  
And publican had spoken of before.  
105 Many and grisly were the oaths they swore,  
Tearing Christ’s blessed body to a shred;  
“If we can only catch him, Death is dead!”

<sup>11</sup> **page:** boy servant.

6. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 90–107. What does the rioters’ response to the description of Death tell you about their characters? Cite evidence in your response.

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When they had gone not fully half a mile,  
Just as they were about to cross a stile,  
110 They came upon a very poor old man  
Who humbly greeted them and thus began,  
“God look to you, my lords, and give you quiet!”  
To which the proudest of these men of riot  
Gave back the answer, “What, old fool? Give place!  
115 Why are you all wrapped up except your face?  
Why live so long? Isn’t it time to die?”

The old, old fellow looked him in the eye  
And said, “Because I never yet have found,  
Though I have walked to India, searching round  
120 Village and city on my pilgrimage,  
One who would change his youth to have my age.  
And so my age is mine and must be still  
Upon me, for such time as God may will.

“Not even Death, alas, will take my life;  
125 So, like a wretched prisoner at strife  
Within himself, I walk alone and wait  
About the earth, which is my mother’s gate,  
Knock-knocking with my staff from night to noon  
And crying, ‘Mother, open to me soon!’  
130 Look at me, mother, won’t you let me in?  
See how I wither, flesh and blood and skin!  
Alas! When will these bones be laid to rest?  
Mother, I would exchange—for that were best—  
The wardrobe in my chamber, standing there

7. **READ ►** As you read lines 108–166, continue to cite textual evidence.
  - In the margin, explain who the old man calls Mother and what he calls “my mother’s gate” (lines 124–137).
  - Circle the ominous words the old man speaks in lines 138–148.
  - Underline the old man’s instructions about where to find death (lines 149–166).
8. **◀ REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 108–116. With a small group, discuss the rioters’ meeting with the old man. What is ironic about their attitudes toward death?

135 So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair<sup>12</sup>  
To wrap me in! She has refused her grace,  
Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.

“But it dishonored you when you began  
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,  
140 Unless he had injured you in word or deed.  
It says in holy writ, as you may read,  
‘Thou shalt rise up before the **hoary** head  
And honor it.’ And therefore be it said  
‘Do no more harm to an old man than you,  
145 Being now young, would have another do  
When you are old’—if you should live till then.  
And so may God be with you, gentlemen,  
For I must go whither I have to go.”

“By God,” the gambler said, “you shan’t do so,  
150 You don’t get off so easy, by St. John!  
I heard you mention, just a moment gone,  
A certain traitor Death who singles out  
And kills the fine young fellows hereabout.  
And you’re his spy, by God! You wait a bit.  
155 Say where he is or you shall pay for it,  
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!  
I say you’ve joined together by consent  
To kill us younger folk, you thieving swine!”

“Well, sirs,” he said, “if it be your design  
160 To find out Death, turn up this crooked way  
Towards that grove, I left him there today  
Under a tree, and there you’ll find him waiting.  
He isn’t one to hide for all your prating.<sup>13</sup>  
You see that oak? He won’t be far to find.  
165 And God protect you that redeemed mankind,  
Aye, and amend you!” Thus that ancient man.

<sup>12</sup>**shirt of hair:** a rough shirt made of animal hair, worn to punish oneself for one’s sins.

<sup>13</sup>**prating:** talking at great length; chattering.

hoary:

At once the three young rioters began  
 To run, and reached the tree, and there they found  
 A pile of golden florins<sup>14</sup> on the ground,  
 170 New-coined, eight bushels of them as they thought.  
 No longer was it Death those fellows sought,  
 For they were all so thrilled to see the sight,  
 The florins were so beautiful and bright,  
 That down they sat beside the precious pile.  
 175 The wickedest spoke first after a while.  
 “Brothers,” he said, “you listen to what I say.  
 I’m pretty sharp although I joke away.  
 It’s clear that Fortune has bestowed this treasure  
 To let us live in jollity and pleasure.  
 180 Light come, light go! We’ll spend it as we ought.  
 God’s precious dignity! Who would have thought  
 This morning was to be our lucky day?

“If one could only get the gold away,  
 Back to my house, or else to yours, perhaps—  
 185 For as you know, the gold is ours, chaps—  
 We’d all be at the top of fortune, hey?  
 But certainly it can’t be done by day.  
 People would call us robbers—a strong gang,  
 So our own property would make us hang.

<sup>14</sup>florins: coins.

9. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 167–204, continue to cite textual evidence.
- In the margin, paraphrase what distracts the rioters from seeking Death.
  - In the margin, summarize the plan the rioters make.
  - Underline text evidence that supports your summary.

10. **REREAD** ◀ Reread lines 167–182. What is ironic about this discovery?  
 How is it different from what you expected?

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190 No, we must bring this treasure back by night  
Some prudent way, and keep it out of sight.  
And so as a solution I propose  
We draw for lots and see the way it goes;  
The one who draws the longest, lucky man,  
195 Shall run to town as quickly as he can  
To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark<sup>15</sup>—  
While two remain in hiding here to mark  
Our heap of treasure. If there's no delay,  
When night comes down we'll carry it away,  
200 All three of us, wherever we have planned.”

He gathered lots and hid them in his hand  
Bidding them draw for where the luck should fall.  
It fell upon the youngest of them all,  
And off he ran at once towards the town.

205 As soon as he had gone the first sat down  
And thus began a **parley** with the other:  
“You know that you can trust me as a brother;  
Now let me tell you where your profit lies;  
You know our friend has gone to get supplies  
210 And here's a lot of gold that is to be  
Divided equally amongst us three.  
Nevertheless, if I could shape things thus  
So that we shared it out—the two of us—  
Wouldn't you take it as a friendly act?”

parley:

<sup>15</sup>**keep things dark:** act in secret, without giving away what has happened.

11. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 205–235, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline words the first rioter uses to persuade the other of his plan.
- In the margin, explain the plan the two rioters make (lines 223–235).
- Underline text evidence that supports your explanation.

215           “But how?” the other said. “He knows the fact  
That all the gold was left with me and you;  
What can we tell him? What are we to do?”

                  “Is it a bargain,” said the first, “or no?  
For I can tell you in a word or so  
220   What’s to be done to bring the thing about.”  
“Trust me,” the other said, “you needn’t doubt  
My word. I won’t betray you, I’ll be true.”

                  “Well,” said his friend, “you see that we are two,  
And two are twice as powerful as one.  
225   Now look; when he comes back, get up in fun  
To have a wrestle; then, as you attack,  
I’ll up and put my dagger through his back  
While you and he are struggling, as in game;  
Then draw your dagger too and do the same.  
230   Then all this money will be ours to spend,  
Divided equally of course, dear friend.  
Then we can gratify our lusts and fill  
The day with dicing<sup>16</sup> at our own sweet will.”  
Thus these two miscreants<sup>17</sup> agreed to slay  
235   The third and youngest, as you heard me say.

                  The youngest, as he ran towards the town,  
Kept turning over, rolling up and down  
Within his heart the beauty of those bright  
New florins, saying, “Lord, to think I might  
240   Have all that treasure to myself alone!  
Could there be anyone beneath the throne  
Of God so happy as I then should be?”

<sup>16</sup>**dicing:** gambling with dice.

<sup>17</sup>**miscreants:** evildoers, villains.

12. ◀ **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 209–235. With a small group, discuss the frequent references to religion by all three rioters. In what ways do these references to religion connect the rioters to the Pardoner who tells the tale?



And so the Fiend, our common enemy,  
Was given power to put it in his thought  
245 That there was always poison to be bought,  
And that with poison he could kill his friends.  
To men in such a state the Devil sends  
Thoughts of this kind, and has a full permission  
To lure them on to sorrow and **perdition**;  
250 For this young man was utterly content  
To kill them both and never to repent.

And on he ran, he had no thought to tarry,  
Came to the town, found an **apothecary**  
And said, "Sell me some poison if you will,  
255 I have a lot of rats I want to kill  
And there's a polecat too about my yard  
That takes my chickens and it hits me hard;  
But I'll get even, as is only right,  
With vermin that destroy a man by night."

260 The chemist answered, "I've a preparation  
Which you shall have, and by my soul's salvation  
If any living creature eat or drink  
A mouthful, ere he has the time to think,  
Though he took less than makes a grain of wheat,  
265 You'll see him fall down dying at your feet;  
Yes, die he must, and in so short a while  
You'd hardly have the time to walk a mile,  
The poison is so strong, you understand."

perdition:

apothecary:

13. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 236–295, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Circle references to evil.
- Summarize the plan the youngest rioter makes.
- Underline text evidence in lines 239–251 that supports your summary.

This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand  
270 The box of poison and away he ran  
Into a neighboring street, and found a man  
Who lent him three large bottles. He withdrew  
And deftly poured the poison into two.  
He kept the third one clean, as well he might,  
275 For his own drink, meaning to work all night  
Stacking the gold and carrying it away.  
And when this rioter, this devil's clay,  
Had filled his bottles up with wine, all three,  
Back to rejoin his comrades sauntered he.

280 Why make a sermon of it? Why waste breath?  
Exactly in the way they'd planned his death  
They fell on him and slew him, two to one.  
Then said the first of them when this was done,  
"Now for a drink. Sit down and let's be merry,  
285 For later on there'll be the corpse to bury."  
And, as it happened, reaching for a sup,  
He took a bottle full of poison up  
And drank; and his companion, nothing loth,<sup>18</sup>  
Drank from it also, and they perished both.

290 There is, in Avicenna's<sup>19</sup> long relation  
Concerning poison and its operation,  
Trust me, no ghastlier section to transcend  
What these two wretches suffered at their end.  
Thus these two murderers received their due,  
295 So did the treacherous young poisoner too.

O cursed sin! O blackguardly excess!  
O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!  
O gluttony that lusted on and diced! . . .

<sup>18</sup>**nothing loth:** not at all unwilling.

<sup>19</sup>**Avicenna's:** Avicenna was an 11th-century Islamic physician who wrote descriptions of various poisons and their effects.

14. ◀ **REREAD** Reread lines 280–289. In the margin, explain how each rioter meets his death, and the irony of their deaths.



avarice:

Dearly beloved, God forgive your sin  
300 And keep you from the vice of **avarice!**  
My holy pardon frees you all of this,  
Provided that you make the right approaches,  
That is with sterling, rings, or silver brooches.  
Bow down your heads under this holy bull!<sup>20</sup>  
305 Come on, you women, offer up your wool!  
I'll write your name into my ledger; so!  
Into the bliss of Heaven you shall go.  
For I'll absolve you by my holy power,  
You that make offering, clean as at the hour  
310 When you were born. . . . That, sirs, is how I preach.  
And Jesu Christ, soul's healer, aye, the leech<sup>21</sup>  
Of every soul, grant pardon and relieve you  
Of sin, for that is best, I won't deceive you.

One thing I should have mentioned in my tale,  
315 Dear people. I've some relics<sup>22</sup> in my bale  
And pardons too, as full and fine, I hope,  
As any in England, given me by the Pope.  
If there be one among you that is willing  
To have my absolution for a shilling<sup>23</sup>  
320 Devoutly given, come! and do not harden  
Your hearts but kneel in humbleness for pardon;  
Or else, receive my pardon as we go.  
You can renew it every town or so  
Always provided that you still renew  
325 Each time, and in good money, what is due.  
It is an honor to you to have found  
A pardoner with his credentials sound  
Who can absolve you as you ply the spur  
In any accident that may occur.

<sup>20</sup>**bull:** an official document from the pope.

<sup>21</sup>**leech:** a physician.

<sup>22</sup>**relics:** the remains of a saint.

<sup>23</sup>**shilling:** a coin worth twelve pence.

15. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 296–340, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Circle examples of what the Pardoner offers his listeners.
- Underline the forms of payment he accepts.
- In the margin, summarize his final sales pitch.

330 For instance—we are all at Fortune’s beck—  
Your horse may throw you down and break your neck.  
What a security it is to all  
To have me here among you and at call  
With pardon for the lowly and the great  
335 When soul leaves body for the future state!  
And I advise our Host here to begin,  
The most enveloped of you all in sin.  
Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay,  
And kiss my holy relics right away.  
340 Only a groat<sup>24</sup> Come on, unbuckle your purse!

<sup>24</sup>**groat:** a silver coin worth less than a shilling.

16. **REREAD** Reread lines 330–340. What motivation for the Pardoner’s telling his tale is revealed in these lines? Cite text evidence in your response.

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## SHORT RESPONSE

**Cite Text Evidence** Relate the story of the rioters to the goal of the Pardoner. How does the tale of the three rioters help the Pardoner make sales? Review your reading notes, and **cite text evidence** in your response.

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