

The story told by Chaucer in "The Pardoner's Tale" has roots that are old and widespread. Avarice as the root of evil is a theme that appears in stories in many lands. Starting with the first part of his story, the Pardoner presents us with an *exemplum*, an anecdote (short narrative) or example inserted into a sermon to teach a moral lesson. As with every story, Chaucer fits the story to the character of the storyteller.

Chaucer is a master of both verbal and situational irony. You use both type of irony all the time. You use verbal irony when you say one thing but mean another. For example, when a friend asks how you like cleaning your room for three hours, you might reply, "It was a blast." Both of you know differently, of course. In situational irony, what actually happens is different from what you expect. You feel situational irony when it rains on the weather forecaster's picnic, or when the police officer's son turns out to be a criminal.

## The Pardoner's Tale

from *The Canterbury Tales*  
Geoffrey Chaucer,

translated by Nevill Coghill

### The Prologue

"But let me briefly make my purpose plain;  
I preach for nothing but for greed of gain  
And use the same old text, as bold as brass,  
*Radix malorum est cupiditas*. (Latin for - The love of  
money is the root of all evil)

5 And thus I preach against the very vice  
I make my living out of—avarice.  
And yet however guilty of that sin  
Myself, with others I have power to win  
Them from it, I can bring them to repent;  
10 But that is not my principal intent.  
Covetousness is both the root and stuff  
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.  
15 A yokel mind loves stories from of old,  
Being the kind it can repeat and hold.  
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?  
20 That's not the counsel of my inner voice!  
No! Let me preach and beg from kirk to kirk  
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.  
25 There's no apostle I would counterfeit;  
I mean to have money, wool and cheese and wheat  
Though it were given me by the poorest lad  
Or poorest village widow, though she had  
A string of starving children, all agape.  
30 No, let me drink the liquor of the grape  
And keep a jolly wench in every town!  
"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,  
35 By God it stands to reason I can strike  
On some good story that you all will like.

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;  
40 Now please be quiet. Here is the beginning."

### The Tale

In Flanders once there was a company  
Of youngsters haunting vice and ribaldry,  
Riot and gambling, stews and public-houses  
Where each with harp, guitar, or lute carouses,  
45 Dancing and dicing day and night, and bold  
To eat and drink far more than they can hold,  
Doing thereby the devil sacrifice  
Within that devil's temple of cursed vice,  
Abominable in superfluity,  
50 With oaths so damnable in blasphemy  
That it's a grisly thing to hear them swear.  
Our dear Lord's body they will rend and tear. . . .  
It's of three rioters I have to tell  
Who, long before the morning service bell,  
55 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  
And said "Go and find out at once—look spry!—  
60 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,  
65 And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,  
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.

There came a privy thief, they call him Death,  
Who kills us all round here, and in a breath  
He speared him through the heart, he never stirred.  
70 And then Death went his way without a word.  
He's killed a thousand in the present plague,  
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,  
75 Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,  
That's what my mother said. It's all I know."  
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  
80 A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,  
Page 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!"  
85 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  
90 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,  
95 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.

100 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!"  
 When they had gone not fully half a mile,  
 Just as they were about to cross a stile,  
 105 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!  
 110 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  
 115 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;  
 120 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!  
 125 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  
 130 So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair  
 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,  
 135 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,  
 140 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,  
 145 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.  
 150 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  
 155 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.  
 You see that oak? He won't be far to find.  
 160 And God protect you that redeemed mankind,  
 Aye, and amend you!" Thus that ancient man.  
 At once the three young rioters began  
 To run, and reached the tree, and there they found  
 A pile of golden florins on the ground,  
 165 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.  
170 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.  
175 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—  
180 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.  
185 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,  
190 Shall run to town as quickly as he can  
To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark—  
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,  
195 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.  
200 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  
205 And here’s a lot of gold that is to be  
Divided equally among 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?”  
210 “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  
215 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.  
220 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.  
225 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 at our own sweet will.”  
Thus these two miscreants agreed to slay  
230 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  
 235 Have all that treasure to myself alone!  
 Could there be anyone beneath the throne  
 Of God so happy as I then should be?"  
 And so the Fiend, our common enemy,  
 Was given power to put it in his thought  
 240 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;  
 245 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,  
 250 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."  
 255 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,  
 260 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."  
 This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand

265 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,  
 270 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.  
 275 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,  
 280 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,  
 Drank from it also, and they perished both.  
 285 There is, in Avicenna's 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,  
 290 So did the treacherous young poisoner too. . . .  
 "One thing I should have mentioned in my tale,  
 Dear people. I've some relics in my bale  
 And pardons too, as full and fine, I hope,  
 As any in England, given me by the Pope.  
 295 If there be one among you that is willing  
 To have my absolution for a shilling  
 Devoutly given, come! and do not harden

Your hearts but kneel in humbleness for pardon;  
Or else, receive my pardon as we go.  
300 You can renew it every town or so  
Always provided that you still renew  
Each time, and in good money, what is due.  
It is an honor to you to have found  
A pardoner with his credentials sound  
305 Who can absolve you as you ply the spur  
In any accident that may occur.  
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  
310 To have me here among you and at call  
With pardon for the lowly and the great  
When soul leaves body for the future state!  
And I advise our Host here to begin,  
The most enveloped of you all in sin.  
315 Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay,

And kiss my holy relics right away.  
Only a groat. Come on, unbuckle your purse!”  
“No, no,” said he, “not I, and may the curse  
Of Christ descend upon me if I do! . . .”  
320 The Pardoner said nothing, not a word;  
He was so angry that he couldn’t speak.  
“Well,” said our Host, “if you’re for showing pique,  
I’ll joke no more, not with an angry man.”  
The worthy Knight immediately began,  
325 Seeing the fun was getting rather rough,  
And said, “No more, we’ve all had quite enough.  
Now, Master Pardoner, perk up, look cheerly!  
And you, Sir Host, whom I esteem so dearly,  
I beg of you to kiss the Pardoner.  
330 “Come, Pardoner, draw nearer, my dear sir.  
Let’s laugh again and keep the ball in play.”  
They kissed, and we continued on our way.

### Making Meanings/ Reading Check

- a. How does the Pardoner describe his own character and morals in his Prologue?
- b. According to “The Pardoner’s Tale,” why are the three rioters looking for Death?
- c. Where does the old man tell the three rioters to look for Death? How do they treat him?
- d. Describe the rioters’ plan for the gold and how it proves fatal to all three men.
- e. Why do the Pardoner and the Host quarrel at the end of the tale? Who patches up their quarrel?

### First Thoughts

1. How did you respond to the tale told by the Pardoner? How did you respond to the fact that it was told by a man of the Pardoner’s character?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. How do the tavern knave and the publican **personify** Death? What does the rioters’ response to the description tell you?
3. What do you think the poor old man may **symbolize**?
4. Irony is a discrepancy between expectations and reality. How many layers of **irony** can you identify in this story?
5. Why is it ironic that the Pardoner preaches a story with this particular moral? How would you account for the psychology of the Pardoner: Is he truly evil, just drunk, or so used to cheating that he does it automatically?
6. What do you think Chaucer is **satirizing** in “The Pardoner’s Tale”?
7. What **moral** does the Pardoner want us to draw from his tale? What moral do you think Chaucer wants you to draw from the Pardoner’s tale?

### Extending the Text

8. Do people with the Pardoner’s ethics and tricks still exist today—in any field of life? Explain.
9. How would the Pardoner fill in the following personality profile?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Profession: \_\_\_\_\_

Last Book I Read: \_\_\_\_\_

Latest Accomplishment: \_\_\_\_\_

Why I Do What I Do: \_\_\_\_\_

Future Goals: \_\_\_\_\_

Quotation I Like Best: \_\_\_\_\_