

THE PARDONER'S TALE

TEACHER GUIDE

BACKGROUND

A part from the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner may be *The Canterbury Tales's* most interesting character. As a churchman he is the epitome of corruption, yet he freely admits this among the other pilgrims. Pardoners sold official pardons for sins for a certain price—a dishonorable practice in the first place—but this Pardoner also dupes churchgoers with fake holy relics. His long hair and high-pitched voice also give him a feminine appearance and demeanor that makes Chaucer wonder if he is a gelding “castrated horse” or a mare “female horse.”

“The Pardoner’s Tale” has been called the first short story in English literature because it has a brief plot, develops a theme throughout, and wraps up with a snappy ending. This may be why it is also the most famous tale from the collection.

SUMMARY

The Pardoner brags to the other pilgrims about how easily he uses his fake relics to fool churchgoers. The other pilgrims feel contempt toward him and wonder if he is not perhaps a eunuch. In spite of the animosity the others feel against him, he takes his turn to tell a tale. He tells them the theme of his story is that greed is the root of all evil.

When three ruffians learn that the plague has taken the life of their friend, they set out to murder Death. The local tavern-

keeper tells them that Death lives in the nearby village, but that they should be careful if they intend to harm him since he has claimed so many lives.

The three ruffians set out toward the next village intent on ambushing and killing Death once and for all. Along the road they encounter an old man, whom they first believe to be Death. Instead he tells the ruffians that he is a man who has been cursed to wander the earth for eternity. Death will not take him, so he can never die. He wanders, tapping the earth with his stick, hoping to get inside. He tells the ruffians that he saw Death standing under the tree up the road. The ruffians leave the old man behind and hurry on up the road.

When they reach the gnarled tree the old man mentioned, they do not find Death, but they do find a large mound of gold. The leader of the ruffians tells the youngest ruffian to go into town and bring them back some bread and wine while they wait for night to fall.

The youngest ruffian heads to town, but as he does, he schemes against the other two. In town he buys rat poison and poisons two bottles of the wine he is bringing back. Meanwhile, the other two ruffians plot a way to kill the young ruffians. When the young ruffian returns, the other two stab him in the side. To celebrate that they have been successful, they sit down to drink the wine that the young ruffian has brought back. The poison takes effect quickly, and they both die. In the end Death was victorious.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why is greed destructive?
- Can we ever overcome death?

CONNECT

The Wandering Jew According to a popular medieval legend, when a certain Jewish man taunted Jesus Christ on his way to the cross, God doomed him to wander the earth until the Second Coming of Christ. This character type, a cursed individual who cannot die, has appeared in many different tales throughout the years. Some critics have identified the old man in this story as the Wandering Jew. Analyze whether or not you believe there is a connection between this legend and the old man in the story.

ANTICIPATORY QUESTIONS

- Have you ever let greed get the better of you?
- Is it possible to overcome death?
- If you had a chance to never die, would you take it?

TEACHABLE TERMS

- **Situational Irony** The reversal of the three ruffians' fortunes at the end of this tale is great example of situational irony. On pg. 53 rather than killing Death, the ruffians end up killing each other—leaving Death triumphant.
- **Personification** This story personifies Death because various characters expect Death to be a flesh-and-blood person on which one might take revenge. In fact, on pg. 49 the ruffians seemed to be confused as to whether the thief called Death, to which the boy refers, is an actual person or not.
- **Theme:** This story is an *exemplum*, an anecdote used to illustrate a moral point.

The ruffians act out the theme of “Greed is the root of all evil.”

- **Irony** Chaucer is a master of irony. An example of this is that he has the Pardoner, a confessed charlatan who dupes innocent Christians out of their money, tell a tale whose moral is about the dangers of greed.

RECALL QUESTIONS

1. Who did the three ruffians set out to kill?
2. What is the curse of the old man they encounter on the road?
3. What do they find underneath a tree?
4. What does the young ruffian buy while he is in town?
5. What lesson does this story teach?



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CAST

NARRATOR	<i>Chaucer Narrating</i>
PARDONER	<i>Dishonest Clergyman</i>
KNIGHT	<i>Noble Warrior</i>
HOST	<i>Leader of the Party</i>
RUFFIAN ONE	<i>Sinful Scoundrel</i>
RUFFIAN TWO	<i>Sinful Scoundrel</i>
RUFFIAN THREE	<i>Sinful Scoundrel</i>
TAVERN-KEEPER	<i>Keeper of a Tavern</i>
OLD MAN	<i>Cursed Old Man</i>
APOTHECARY	<i>Medieval Pharmacist</i>
BOY	<i>Young Servant</i>

NARRATOR: Among our company there was a Pardoner of sins. This Pardoner offered the Lord's forgiveness in return for a contribution to the church—or to his own pockets. This Pardoner had waxy-yellow

hair spread over his shoulders in thin strands like rat tails.

PARDONER: (*high-pitched singing*) When in April the sweet showers fall and pierce the drought of March to the root...

NARRATOR: This Pardoner always sang merrily and loud. On his cap he had sewed an image of St. Veronica, and his satchel was full of pardons hot from Rome. His voice was as small as a goat's. He had no beard nor ever would have. His face was as smooth as if lately shaven. I believe he was a gelding or a mare.

PARDONER: (*singing*) Nature stirs us and our heart engages. Then people long to go on pilgrimages!

NARRATOR: He knew how to win silver from the rich and the poor. It did not matter to him if it was a poor widow's last coin—he could weasel it out of her. He carried "holy" relics from the days of old for the faithful to see and give their money to.

PARDONER: Good people, I have a handkerchief from the Virgin Mary! Who would like to see it? (*whispering*) But in reality it is just an old pillowcase! And this—this is a bit of sail from the ship that Christ himself sailed in. In fact, it's the same ship that Peter stepped out of to walk upon the waves. (*pause*) Or at least that's what I tell people.

HOST: What is this? It looks like a bottle of pig bones.

PARDONER: Those? No! Those are the remains of great saints of old.

HOST: Hogwash!

NARRATOR: This Pardoner was an odious chap, but many devoted Christians he duped with his holy-sounding speech. He even bragged to us fellow travelers about how easily he fooled the masses with his fake relics and deceptive tactics. The host of our traveling party contemptuously addressed the Pardoner.

HOST: Let's see if you are worth your salt, Pardoner. Tell us a tale worth the hearing.

PARDONER: It shall be done!

HOST: And don't tell us a story with coarse jokes. We've had enough of those!

PARDONER: Hmmm. A moral tale, huh? One filled with wisdom would be best!

HOST: Yes, if you have any of that, we would love to hear it.

PARDONER: Hmmm. Gentle-people, when I preach in churches, I strive for a resounding voice! I ring it out as round as a bell, for I know by heart all that I say. My theme is and always was one and the same: *Radix malorum est cupiditas*.

NARRATOR: He looked at some of the less-educated members of our group—probably hoping to see a look of confusion.

PARDONER: It means "Greed is the root of all evil." I speak a few words in Latin to give a flavor to my preaching and to stir men to devotion. Then I tell them many examples from stories of long ago. For simple people love old tales—the kinds of

things that they can well remember and repeat.

HOST: Then hurry and tell us one—in our own language, so we can truly judge its worth.

PARDONER: Of course! Now hold your peace, and I will begin. (*narrating*) Once there dwelt in Flanders a group of young ruffians who made a habit of sin. Their time was filled with debauchery, gambling, brothels, and taverns. One day the three of them were gathered in one such tavern reveling in their sin.

RUFFIAN ONE: Allow me to confess some of my sins to you all!

RUFFIAN TWO: Why?

RUFFIAN ONE: So we can laugh at them and think of some more to commit! (*laughter*)

PARDONER: As they sat there, they heard a bell tinkle—the kind of bell that was carried before a corpse on the way to the grave. (*tinkling of a bell*) One of the ruffians called to a serving boy wiping down the nearby table.

RUFFIAN ONE: Boy! Go quickly! Ask what corpse that was that just passed by here!

PARDONER: It was the time of the Black Death, when men, women, and children were dying daily—carried away by Death.

BOY: That corpse was the body of an old friend of yours—a reveler in sin much like

you. He was slain suddenly in the night, as he sat very drunk on his bench.

RUFFIAN ONE: Who slayed him?

BOY: A stealthy thief that men call Death, who slays all the people in this countryside.

RUFFIAN TWO: Death slayed him? Explain yourself!

BOY: Death came with his spear and struck the man's heart in two and went his way without a word.

RUFFIAN THREE: Do you mean Death-Death? Or a man named Death?

BOY: Death himself. He has slain a thousand in this pestilence. My own mother and father were victims to him.

PARDONER: The three ruffians looked at one another and then collapsed into laughter.

ALL RUFFIANS: (*loud laughter*)

RUFFIAN TWO: This stupid boy is putting us on!

BOY: Be careful. One day you will meet Death, too. Be wary of such an adversary. Be ready to meet him at all times. My mother taught me that. I can say no more.

RUFFIAN ONE: Get out of here—before I strike you for playing jokes on us!

PARDONER: The tavern-owner stepped forward—slowly wiping his hands on a cloth.

TAVERN-KEEPER: The boy speaks the truth. Not a mile from here in a large village, Death has slain both man and woman, child, servant, and page.

RUFFIAN ONE: You mean like Death-Death? The reaper who comes for you when you die? Or a man of flesh and blood?

TAVERN-KEEPER: Who knows? But I believe his habitation to be in that village. Beware!

RUFFIAN ONE: (*mockingly*) Oooh, Death! How scary!

RUFFIAN TWO: I'm sure there are plenty of people who are *dying* to meet him! (*loud laughter*)

RUFFIAN THREE: I'm not afraid of anyone—even Death!

RUFFIAN ONE: I vow to God's bones that I will seek to meet this Death in the highways and the byways. And there I will kill him!

TAVERN-KEEPER: Friend, that is a wild oath!

PARDONER: The leader of the ruffians turned to his comrades.

RUFFIAN ONE: Listen, friends, we three are all one in this! Let each of us hold up his hand and become the others' brother and slay this false traitor Death. We will not rest until Death is dead!

(*shouts of agreement from the ruffians*)

ALL RUFFIANS: Death to Death!

PARDONER: These three pledged their word together, and up they all started up in a drunken fury. Forth they went toward that village of which the tavern-keeper had spoken—swearing many grisly oaths along the way.

RUFFIAN THREE: We'll make Death our victim! Yeah!

RUFFIAN TWO: Death shall be dead if we can catch him!

PARDONER: When they had gone only a little way, they spied a figure completely wrapped up in a dark robe except for his face.

RUFFIAN THREE: (*crying out*) There he is! Death!

PARDONER: They started to spring upon the figure, but a muffled voice cried out from within the cloak.

OLD MAN: (*old voice*) Please spare me! God be with you!

RUFFIAN TWO: What? You're not Death! Why are you completely wrapped up except your face?

PARDONER: The ruffians roughly pulled the cloak from the figure's face—revealing a man aged beyond time.

RUFFIAN THREE: This geezer looks old enough to be Death! He must have one foot already in the grave.

RUFFIAN ONE: If you aren't Death, why do you look so old?

OLD MAN: I am cursed. I must wander for years and years—as long as it is God's will. I have outlived every man on earth, but the problem is—Death won't take me until...

RUFFIAN ONE: Until what?

OLD MAN: Until I find a man who will exchange his youth for my old age, I can never die. (*pause*) By the way, would any of you young gents be willing to switch me?

RUFFIAN TWO: No! Curse you, you old fool, for even asking such a thing!

OLD MAN: (*sigh*) That's what I thought. Nobody wants to be a wretch like me. So I wander, a restless sufferer, knocking my staff upon the ground. My mother is the ground, and I say, "Dear mother! Let me in! Let me lie in your embrace once again and my flesh rot away."

RUFFIAN TWO: Yeech. Stupid, old man.

RUFFIAN ONE: He annoys me. Let's beat him until he cries for mercy.

RUFFIAN THREE: Yeah!

OLD MAN: You rogues! It is not a courteous thing to treat an old man so rudely! You can read of this rule in the Holy Scriptures. So do not harm me. May God be with you wherever you go. I must go where I must.

RUFFIAN THREE: Nay, old churl! Not so fast! You shall not depart so easily! You spoke just now of that traitor Death who slays all our friends in this countryside. I say you are his spy!

OLD MAN: Not so! He is my enemy!

RUFFIAN ONE: You are planning to help Death slay us, aren't you?

RUFFIAN TWO: Tell us where he is, or, by Heaven, you shall pay for it!

OLD MAN: Now sirs! Please! Listen! If you truly want to find Death, turn up this crooked path that runs by here. I left him there in that grove under a tree. Do you see that twisty oak? There you will find him.

RUFFIAN TWO: If we find that you have lied to us, it will go badly for you.

OLD MAN: I do not lie. You will find Death there. May God, who redeemed mankind, protect you!

PARDONERE: The ruffians let the old man continue on down the path—beating his staff upon the ground. They hurried up the crooked path toward the oak he had indicated. There their eyes nearly bugged out of their head. (*gasping of the ruffians*)

RUFFIAN THREE: Look!

PARDONER: Under the tree was a great pile of gold—eight bushels of florins, as it seemed to them.

RUFFIAN ONE: (*happily*) Forget Death! Look at this treasure!

RUFFIAN TWO: We're rich! We're rich!

PARDONER: The gold florins were so beautiful and bright that they sat themselves down by this precious horde—running their greedy fingers through it.

RUFFIAN ONE: Listen! I know I often make sport, but Fortune has truly blessed us today. As easily as this treasure appeared, we will spend it again.

RUFFIAN TWO: I agree! With this treasure we will live the rest of our lives in happiness!

RUFFIAN THREE: Who would have thought that God would show us such wonderful grace today?

RUFFIAN ONE: This gold, which is rightly ours now, must be carried to my house.

RUFFIAN TWO: (*angrily*) Your house? Why yours?

RUFFIAN ONE: Mine—or whoever's! Someone's! But if we take it during the day, people would call us harsh thieves and hang us for taking our own treasure! It must be carried by night, as wisely and slyly as can be.

RUFFIAN TWO: Then what should we do?

RUFFIAN ONE: Listen. We will draw straws, and he that draws the shortest straw will run to town and bring us back some bread and wine.

RUFFIAN THREE: What will the other two of us do?

RUFFIAN ONE: We will secretly guard this treasure, and when night falls, we will carry it to a place where we all agree is safest.

PARDONER: The first ruffian put some straws into his fist, and each of them drew

one from his fist. The lot fell to the youngest ruffian.

RUFFIAN THREE: Fine! I will go back to the town to fetch us some victuals.

PARDONER: With a suspicious, hesitating look, the ruffian disappeared down the road toward town. The other two ruffians waited until all sight of him was lost, and the leader turned to the other.

RUFFIAN ONE: You know, this is a great abundance of gold to be divided among the three of us, but think! What if it were only divided among the *two* of us?

RUFFIAN TWO: But our *friend* has already left, and he knows about the gold. What shall we say to him if we keep it for ourselves?

RUFFIAN ONE: Say? No, we will *do*. Two are stronger than one. When he returns, you should start a scuffle with him—just a playful thing. Then while you two wrestle, I will pierce him in the side.

PARDONER: The ruffian leader drew a deadly dagger from his belt.

RUFFIAN ONE: Then, my dear friend, the gold will be shared between you and me, and no one will know the difference.

PARDONER: Thus, the two villains agreed to slay the third. Meanwhile, the youngest ruffian was making his way to town, and as he did, he turned the beauty of those florins over and over in his mind.

RUFFIAN THREE: Oh, if only I could have all that treasure to myself, no man living

under God's throne should live as merry as I would!

PARDONER: So the Arch-fiend, the Devil, our enemy, put it into his mind to betray his two friends. Instead of going to the tavern in town, he went to the apothecary.

APOTHECARY: How may I serve you, young man?

RUFFIAN THREE: I need a poison—the kind with which I might kill rats.

APOTHECARY: A poison? For what purpose?

RUFFIAN THREE: I have a pole-cat in my yard, which has killed my chickens. I need to be rid of it. I will be avenged on it!

APOTHECARY: Very well! You shall have a deadly poison. May God save my soul, no creature can eat or drink a sip of this compound without dying immediately. This poison is so violent that it will kill in less time than you can walk a mile!

RUFFIAN THREE: Perfection!

PARDONER: This young ruffian gripped the box of poison in his hand and then ran into the next street to a shop and borrowed three large bottles. Into two of them he poured his poison, but the third he kept clean for his own drink.

RUFFIAN THREE: I'll need some refreshment after I haul away that mound of gold all by myself! Hee hee!

PARDONER: And when the young ruffian had filled his three great bottles with wine,

he returned again to his friends. When the young ruffian returned, the other two enacted their plan—stabbing him in the side and ending his life.

RUFFIAN THREE: (*dying sound*) Ack!

RUFFIAN ONE: Ha! He's dead! Now the gold is ours!

RUFFIAN TWO: Yes...I'm just trying to remember. Why did we come here? I mean, before we found the gold?

RUFFIAN ONE: Ah, who can remember? Let us sit and drink and make merry for a minute, and then we will bury his body.

PARDONER: With that the ruffian happened to take up one of the poisoned bottles, and he drank it up and gave his friend a drink also. Therefore, they both died soon from the horrible poison. (*dying sounds of the ruffians*) Thus the two murderers and the poisoner all met a suitable end—and Death was victorious over them all. And that is the end of my tale.

KNIGHT: A grisly tale! And well-told! I always enjoy a good, moral lesson.

HOST: Ha! I don't know which is a better warning against greed—the story or the storyteller himself.

PARDONER: (*dramatically*) Oooooh, gentle-people! May God forgive your trespasses and save you from the sin of greed! It is the evil that lurks in every man's heart! But if you fall, do not worry! My holy pardons will cure you—provided you pay me the correct price. Just so you know, in

addition to gold coins, I also accept rings, brooches, or spoons of that same metal. I am not picky. Now who would like one of these pardons I carry here in my sack?

HOST: (*angrily*) Stop your bellowing, you miserable fraud! Your devotion to God is about as authentic as those relics you carry!

PARDONER: (*in complete shock*) What? How dare you!

HOST: I wish you were neutered—if it has not been done already. Your precious relics deserve to be enshrined in a hog's turd.

(*all the pilgrims laugh at the Pardoner*)

PARDONER: I—I—I...

NARRATOR: This Pardoner answered not a word. He was so angry that he would not speak.

HOST: Get as angry as you want! I will not talk to you any longer!

NARRATOR: When the worthy Knight saw all the people laughing at the Pardoner, he spoke up.

KNIGHT: Enough of this! Sir Pardoner, be cheerful. And I pray you, Sir Host, make up with the Pardoner. Let us laugh and make sport as we did before.

HOST: (*sigh*) Very well. Perhaps I spoke too harshly. My apologies.

NARRATOR: Without delay the Host and the Pardoner made up, and we rode on toward Canterbury.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is repellent or odd about the character of the Pardoner?
2. Do the three ruffians deserve to die as they did?
3. What is the theme of this story?
4. Is it futile to “take on Death” as these ruffians did? Explain.
5. What purpose does the deathless, old man serve in the story?
6. What do you think was the source of the gold that the three ruffians found?
7. Why is it ironic that it is the Pardoner who is telling this story?
8. Why do you think the Host is so hostile toward the Pardoner?
9. In modern times people try to slow the aging process. What are some techniques they use to do this? Is it successful? Explain.