



## 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  
4 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>

*The Pardoner explains how he introduces himself to a congregation, showing official documents and offering relics as cures for various problems. Next, he explains how he preaches.*

- "Then, priestlike in my pulpit, with a frown,  
10 I stand, and when the yokels<sup>2</sup> have sat down,  
I preach, as you have heard me say before,  
And tell a hundred lying mockeries<sup>3</sup> more.  
I take great pains, and stretching out my neck  
To east and west I crane about and peck  
15 Just like a pigeon sitting on a barn.  
My hands and tongue together spin the yarn  
And all my antics<sup>4</sup> are a joy to see.  
The curse of avarice and cupidity<sup>5</sup>  
Is all my sermon, for it frees the pelf.<sup>6</sup>  
20 Out come the pence, and specially for myself,  
For my exclusive purpose is to win

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1. ***Radix malorum est cupiditas*** Latin for "Greed is the root of all evil."
  2. **yokels** (yó' kəlz) *n.* unsophisticated people living in a rural area.
  3. **mockeries** (māk' ə ēz) *n.* stories that are untrue.
  4. **antics** (an' tikz) *n.* playful, silly, or ludicrous acts.
  5. **avarice** (av' ə ris) and **cupidity** (kyōō pid' ə tē) *n.* desire to gain wealth; greed (synonyms).
  6. **pelf** (pelf) *n.* ill-gotten gains of money or wealth.

### Reading Strategy

**Rereading** Reread lines 41–44 to determine the “principal intent” of the Pardoner’s sermons.

And not at all to castigate<sup>7</sup> their sin.  
Once dead what matter how their souls may fare?  
They can go blackberrying, for all I care!

25 “Believe me, many a sermon or devotive  
Exordium<sup>8</sup> issues from an evil motive.  
Some to give pleasure by their flattery  
And gain promotion through hypocrisy,  
Some out of vanity, some out of hate;  
30 Or when I dare not otherwise debate  
I’ll put my discourse into such a shape,  
My tongue will be a dagger; no escape  
For him from slandering falsehood shall there be,  
If he has hurt my brethren<sup>9</sup> or me.  
35 For though I never mention him by name  
The congregation guesses all the same  
From certain hints that everybody knows,  
And so I take revenge upon our foes  
And spit my venom forth, while I profess  
40 Holy and true—or seeming holiness.

“But let me briefly make my purpose plain;  
5 I preach for nothing but for greed of gain  
And use the same old text, as bold as brass,  
*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*  
45 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  
6 Them from it, I can bring them to repent;  
50 But that is not my principal intent.  
Covetousness<sup>10</sup> 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.  
55 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?  
60 That’s not the counsel of my inner voice!  
No! Let me preach and beg from kirk<sup>11</sup> to kirk

7. **castigate** (kas’ ti gāt’) *v.* to punish severely.

8. **Exordium** (eg zôr’ dē əm) *n.* the opening part of an oration.

9. **brethren** (breth’ rən) *n.* brothers.

10. **Covetousness** (kuv’ ət əs nis) *n.* greed, especially for what belongs to others.

11. **kirk** *n.* church.

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.

- 65 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  
7 Or poorest village widow, though she had  
A string of starving children, all agape.  
70 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 draught of corn-ripe ale,  
75 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;  
80 Now please be quiet. Here is the beginning."



## The Pardoner's Tale

- 8 It's of three rioters I have to tell  
Who, long before the morning service bell,<sup>12</sup>  
Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.  
And as they sat, they heard the hand-bell clink  
85 Before a coffin going to the grave;  
One of them called the little tavern-knave<sup>13</sup>  
And said "Go and find out at once—look spry!—  
Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by;  
And see you get the name correctly too."  
90 "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,  
And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,  
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.

12. long before . . . bell long before 9:00 A.M.

13. tavern-knave serving boy.

### Reading Strategy

**Rereading** Reread lines 66–71 to find out what the Pardoner means by saying, "I do not preach in vain."

### Literary Analysis

**Allegory** Which details in the opening sentence enable the audience to form a quick opinion of the main characters?

### 9 Reading Check

What vice does the Pardoner admit to having, even though he preaches against it?

## Literary Analysis

### Allegory and Archetypal

**Elements** What details of the publican's comments add to the sense of danger?

## Reading Strategy

**Rereading** What lines explain the "bargain" the rioters are said to have made in line 122?

95 There came a privy<sup>14</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.  
And then Death went his way without a word.  
He's killed a thousand in the present plague,<sup>15</sup>

100 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,  
Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,  
That's what my mother said. It's all I know."

105 The publican<sup>16</sup> joined in with, "By St. Mary,  
What the child says is right; you'd best be wary,  
**10** This very year he killed, in a large village  
A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,<sup>17</sup>  
Page in the household, children—all there were.

110 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!"  
The rioter said, "Is he so fierce to meet?  
I'll search for him, by Jesus, street by street.

115 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  
In this affair, and each defend the others,  
And we will kill this traitor Death, I say!

120 Away with him as he has made away  
With all our friends. God's dignity! Tonight!"

**11** | They made their bargain, swore with appetite,  
These three, to live and die for one another  
As brother-born might swear to his born brother.

125 And up they started in their drunken rage  
And made towards this village which the page  
And publican had spoken of before.

Many and grisly were the oaths they swore,  
Tearing Christ's blessed body to a shred;<sup>18</sup>

130 "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,  
They came upon a very poor old man  
Who humbly greeted them and thus began,  
135 "God look to you, my lords, and give you quiet!"

14. **privy** secretive.

15. **plague** the Black Death, which killed over a third of the population of Europe from 1347–1351. The plague reached England in 1348.

16. **publican** innkeeper.

17. **tillage** plowing.

18. **Tearing . . . shred** their oaths included such expressions as "God's arms" and "God's blessed bones."

To which the proudest of these men of riot  
Gave back the answer, "What, old fool? Give place!  
Why are you all wrapped up except your face?  
Why live so long? Isn't it time to die?"

140 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  
Village and city on my pilgrimage,  
One who would change his youth to have my age.  
145 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;  
So, like a wretched prisoner at strife  
Within himself, I walk alone and wait

150 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!  
Look at me, mother, won't you let me in?  
See how I wither, flesh and blood and skin!  
155 Alas! When will these bones be laid to rest?  
Mother, I would exchange—for that were best—  
The wardrobe in my chamber, standing there  
So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair<sup>19</sup>  
To wrap me in!' She has refused her grace,

160 Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.

"But it dishonored you when you began  
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,  
Unless he had injured you in word or deed.  
It says in holy writ, as you may read,

165 '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,  
Being now young, would have another do  
When you are old'—if you should live till then.

170 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,  
You don't get off so easy, by St. John!  
I heard you mention, just a moment gone,

175 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.  
Say where he is or you shall pay for it,  
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!

180 I say you've joined together by consent



### 13 ▲ Critical Viewing

What moral might a medieval illustration like this one have served to teach?

[Hypothesize]

### Vocabulary

**pallor** (pal' er) *n.* unnatural lack of color; paleness

**hoary** (hōr' ē) *adj.* white or gray with age

### 14 Reading Check

What do the three rioters swear to do?

19. **shirt of hair** here, a shroud.

## Literary Analysis

### Allegory and

### Archetypal Elements

What archetypal role does the old man play?

## Reading Strategy

### Rereading

Reread lines 206–211 to clarify the remark in line 212.

15

To kill us younger folk, you thieving swine!"  
"Well, sirs," he said, "if it be your design  
To find out Death, turn up this crooked way  
Towards that grove, I left him there today  
185 Under a tree, and there you'll find him waiting.  
He isn't one to hide for all your prating.<sup>20</sup>  
You see that oak? He won't be far to find.  
And God protect you that redeemed mankind,  
Aye, and amend you!" Thus that ancient man.

190 At once the three young rioters began  
To run, and reached the tree, and there they found  
A pile of golden florins<sup>21</sup> on the ground,  
New-coined, eight bushels of them as they thought.  
No longer was it Death those fellows sought,  
195 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.  
The wickedest spoke first after a while.  
"Brothers," he said, "you listen to what I say.  
200 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.  
Light come, light go! We'll spend it as we ought.  
God's precious dignity! Who would have thought  
205 This morning was to be our lucky day?

16

"If one could only get the gold away,  
Back to my house, or else to yours, perhaps  
For as you know, the gold is ours, chaps—  
We'd all be at the top of fortune, hey?  
210 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.  
No, we must bring this treasure back by night  
Some prudent way, and keep it out of sight.  
215 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,  
Shall run to town as quickly as he can  
To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark—  
220 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,  
All three of us, wherever we have planned."

He gathered lots and hid them in his hand  
225 Bidding them draw for where the luck should fall.

20. **prating** chatter.

21. **florins** coins.

It fell upon the youngest of them all,  
And off he ran at once towards the town.

As soon as he had gone, the first sat down  
And thus began a parley<sup>22</sup> with the other:

230 "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  
And here's a lot of gold that is to be  
Divided equally amongst us three.

235 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?"

"But how?" the other said. "He knows the fact  
that all the gold was left with me and you;

240 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  
What's to be done to bring the thing about."

"Trust me," the other said, "you needn't doubt

245 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.

Now look; when he comes back, get up in fun  
To have a wrestle; then, as you attack,

250 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.  
Then all this money will be ours to spend,  
Divided equally of course, dear friend.

255 Then we can gratify our lusts and fill  
The day with dicing at our own sweet will."  
Thus these two miscreants<sup>23</sup> agreed to slay  
The third and youngest, as you heard me say.

The youngest, as he ran towards the town,

260 Kept turning over, rolling up and down  
Within his heart the beauty of those bright  
New florins, saying, "Lord, to think I might  
Have all that treasure to myself alone!

Could there be anyone beneath the throne

265 Of God so happy as I then should be?"

And so the Fiend,<sup>24</sup> our common enemy,  
Was given power to put it in his thought  
That there was always poison to be bought,



**18** ▲ **Critical Viewing**

Compare this illustration to the one on page 129. What point might the artist make by depicting contrasting individuals being taken by death? [**Compare and Contrast**]

**19** ✓ **Reading Check**

What does the old man say the rioters will find under the tree? What do they find there?

22. **parley** discussion.

23. **miscreants** villains.

24. **Fiend** Satan.

### Vocabulary

**tarry** (tar' ē) *v.* to delay  
or linger

### apothecary

(ə pāth' ə ker' ē) *n.*  
pharmacist; druggist

### Vocabulary

**deftly** (deft' lē) *adv.* skillfully;  
with ease and quickness

**sauntered** (sōn' tērd) *v.*  
walked at an unhurried pace

And that with poison he could kill his friends.  
270 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;<sup>25</sup>  
For this young man was utterly content  
To kill them both and never to repent.

275 And on he ran, he had no thought to **tarry**,

21 I Came to the town, found an **apothecary**  
And said, "Sell me some poison if you will,  
I have a lot of rats I want to kill  
And there's a polecat too about my yard  
280 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."

The chemist answered, "I've a preparation  
Which you shall have, and by my soul's salvation  
285 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,  
You'll see him fall down dying at your feet;  
Yes, die he must and in so short a while  
290 You'd hardly have the time to walk a mile,  
The poison is so strong, you understand."

This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand  
The box of poison and away he ran  
Into a neighboring street, and found a man  
295 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,  
For his own drink, meaning to work all night  
Stacking the gold and carrying it away.

300 And when this rioter, this devil's clay,  
Had filled his bottles up with wine, all three,  
Back to rejoin his comrades **sauntered** he.

Why make a sermon of it? Why waste breath?  
Exactly in the way they'd planned his death  
305 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,  
For later on there'll be the corpse to bury."  
And, as it happened, reaching for a sup,  
310 He took a bottle full of poison up  
And drank and his companion, nothing loth,  
Drank from it also, and they perished both.

25. **perdition** damnation.





### 23 ◀ Critical Viewing

What does this illustration say about the relationship between material wealth and death? **[Interpret]**

There is, in Avicenna's long relation<sup>26</sup>  
Concerning poison and its operation,  
315 Trust me, no ghashtlier section to transcend  
What these two wretches suffered at their end.  
Thus these two murderers received their due,  
So did the treacherous young poisoner too.

24 O cursed sin! O blackguardly excess!  
320 O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!  
O gluttony that lusted on and diced!  
O blasphemy that took the name of Christ  
With habit-hardened oaths that pride began!  
Alas, how comes it that a mortal man,  
325 That thou, to thy Creator, Him that wrought thee,


### Literary Analysis

**Allegory** In addition to avarice, or greed, against what sins does the exemplum preach in lines 319–323?

### 25 Reading Check

What explanation does the rioter give to the Apothecary for buying the poison?

26. **Avicenna's long relation** book on medicines written by Avicenna (980–1037), an Arab physician, which contains a chapter on poisons.



That paid His precious blood for thee and bought thee,  
Art so unnatural and false within?

Dearly beloved, God forgive your sin  
And keep you from the vice of avarice!

- 330 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>27</sup>  
Come on, you women, offer up your wool!
- 335 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  
When you were born. . . . That, sirs, is how I preach.
- 340 And Jesu Christ, soul's healer, aye, the leech  
Of every soul, grant pardon and relieve you  
Of sin, for that is best I won't deceive you.

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**27. holy bull** an official proclamation by the Catholic Church.