

The Pardoner's Tale

Summary and Discussion Questions

Summary: After a prologue in which he brags about his own desire for wealth (avarice), the corrupt Pardoner tells a moral tale illustrating the consequences of greed. As three young men sit in a tavern, a coffin passes, bearing the body of a man who they learn has been murdered by a thief called Death. The three decide to find Death and kill him. They set out and meet an old man who says that Death waits under a nearby tree. They go there and find a stash of gold coins, which they decide to steal. While the youngest is in town getting supplies, the other two decide to kill him and share the gold. But the youngest plots to get rid of the other two by poisoning the wine. When he returns, his two accomplices kill him, drink the wine, and die.

Literary Focus: Irony

Irony – a contrast or a discrepancy between expectations and reality – between what is said and what is meant, between what is expected and what happens, or between what appears to be true and what actually is true.

Analysis:

The function of a pardoner in Chaucer's time was to collect moneys for charitable purposes and to be the Pope's special agent in dispensing or rewarding contributors with certain pardons as a remission for sins. By canon law, a pardoner was required to remain in a certain area; within this area, he could visit churches, receive contributions, and, in the Pope's name, dispense indulgences. An honest pardoner was entitled to a percentage of the take; however, most pardoners were dishonest and took much more than their share and, in many cases, would take all the contributions. As he boasts, Chaucer's Pardoner belongs to the latter class — that is, he speaks of how much he collects by refusing to give indulgences to anyone except the very good people.

In his prologue, the Pardoner confesses that he is a fraud motivated by greed and avarice and that he is guilty of all seven sins. Even though he is essentially a hypocrite in his profession, he is at least being honest as he makes his confession. But then, ironically, at the end of his tale, he requests that the pilgrims make a contribution. Thus, for many reasons, the Pardoner is the most complex figure in the entire pilgrimage. He is certainly an intellectual figure; his references and knowledge demonstrated in the tale and his use of psychology in getting only the good people to come forward attest to his intellect. But in making his confessions to the pilgrims about his hypocrisy, he seems to be saying that

he wishes he could be more sincere in his ways, except that he is too fond of money, good food and wine, and power.

The Pardoner takes as his text that "Love of money is the root of all evil," yet he emphasizes how each relic will bring the purchaser more money; in emphasizing this, he sells more and gains more money for himself. Thus, his text contains a double irony: His love for money is the root of his evil, yet his sales depend upon the purchaser's love of money. Furthermore, his technique of relying upon basic psychology by selling only to the good people brings him more money. His sermon on avarice is given because the Pardoner is filled with avarice and this sermon fills his purse with money.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What possible reasons does the Pardoner admit he preaches to make a personal profit?
2. In medieval times, people were keenly concerned about the seven deadly sins: pride, avarice (desire for wealth), lust, anger, gluttony (excess), envy, and sloth (laziness). According to the Church, these sins brought eternal damnation unless the sinner confessed and obtained a pardon. Which of these sins does the Pardoner acknowledge as his own vices?
3. In what ways is the Pardoner being confessional? How is this not a confession?
4. How might you defend the Pardoner not as a good person but as a good preacher? Does it matter to others that there is a difference? Why or why not?
5. How does his prologue to his tale differ from the tale itself? Explain.
6. How is the story ironic and the pardoner's relationship to the story ironic?
7. What is hypocritical about the Pardoner's emphasizing "The Love of Money is the Root of All Evil"?
8. Who or what is the Old man in the Tale? Explain your reasoning.
9. Recount the story the Pardoner tells and explain what it means? Why does the Pardoner use this story?
10. How is the story he recounts related to his own desire to attain others' wealth? How does it represent societal concerns of the times?