

# Before You Read

## from The Pardoner's Tale

### Make the Connection

The story in "The Pardoner's Tale" has roots that are old and widespread. Greed as the root of evil is a theme that appears in stories the world over. Starting from the Latin saying, "*Radix malorum est cupiditas*"—translated loosely as "The love of money is the root of all evil"—the Pardoner presents us with an **exemplum**, an anecdote that teaches a moral lesson. As in all the tales, Chaucer fits the story to the character of the storyteller. (You may wish to review the description of the Pardoner in lines 689–734 of the general Prologue.)

### Literary Focus

#### Irony

Chaucer is a master of both verbal and situational irony. You use both types of irony yourself all the time. You use **verbal irony** when you say one thing but mean something else. When a friend asks how you liked spending three hours cleaning your room, you might answer, "It was just great." You both know that was not the case, of course. In **situational irony**, what actually happens is different from what you expect. Situational irony occurs when it rains on the weather forecasters' picnic or when the police officer's son robs the bank.

**Irony** is 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.

For more on Irony, see the *Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms*.

### Background

In the medieval Church, a pardoner was a member of the clergy who had been given power by the pope to forgive sins and grant indulgences. Even when their sins were forgiven in this earthly life, however, many believed that punishment for their sinful deeds awaited them in the next life. Indulgences could help alleviate this problem. They were promises made by the Church to reduce the length and severity of punishments due after death. Forgiving sins and granting indulgences were powers the Church gave the clergy for the spiritual benefit of believers. Such benefits were not supposed to be bought and sold, but greedy clergy sometimes took advantage of people's fear of punishment to demand money. Some, like Chaucer's Pardoner, went so far as to keep the money for themselves instead of turning it over to the Church.

### Vocabulary Development

**avarice** (av'ə-ris) *n.*: too great a desire for wealth.

**abominable** (ə-bām'ə-nə-bəl) *adj.*: disgusting; hateful.

**superfluity** (sōō'per-flōō'ə-tē) *n.*: excess.

**grisly** (griz'lē) *adj.*: terrifying.

**adversary** (ad'ver-ser'ē) *n.*: enemy.

**pallor** (pal'ər) *n.*: paleness.

**prudent** (prōō'dant) *adj.*: careful; cautious.

**transcend** (tran-send') *v.*: exceed; surpass.

**credentials** (kri-den'shelz) *n.*: evidence of a person's position.

**absolve** (ab-zälv') *v.*: forgive; make free from blame.

SKILLS  
FOCUS

Literary Skills  
Understand  
irony, including  
verbal and  
situational irony.

10  
DAY  
PLAN

#### INTERNET

Vocabulary  
Practice

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Geoffrey Chaucer

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# from The Pardoner's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer  
translated by Nevill Coghill

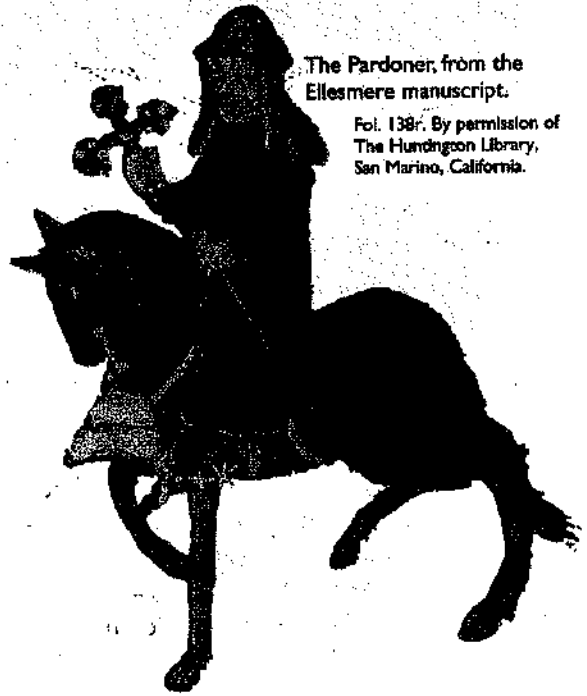
## from The Pardoner's Prologue

"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.*"

- 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

### Vocabulary

avarice (av'ə-ris) n.: too great a desire for wealth.



The Pardoner, from the  
Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 138r. By permission of  
The Huntington Library,  
San Marino, California.

4. *Radix malorum est cupiditas*  
(rā'diks ma-lō'rum est  
kōō-pi'di-tas): literally, "The root  
of evil is desire" (1 Timothy 6:10).  
The Pardoner has been telling the  
pilgrims about his preaching  
methods.

11. Covetousness (kuv'ət-əs-nis)  
n.: quality of craving wealth or  
possessions; greed.

15. yokel n. used as adj.: rustic; of  
the country.

21. kirk n.: Scottish for "church."



- Or poorest village widow, though she had  
A string of starving children, all agape.<sup>o</sup>  
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<sup>o</sup> 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 Pardoner's Tale

- In Flanders once there was a company  
Of youngsters haunting vice and ribaldry,<sup>o</sup>  
Riot and gambling, stews and public-houses  
Where each with harp, guitar, or lute carouses,<sup>o</sup>  
45 Dancing and dicing<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</sup>  
That it's a grisly thing to hear them swear.  
Our dear Lord's body they will rend and tear.<sup>o</sup>  
It's of three rioters<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</sup>  
And said "Go and find out at once—look spy!—  
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<sup>o</sup> thief, they call him Death,

### Vocabulary

abominable (ə·bām'ə·nə·bəl) *adj.*: disgusting; hateful  
superfluity (sūp'ər·flū'ə·tē) *n.*: excess.  
grisly (griz'lē) *adj.*: terrifying.

29. agape *adj.*: open-mouthed.

37. vicious *adj.*: here, possessing many faults.

42. ribaldry (rib'al·drē) *n.*: vulgar language or humor.

44. carouses (kə·rouz'ez) *v.*: drinks and celebrates noisily.

45. dicing *v.*: gambling (throwing dice).

50. blasphemy (blas'fə·mē) *n.*: mockery of God.

52. Our . . . tear: Their oaths refer to "God's arms" and "God's blessed bones."

53. rioters *n. pl.*: people living a wild, unrestrained lifestyle.

58. tavern-knave: serving boy.

67. privy (priv'ē) *adj.*: archaic usage meaning "secretive; furtive."

- 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,<sup>o</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,
- 75 Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,  
 That's what my mother said. It's all I know."
- The publican<sup>o</sup> 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,<sup>o</sup>  
 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,<sup>o</sup>  
 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,<sup>o</sup>
- 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?"

### Vocabulary

**adversary** (ad'vər·ser'ē) *n.*: enemy.

71. **present plague**: the Black Death, which killed nearly one third of the population of England during the mid-fourteenth century.

77. **publican** *n.*: tavern keeper; from *public house*, an inn or tavern.

80. **tillage** *n.*: working the land.

83. **alarms** *n. pl.*: here, anxious times.



104. **stile** *n.*: steps used for climbing over a wall.

- 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

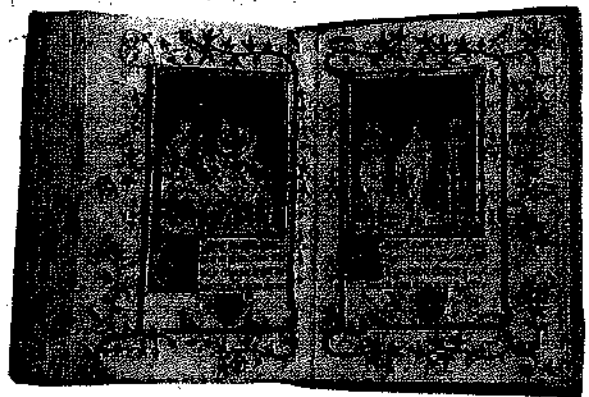


122. mother's gate: The old man is personifying Death as a mother, her house surrounded by a gate (the earth). Thus, "mother's gate" is the entrance to the grave.

130. shirt of hair: Coarse shirts of woven horsehair were worn as penance. Here, the old man refers to such a shirt used to wrap his body for burial.

136. holy writ: the Bible.

137. hoary *adj.*: white.



*The Three Living, the Three Dead, from the Psalter and Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy (14th century). Grisaille, color, gilt, and brown ink on vellum (4 13/16" x 3 7/16").*

Fol. 321v-322r. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Cloisters Collection, 1969 (69.86). Photograph © 1991 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

### Vocabulary

**pallor** (pal'ər) *n.*: paleness.

- 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>o</sup>  
 You see that oak? He won't be far to find.
- 160 And God protect you that redeemed mankind,  
 Aye, and amend<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</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,
- 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.

158. prating *n.*: chattering.

161. amend *v.*: improve.

164. florins *n. pl.*: coins worth twenty-four pence. *Pence* is the British plural of penny.

191. keep things dark: do it in secret.

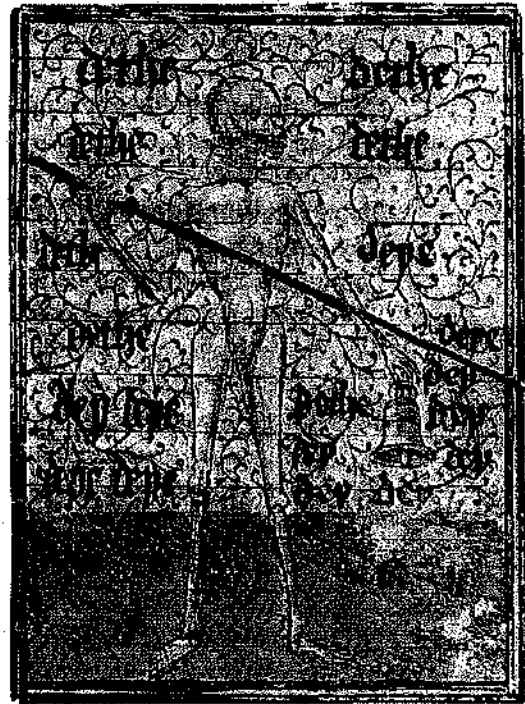
### Vocabulary

prudent (prōō'dent) *adj.*: careful; cautious.



- 200 As soon as he had gone the first sat down  
And thus began a parley<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</sup> 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,<sup>o</sup> 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;<sup>o</sup>  
245 For this young man was utterly content  
To kill them both and never to repent.

201. parley *n.*: discussion.



Death with his spear, from "The  
Pardoner's Tale."

229. miscreants (mis'krē-ants)  
*n. pl.*: criminals; literally,  
"unbelievers."

238. Fiend: the devil.

244. perdition (per-dish'ən) *n.*:  
damnation.

- 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. . . .

### Vocabulary

**transcend** (tran-send') v.: exceed; surpass.

**248. apothecary** (ə-pīth-ə-ker'e)  
 n.: druggist. Formerly apothecaries prescribed drugs.

**258. ere** prep.: before.



**274. sauntered** (sôn'tôrd) v.: strolled.

**283. loth** (lôth) adj.: reluctant; unwilling; alternative spelling of *loath*.

**285. Avicenna's** (av'i-sen'az): Avicenna (A.D. 980-1037), a famous Islamic philosopher and doctor, wrote several medical books.



- "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.

### Vocabulary

**credentials** (kri·den'shelz) *n.*: evidence of a person's position.  
**absolve** (ab·zälv) *v.*: forgive; make free from blame.

292. **relics in my bale**: Relics are the supposedly holy remains of a saint—bones, teeth, hair, or clothing. A bale is a bundle of goods. In the Middle Ages, many relics were faked.

296. **absolution** (ab·sə·lōō'shan) *n.*: forgiveness. **shilling** *n.*: coin worth twelve pence.

305. **ply the spur**: In today's terms, this idiom means something like "rev it up" or "put on speed." It refers to the action of a rider digging his spurs into a horse to make it go faster.

307. **beck** *n.*: summons; in other words, subject to Fortune's will.

317. **groat** *n.*: silver coin worth four pence.

318. **he**: the Host.

322. **pique** (pēk) *n.*: resentment and ill humor.

331. **keep the ball in play**: continue.

# Response and Analysis

## Reading Check

1. How does the Pardoner describe his own character and morals in the Prologue to his tale?
2. According to "The Pardoner's Tale," why are the three young rioters looking for Death?
3. Where does the old man tell the rioters to look for Death? How do they treat him?
4. Describe the rioters' plan for the gold and how it proves fatal to all three of them.

## Thinking Critically

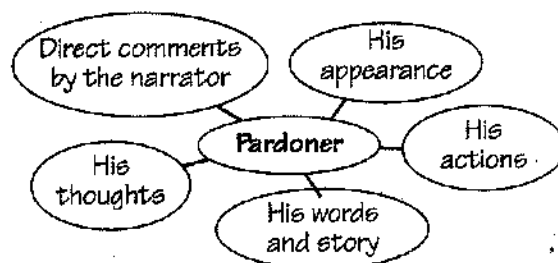
5. How do the descriptions given by the tavern-knave and the publican personify Death? What does the rioters' response to the description of Death tell you about their characters?
6. What do you think the poor old man symbolizes?
7. Irony is a discrepancy between expectations and reality. What is the central irony in "The Pardoner's Tale"? (What do the rioters expect to find under the tree? What do they *actually* find?)
8. Explain the irony in the fact that the Pardoner preaches a story with this particular moral. How do you account for the psychology of the Pardoner? Is he truly evil, simply drunk, or so used to cheating that he does it automatically?
9. What aspects of medieval society (and human nature in general) do you think Chaucer is satirizing in "The Pardoner's Tale"?
10. What moral does the Pardoner want us to draw from his tale? How is it different from the moral you think Chaucer wants you to draw from "The Pardoner's Tale"?
11. Do people with the Pardoner's ethics exist today—in all sorts of professions? Explain your response.

12. Is greed or desire the root of all evil? Discuss the Pardoner's moral.

## WRITING

### What Makes the Pardoner Tick?

Write a character analysis of the Pardoner. Consider in your analysis the Pardoner's Prologue, his tale, and the description of the Pardoner in the general Prologue (see pages 161–162). Before you write, gather details for your analysis in a cluster diagram like the following one:



Be sure to quote directly from the text to support your character analysis. If you are so inspired, supply your own illustration (or a cartoon) of the Pardoner.

## SKILLS FOCUS

### Literary Skills

Analyze irony, including verbal and situational irony.

### Writing Skills

Write a character analysis.

### Vocabulary Skills

Demonstrate word knowledge.

## INTERNET

Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE7 12-2

## Vocabulary Development

### Question and Answer

Demonstrate your understanding of the underlined Vocabulary words by answering the following questions.

1. Might a person guilty of avarice have a superfluity of possessions?
2. Why might running into an adversary bring a pallor to someone's complexion?
3. Who could absolve a person of an abominable crime?
4. What could you do to transcend your fears if you were faced with a grisly sight?
5. When would it be prudent to check someone's credentials?