


Investigate!

The Pardoner's Tale

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❖ I. 175–194

- List any emotive words or phrasing that conveys disapproval and horror of the young men's lifestyle.
- How far are any of their sins presented not just as antisocial, disorderly or wicked, but (to the medieval mind) as anti-God?
- How does Chaucer's writing bring lechery and gluttony together, even before l.193-4, which states their connection as explicit (and is an aphorism)?

❖ I. 195–209

- What wording or rhetorical devices in this section make it sound particularly persuasive?
- How many consequences does the passage list for the sins of lechery and gluttony?
- What literary devices are employed to draw listeners into the text?
- The prevailing culture of any era makes attitudes seem natural. Studying medieval writing shows us both the source of some attitudes that are still current and also how a different culture can produce assumptions that no longer seem 'natural' to us any more:
 - With a partner think through which assumptions in this section seem to be current today and which now seem 'alien' to modern thinking.

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I. 210-300

- Collect together words which convey the physical and disgusting aspects of various sins:
 - What effect do these words have on the reader / a listening audience?
- How might the metaphor linking a glutton's throat with what goes down the toilet work as a persuasive item of rhetoric?
- What do you make of the sounds in l.255?
 - Bear in mind that the sounds **g** and **o** were pronounced at the back of the throat.
- Create a mind-map or table showing how Chaucer's writing connects food, drink and death:
 - How powerfully does this association come across?

❖ I. 301-340: Gambling

- How does Chaucer show different sins are connected here?
 - What do you think he achieves by doing that?
- Pick out the vocabulary associated with princes and rulers
- How does Chaucer's choice of words help to support the lesson that gambling is particularly shameful for a lord or prince?

❖ I. 341-371: Swearing

- How do Chaucer's sections on oaths, gluttony and gambling prefigure aspects of the

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subsequent story about the three rioters?

- Create a table linking the sections of his 'sermon' with the relevant situations in the actual story
- By now you will have come across the devices Chaucer uses to signal that a new section is starting - remember how necessary these are for an oral performance
 - Go back through the poem thus far and make a note of the techniques you have noticed


❖ I. 372-422

- Chaucer seeks to create mystery in this section and writes obliquely (i.e. not directly or literally)
 - Pick out those phrases or elements which demonstrate this
- What do you feel to be the effect of Chaucer having the boy make the speech about death as a thief (l. 382-396)
- What message is Chaucer representing symbolically in l. 392-6?
- What useful message is symbolized by the idea of death coming unannounced, like a thief?
- What effects do you think the taverner's words (l. 397-403) might have on the rioters if they had been more thoughtful?
- Yet again one sin is combined with others (l. 417-21):
 - How do 'great oaths' relate to the larger

theme of death in the tale?

❖ I. 423-479

- Compare in detail the greeting given by the Old Man to the rioters and their response:
 - What does their use of *thou* forms to an Old Man show – respect or inappropriate informality? See 🔗 Texts in detail > *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* > Literary context > Chaucer's English
- How would you interpret l. 440?
 - What can be meant - what is it that cannot die?
 - Pick out other details about the Old Man which give him an 'other-worldly' quality
- On l. 430 we are told the response is made by the 'proudeste of these riotours'
 - What is the effect of that detail?
 - Where else does Chaucer present the riotors as proud and how does that shape your attitude to them?
 - Is there anything in what is happening here to explain why pride is regarded as the worst of the seven deadly sins?
- The phrase 'gan looke in his visage' (l. 434) gives the impression that the Old Man stared at the youth intently:
 - What are the effects of this way of responding to the rioter's question?

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- It is possible to interpret the Old Man as Death:
 - Do you agree or do you think that he should be interpreted in another way?
 - Could the figure have several potential meanings simultaneously?
- How do you react to Chaucer's inclusion of the word 'croked' in l. 473?
- What themes does Chaucer's wording of the Old Man's farewell introduce?
 - What is the effect for the reader?

❖ I. 480-517: Money

- In l. 481-7 how do you read the fact that the place where Death is said to be is a place where money is?
 - How many different implications could you find in this?
- Which words in l. 494-5 bring into the tale an alternative outlook to the ungodly one of the rioters?
- What elements of Chaucer's writing help speed up the narrative from l. 491 onwards?
 - What effect do you think this has?
- Pick out the words and phrases in l. 500-12 by which Chaucer is introducing a hint of deception already
- What would we lose from the recent, swift part of the narrative if we had not experienced the slower, elaborate first part of *The Pardoner's Tale* with its

sections on gluttony, gambling and oaths?


❖ I.518-562: Two conspiracies

- 'My sworn brother': what is the effect, in the context of the rioters' dialogue, of this phrase in l. 520?
 - Consider further 'felawe' (522), 'freendes' (527) and 'My deere freend' (544)?
- What is the effect of the repetition of the 'thou' forms of the personal pronoun at the start of this dialogue?
- What's the effect on the reader of the particular phrase that Chaucer chooses in l. 554-5 for 'anywhere in the world'?
- How does Chaucer's wording suggest spiritual forces above and beyond the sordid actions and thoughts of the youths?

❖ I.563-606: Love of money leads to death

- From what / whose point of view is the youngest rioter 'cursed' (l. 580)?
- What is the effect of the choice of the word 'grace' in l. 588?
- Clear and rapid narrative can be as effective as elaborate rhetoric
 - Talk through the techniques Chaucer uses to 'hold' his audience right up to the denouement of the story
- Which earlier themes get re-introduced in this final scene and in what way?

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- How does Chaucer show the reader that, in seeking money, the young men have found death?
- The question was posed at the start of the narrative: 'Can a wicked person tell a moral tale?'
 - In the light of this, what are your views of the Pardoner's story?
- ❖ **The final link passage, l. 608-680: Reaction**
 - Do you feel that the joke about the Pardoner's breeches is:
 - Just an attack on the outrageous lengths to which the cheat will go to make money out of people?
 - A possible criticism of the general cult of relics, which was attacked by Wyclif's followers?
 - A homophobic attack on the Pardoner?
 - Whatever you think about the above, what for you is the effect of the scatological and sexual words that follow: 'fundament', 'turd' and 'coillons'?
 - In *The General Prologue* there is a comment that the Pardoner may be a 'gelding' (a eunuch) or 'mare' (effeminate):
 - Does this idea affect the way in which you read the reaction of the Host?
 - Pick out examples of how the theme of death continues to run through the final section of *The Pardoner's Tale*:
 - What aspects of death are referred to?
- What is the effect of:
 - 'thou' from the Host and Knight to the Pardoner?
 - 'ye' from the Knight to the Host?
- Why do you think Chaucer inserts a reference to a relic that was believed to be *authentic* and one which was of the highest reverence for Christians (the 'true Cross', said to have been discovered by St Helena)?
 - What effect (if any) does this have on your perspective?
- Think through the idea that the Knight's words and encouragement of reconciliation tie up the story in a moral sense as well as being practically apt:
 - How 'satisfied' do you feel at the end of the narrative?
 - Have the issues raised by the preceding *The Pardoner's Prologue* and *The Tale* been resolved in your view?