

Summary & Analysis of The Pardoner's Tale

Summary

Apparently deeply affected by the Physician's sad and gruesome tale of Virginia, the Host praises the Physician by using as many medical terms as he can muster. However, he rejects the Physician's moral to the tale and substitutes one of his own: Thus the gifts of fortune and nature are not always good ("The gifts of Fortune and Nature have been the cause of the death of many a person"). Thinking that the pilgrims need a merry tale to follow, the Host turns to the Pardoner. The more genteel members of the company, fearing that the Pardoner will tell a vulgar story, ask the Pardoner for a tale with a moral.

The Pardoner then explains to the pilgrims the methods he uses in preaching. His text is always "Radix malorum est cupiditas" ("Love of money is the root of all evil"). Always employing an array of documents and objects, he constantly announces that he can do nothing for the really bad sinners and invites the good people forward to buy his relics and, thus, absolve themselves from sins. Then he stands in the pulpit and preaches very rapidly about the sin of avarice so as to intimidate the members into donating money.

He repeats that his theme is always "Money is the root of all evil" because, with this text, he can denounce the very vice that he practices: greed. And even though he is guilty of the same sins he preaches against, he can still make other people repent. The Pardoner admits that he likes money, rich food, and fine living. And even if he is not a moral man, he can tell a good moral tale, which follows.

In Flanders, at the height of a black plague, three young men sit in an inn, eating and drinking far beyond their power and swearing oaths that are worthy of damnation. The revelers mark the passing of a coffin and ask who has died. A servant tells them that the dead man was a friend who was stabbed in the back the night before by a thief called Death. The young revelers, thinking that Death might still be in the next town, decide to seek him out and slay him.

On the way, the three men meet an old man who explains that he must wander the earth until he can find someone willing to exchange youth for old age. He says that not even Death will take his life. Hearing him speak of Death, the revelers ask where they can find Death, and the old man directs them to a tree at the end of the lane. The revelers rush to the tree and find eight bushels of gold coins, which they decide to keep. They decide to wait for night to move the gold and draw straws to see which one will go into town to get food and wine. The youngest of the three draws the shortest straw. When he leaves, the two others decide to kill him and divide his money. The youngest, however, wanting the treasure to himself, buys poison, which he adds to two of the bottles of wine he purchases. When the youngest reveler approaches the tree, the two others stab him and then sit down to drink the wine before they dispose of his body. Thus, all three indeed find Death.

Analysis

From the Pardoner's perspective, the Physician told a cheaply pious story and the Host, a sanctimonious fool, reacts to the tale with what seems high praise. Then, after praising the Physician, the Host turns to the Pardoner and asks for a merry tale or jokes ("som myrthe or japes"), even though preaching is the Pardoner's profession.

The Pardoner agrees by mockingly echoing the same oath the Host has just used — "By Saint Ronyon." The echo of the Host indicates, if anything at all, the Pardoner's irritation at hearing the Physician praised as being "like a Prelate" ("lyk a prelat"). The Pardoner is further insulted when some members of the company cry with one voice, "No, don't let him tell dirty jokes!" ("Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye"). The Pardoner will have his revenge on all the complacent, self-righteous critics, and he resolves to think his revenge out carefully.

The ironic relationship between *The Physician's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale* — and therefore the Physician and Pardoner — is that both men are self-loving dissemblers. However, one of the two, the Pardoner, possesses enough self-knowledge to know what he is; the other, the Physician, being self-satisfied and affected, does not.

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. Thus, 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 frankly 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.

Scholars, critics, and readers in general consider *The Pardoner's Tale* to be one of the finest "short stories" ever written. Even though this is poetry, the narration fits all the qualifications of a perfect short story: brevity, a theme aptly illustrated, brief characterizations, the inclusion of the symbolic old man, rapid narration, and a quick twist of an ending. The entire tale is an *exemplum*, a story told to illustrate an intellectual point. The subject is "Money (greed) is the root of all evil."

The Pardoner's Tale ends with the Pardoner trying to sell a relic to the Host and the Host attacking the Pardoner viciously. At this point, the Knight who, both by his character and the nature of the tale he told, stands as Chaucer's symbol of natural balance and proportion, steps between the Host and the Pardoner and directs them to kiss and be reconciled. In the conflict between the Host and the Pardoner, the Pardoner — whose official role is to get men to call on God for forgiveness of their sins — is unmerciful in his wrath; that is, the Pardoner is unwilling to pardon, and the pardon is effected only when the noble Knight steps in.

Character Description

In his descriptions of the pilgrims in *The Prologue*, Chaucer begins with a description of the most noble, the Knight, and then includes those who have pretensions to the nobility, such as the Squire, and those whose manner and behavior suggest some aspects of nobility, such as the Prioress. Then he covers the middle class (the Merchant, the Clerk, and the Man of Law, for example) and ultimately descends to the most vulgar (the Miller and the Reeve). The reader must ask why the Pardoner is placed at the very end of the descending order.

From his prologue and tale, the reader discovers that the Pardoner is well read, that he is psychologically astute, and that he has profited significantly from his profession. Yet Chaucer places him at the very bottom of humanity because he uses the church and holy, religious objects as tools to profit personally. In the other great classic of the Middle Ages, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Dante arranges hell into nine concentric circles. The first circle is reserved for the least offensive sinner, with each subsequent circle holding ever more evil sinners, finally ending in the most pernicious and vicious sinners, including betrayers such as Judas Iscariot and Brutus.

In the ninth circle of Dante's *Inferno*, the circle just above the betrayers, are the simonists, those sinners who make a practice of selling holy items, sacraments, or ecclesiastical offices for personal profit. The punishment for such perversion of holy objects was very severe. Consequently, in the hierarchy of the medieval church, the Pardoner and his sin are especially heinous. The other pilgrims recognize the sins of the Pardoner, and their antagonism toward him is expressed by the Host at the end of the Pardoner's tale when the Pardoner has the effrontery and hypocrisy to try to sell one of his "pardons" to the Host.

Thus, while the Pardoner is the most evil of the pilgrims, he is nevertheless the most intriguing. The most provocative thing about the Pardoner is his open revelation about his own hypocrisy and avarice. Some critics have called him the most thoroughly modern character in *The Canterbury Tales*, especially in his use of modern psychology to dupe his victims. Likewise, his self-evaluation makes his character noteworthy: He maintains that, although he is not moral himself, he can tell a very moral tale. This concept alone makes him a character worth noting.
