

# GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

## The Pardoner's Tale from The Canterbury Tales

### Writer's Techniques

**Exemplum.** An anecdote is a brief account of an incident or event. Although "The Pardoner's Tale" may seem rather long for an anecdote, it is a special kind of anecdote—a 238-line anecdote within a sermon, something the Pardoner would have called an *exemplum*, or example. While anecdotes are often personal or biographical, the *exemplum* in "The Pardoner's Tale" is intended to establish the truth of a moral.

The idea for "The Pardoner's Tale" did not originate with Chaucer; it goes back to antiquity. The Pardoner uses this simple but powerful anecdote as an *exemplum* to prove the maxim, "*Radix malorum est cupiditas*," or "Greed is the root of all evil."

### Writing

You have heard many sayings similar to "Greed is the root of evil." List at least five such sayings. Try to think of ones for which a good *exemplum* might be written.

### Primary Source

In "The Pardoner's Tale," Chaucer drew from traditional stories, such as this *exemplum* on swearing by Thomas of Cantimpre. Preachers added detail to such *exemplums* to illustrate their themes more vividly. This *exemplum* was written before 1263.

In the city of Louvain, within the boundaries of Brabant we saw a noble and worthy citizen who, rising to go to matins on the holy night of Good Friday, passed in front of a tavern in which dissolute young men were sitting, playing at dice and vying with one another in blasphemies and oaths. Continuing on his way, this citizen found men in the street near the tavern who were making a loud lamentation over a certain stranger who was badly wounded and bleeding. When he asked the men who had inflicted these wounds they answered: "Those young men who are playing dice." Entering the tavern, the citizen upbraided the young men for playing on that night and asked them sternly why they had so cruelly beaten the stranger who had been with them. Much astonished, the young men denied that anyone had come in since they had sat down, and protested that they had wounded no one either by word or blow. Going forth quickly with the citizen, they sought for the bleeding stranger but could not find him. Having now recovered their senses, each of them realized that by their terrible oaths they had again insulted the Lord Christ and by their taunts had crucified him afresh.

## from The Pardoner's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

translated by Nevill Coghill

*During their journey to Canterbury, each of the pilgrims tells a tale. After the Knight, the Miller, the Reeve, the Nun, and the narrator have finished, the Pardoner entertains the others with a tale that supports his claim that "greed is the root of all evil."*

It's of three rioters I have to tell

Who long before the morning service bell<sup>1</sup>

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:<sup>2</sup>

One of them called the little tavern-knave<sup>3</sup>

And said "Go and find out at once—look spy!—

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,

And suddenly last night, the man was slain,

Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.

There came a privy<sup>4</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>4</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,

Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,

That's what my mother said. It's all I know."

The publican<sup>5</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

A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,<sup>6</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,

He might do you dishonor." "Huh, God's arms!"

<sup>1</sup> long before . . . bell: Long before 9:00 A.M.

<sup>2</sup> tavern-knave: Serving boy.

<sup>3</sup> privy: Secretive.

<sup>4</sup> plague: The Black Death, which killed over a third of the population of England in 1348 and 1349.

<sup>5</sup> publican: Innkeeper.

<sup>6</sup> tillage: Plowing.

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  
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! To-night!"  
70 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.  
45 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>7</sup>  
50 "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,  
55 "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!  
Why are you all wrapped up except your face?  
Why live so long? Isn't it time to die?"  
60 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,  
65 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  
70 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!  
75 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>8</sup>  
To wrap me in! She has refused her grace,  
80 Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.

7. Tearing . . . shred:  
Their oaths included expressions such as "God's arms" (line 32) and "God's blessed bones" (line 35).

8. shirt of hair: Here, a shroud.

85 "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,  
"Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head  
And honor it." And therefore be it said  
90 '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,  
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!  
95 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,  
Say where he is or you shall pay for it,  
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!  
100 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  
To find out Death, turn up this crooked way  
Towards that grove. I left him there today  
105 Under a tree, and there you'll find him waiting.  
He isn't one to hide for all your prating.  
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.  
110 At once the three young rioters began  
To run, and reached the tree, and there they found  
A pile of golden florins<sup>9</sup> on the ground,  
New-coined, eight bushels of them as they thought.  
115 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.  
The wickedest spoke first after a while,  
"Brothers," he said, "you listen to what I say.  
120 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  
125 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—  
For as you know, the gold is ours, chaps—  
We'd all be at the top of fortune, hey?  
130 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

9. florins: Coins.

135 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

140 To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark—  
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

145 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.

As soon as he had gone, the first sat down

150 And thus began a parley<sup>10</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

And here's a lot of gold that is to be

Divided equally amongst us three.

155 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 turn?"

"But how!" the other said with some concern,

160 "Because he knows the gold's 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

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

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

165 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

170 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.

Then all this money will be ours to spend,

Divided equally of course, dear friend.

175 Then we can gratify our lusts and fill  
The day with dicing at our own sweet will."  
Thus these two miscreants<sup>11</sup> agreed to slay

The third and youngest, as you heard me say.

The youngest, as he ran towards the town,

Kept turning over, rolling up and down

180 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

185

Of God so happy as I then should be?"

And so the Friend,<sup>12</sup> our common enemy,  
Was given power to put it in his thought

That there was always poison to be bought,

And that with poison he could kill his friends.

190 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>13</sup>  
For this young man was utterly content

To kill them both and never to repent.

195 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,  
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:

200 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

If any living creature eat or drink  
A mouthful, ere he has the time to think,

205 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

You'd hardly have the time to walk a mile,  
The poison is so strong, you understand."

210 This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand  
The box of poison and away he ran

Into a neighboring street, and found a man  
Who lent him three large bottles. He withdrew

215 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.  
And when this rioter, this devil's clay,

220 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

225 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,  
He took a bottle full of poison up

230 And drank; and his companion, nothing loth,  
Drank from it also, and they perished both.

There is, in Avicenna's long relation<sup>14</sup>  
Concerning poison and its operation,

235 Trust me, no ghastlier 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.

12. Fiendi: Salan.

13. perdition:  
Damnation.

14. Avicenna's (a' va se  
32) long relation: A book  
on medicines written by  
Avicenna (980-1037), an  
Arab physician, which  
contains a chapter on  
poisons.

10. parley (pär' le):  
Discussion.

11. miscreants (mis' kre  
ants): Villains.